A Decade of the Oughts

BY GARY CHILSON
Paul Smith's College

I can imagine myself as some “oldtimer” or “graybeard” of the village, pushing into my eighties in the coming 30s. By then this first decade of the Third Millennium will have taken on the patina of age, as far away in time then as the Vietnam War, Race Riots, and Hippies are now. “Yea!” I’ll be able to say, “I remember how it was, back in the Oughts.”

Lots of other terms could be used for this first decade. I’ve heard the zips, the zeros, and digits proposed. Someone thirty-something in the 30s might even say they were born in the “ohs.” I prefer the oughts,* however, because I think it’s time we live up to our obligations. It’s time we do something about the direction our global society is taking. We should use the “Decade of the Oughts” to describe the oughts we have to live up to.

This year, the Double Ought year, could stand for two important oughts to be accomplished. From the top of my list, we ought to accept our responsibility to establish a sustainable society for our future generations. Second, we ought to elect a President this November who is aware of this responsibility and is willing to lead the U.S. in meeting our obligations.

It’s not just my opinion that we ought to cause an economic-environmental transformation of our society for the sake of future generations. A lot of books have been written on the need for and the benefits of transforming our unsustainable and vulnerable energy-economic system from a fossil-fuel-based economy into an independent and perpetual solar-hydrogen economy. I also think that America should take the leadership role in determining just what kind of society future generations will have in the sustainable global society. No other nation has more of the qualifications needed for global leadership. Nor does any other nation have more of the responsibility for having established the present unsustainable society.

Having to change our terminal, vulnerable and polluting energy system into a solar-hydrogen economy, for the sake of future generations, won’t be all bad. If we do it right, there are many excellent benefits to be gained to help offset the inevitable costs of meeting our obligations. So, to get the discussion going in this short prerogative of mine, I’ll just jump to the next year’s “ought to do” from the list I made (everyone, I’m sure, has their own ‘Ought To Do’ list).

In the first year, Ought One, we have to take definite action on our Double Ought decisions — making good on our obligation, so to speak. We ought to enact a new kind of tax system in the United States as the primary means to achieving the economic-environmental transformation. This new kind of tax system would tax — penalize if you prefer — the things we think are socially undesirable. At the same time, we would eliminate taxes, dollar for dollar, on things we think are socially desirable, such as working for a living. I would like to see that first tax be a carbon tax. All this recent brouhaha about high oil prices notwithstanding, we have to begin living up to our obligations some time, and starting with the biggie makes good psychological sense.

* My Webster’s Dictionary defines ought as both a moral duty and a variant of the word, aught. Aught is from naught, a Middle English word for the arithmetical symbol 0.
The carbon tax should begin as a trickle, say five cents per barrel of oil equivalent the first year, but double each year. When the tax reaches $25.60 per barrel, the whole idea could be reassessed.

The next point to be made about this new kind of tax is most important: for the economic-environmental transformation of our society to be successful, the revenues generated from the tax must be used to replace the tax on our incomes beginning at the lowest bracket and working up from the bottom. Eliminating federal income taxes by taxing fossil fuels based on their carbon content penalizes things like energy waste, global warming, acid rain, smog, Middle East wars, oil spills, and the wasteful use of petrochemicals. Meanwhile, it would encourage a natural gas transition to the solar-hydrogen economy while helping those least able to afford the change to a sustainable society. After all, the poor should not bear the burden of our responsibility toward future generations.

Continuing along this vein, in the year Ought Two, we should extend this economic-environmental transformation further by taxing toxic substances. Toxic substances are useful, perhaps even necessary, but their use should not be encouraged under any circumstances. So we tax toxic chemicals rather than taxing low-income working people. Again, to give our industry time to adjust, this kind of tax should begin as a trickle but grow, at some rate, up to a significant level and then be reassessed for its effectiveness.

In Ought Three — and this might bother some of you more than others — we ought to impose our new kind of tax on meat. We really should. We cannot support our excessively rich, meat-based diet in the United States anymore. There is certainly no conceivable way the world, with nine or ten billion people trying to emulate the leading society's lifestyle, can tolerate our wasteful use of land. Beginning the tax at only a penny per pound of meat for example, doubling every year up to $5.12 per pound, say, would certainly encourage us to reduce our meat consumption gradually. Such a tax would give us time to learn new recipes, broaden our tastes, and improve our health while freeing millions of acres of land and acres of water from being used just for meat animals. Eventually we would be using meat mostly as we should, — as a festival or celebration food. With the revenues from the carbon, toxics, and meat taxes going toward eliminating income taxes from the bottom up, we might even live to see an end to income taxes on the middle class.

To my mind, we make a really good start just recognizing this first decade as the "Decade of the Oughts." That we ought to transform our energy-economic system; that we ought to lead the world in this effort, even proceed unilaterally if necessary; that we ought to do all this by removing taxes on good things, like working for a living and taxing bad things like fossil energy, toxic substances, and our wasteful, unhealthy, environmentally destructive addiction to meat, are just some of my oughts.

As I've already said, everyone has their own list of oughts. I've just listed some that I think are among the most important. I think we should have discussions about the bad things we could tax to help us achieve the "Good Society." Others, for instance, might say we should tax luxury goods. Maybe we should tax drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and gambling instead of trying, and always failing anyway, to enforce these moral prohibitions. Eventually, we might tax enough bad things to eliminate taxes on working people entirely.

In my imagination again, I can see myself saying, "Yea, way back in the Oughts, we sure had a lot of obligations. Not like you young folks these days. But it was worth it, knowing all you youngsters are living the better for it."

In this issue of AJES, several articles help us understand our regional obligations and inform our policy decisions for the future of our grandchildren living in the Adirondacks and beautiful Lake Champlain Valley. In "Acid Rain in the Adirondacks: A Time of Change!" Karen Roy, et al., explain the progress that has been made in controlling the acid rain problem so far and point out that it still isn't enough to save our lakes. Tom Cobb reminds us of the historical path that helped us keep our regional obligations from becoming a national concern in "On the 1967 Proposal for an Adirondack Mountains National Park." Heidi Kretzer's "Empty Spaces Offer a World of Opportunity," presents an exciting community development project to rehabilitate some of our abandoned buildings for both residents and tourists by turning them into community information centers. Jon Meade analyzes some of the social dynamics that occurred in "The 1995 Adirondack Blowdown: An Analysis of the Ecological and Sociological Phenomena." And, included among the science and applied practices recorded in this issue is the photo essay "Adirondack Gold" by Ken Rimany, et al., honoring a few of the hidden treasures we can find in these mountains. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to display such art as a beautiful example of the transdisciplinary nature of environmental studies and this journal.

Comments?
Please direct your comments, suggestions or ideas for material for AJES to Gary Chilson, Editor, Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies, Paul Smith's College, Paul Smiths NY 12970, chilsoog@paulsmiths.edu.