Sustainable Development: A New World Deception

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The term "sustainable development" began a rapid spread with the release in 1987 of a United Nations report titled *Our Common Future*, now generally referred to as the Bruntland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). In the report, sustainable development was defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Another international publication, *Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living* (World Conservation Union [IUCN] et al. 1991), appeared in 1991. The declaration of principles therein was authorized by a coalition of major international conservation organizations; it defined sustainable development as "improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems." *Caring for the Earth* has generated dialogue and commentary in recent issues of *Conservation Biology* (Robinson 1993a, 1993b; Holdgate & Munro 1993; Young 1993).

Robinson (1993a) faulted the document for its "purely utilitarian perspective" and the fact that it presents development and conservation as parts of a single process. In responding to Robinson, Holdgate and Munro (Holdgate is Director General of the World Conservation Union [IUCN], an authorizing agency of *Caring for the Earth*) stated that the document has "a political purpose [that seeks to] relate the primary objectives that it espouses to the aspirations of the widest possible audience." The audience, they admitted (by quoting directly from *Caring for the Earth*), is intended to be "those who shape policy and make decisions that affect the course of development and the condition of the environment." They also made clear their view that "many years of debate will be required to fully clarify and widely disseminate the concept of sustainable development, and every positive contribution to that process will be welcome."

In fact, sustainable development is code for "perpetual growth." Consider the following passages, also taken from *Our Common Future*: "The international economy must speed up world growth while respecting environmental constraints"; "A five to tenfold increase in manufacturing output will be needed"; "Efforts to save particular species will be possible for only relatively few of the more spectacular and important ones." Likewise, in a chapter titled "The Growth Imperative and Sustainable Development," the authors wrote that "the ... needs of 5 billion people (with 5 billion more to come in the next five decades) require large appropriations of natural resources, and the most basic aspirations for material consumption, livelihood, and health require even more. The maxim of sustainable development is not 'limits to growth;' it is 'the growth of limits.'"

The concept of sustainable development has been force-fed to the world community by the global corporate-political-media network that is paving the way for the New World Order. It comes to us in every form of print and electronic media. It comes to us on a daily basis, packaged in such a sugar coat that to refute it is to seem unpatriotic, especially when continued growth and development are presented as compatible with "respecting environmental constraints."

But proponents of sustainable development do not respect environmental constraints, and they ignore the fact that the First World has long since lived beyond sustainability. Indeed, they hold up the overconsumptive lifestyle of industrialized society as the standard to
which the rest of the world should aspire. Sustainable
development guarantees the continued deterioration of
ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity, and it lauds the
growth that independent scientists have warned against
since midcentury, when, in a symposium of the Ameri-
can Association for the Advancement of Science, it was
suggested that the human species is to planet Earth what
cancer is to a human body (cited in Potter 1988).

Economists Robert Costanza and Herman Daly
(1992) have a different understanding of sustainable de-
velopment: "We differentiate the concepts of growth
(material increase in size) and development (improve-
ment in organization without size change)." Their opin-
ion, though, is well buried in the literature and, realis-
tically speaking, has had little influence on the wider
use, understanding, and direction of the concept.

In Blueprint for a Green Economy (Pearce et al.
1989), the authors wrote that sustainable development
"has come to mean whatever suits the advocacy of the
individual concerned." As a term, then, it is something
of a chameleon, and as such it becomes a powerful tool
in the hands of those who have the financial and polit-
cal power and the media connections to manipulate it
and to insert their definitions of it into mainstream
thought.

It is also being inserted into educational systems. A
case in point is a slick promotional brochure mailed out
the Global Environment. The cover of the brochure
bears a photo of a sunrise taken from space. In the upper
part of the photo, against cosmic blackness, are the
words, "The overpowering challenger in the contest for
primacy among environmental almanacs." Within
weeks, educators who had been mailed the promotional
brochure received the 385-page report produced by the
World Resources Institute (World Resources Institute
1992) [WRI], which describes itself as "an independent
research and policy institute created in 1982 to help
governments, the private sector, environmental and de-
velopment organizations (sic), and others grapple with
one of our time's most pressing questions: How can
societies meet human needs and nurture economic
growth without destroying the natural resources and
environmental integrity that make prosperity possible
[emphasis added]." The cover of the guide displays the
same photo as the promotional brochure, but the words
that stand out against the black background are "Toward
sustainable development." It is not surprising that the
WRI receives financial support from Corporate Prop-
erty Investors, Mitchell Energy and Development Cor-
poration, and foundations for Weyerhaeuser, Amoco,
Shell Oil, etc. A separate category titled "Corporate As-
ociates" includes Waste Management, Inc., Monsanto,
Chevron, and E. I. duPont de Nemours. Cooperating or-
dizations include the World Bank, the Overseas De-
velopment Association, and dozens of other organiza-
tions devoted to growth and resource exploitation.

The U.S. federal government is a great champion of
sustainable development. The Environmental Protec-
tion Agency (EPA), in a report to Congress (Environ-
mental Protection Agency 1992), stated that "EPA is . . .
assisting regional, state, and local efforts to promote sus-
tainable development . . . The Nation can only achieve
and maintain sustainable development when its citizens
understand the concept and embrace it as a national
driority. As part of its effort to educate the public . . . the
Agency will fund a national Environmental Education
and Training Program to train a force of environmental
educators . . . The Agency is actively pursuing public-
private partnerships such as the recent cooperative ef-
fort with GM to produce an award-winning video on the
environment for school children. The video, which re-
quired no public funding, has been requested by over
100,000 schools."

It may well be that President Clinton's Council on
Sustainable Development will, in the end, inflict more
violence on the natural world than did the Bush Admin-
istration's Council on Economic Competitiveness. Cer-
tainly it has the potential to do so. By charter, the 25-
person Council exists to develop for the President a
strategy to advance the cause of sustainable develop-
ment. Co-chaired by Dow Chemical vice president
David Buzzelli, it has eight representatives from the cor-
porate sector, with connections to such groups as the
Chemical Manufacturer's Association, the Committee
for Economic Development, the American Petroleum
Institute, and the Business Council for Sustainable De-
velopment. By contrast, only five members of the Coun-
cil have environmental ties, and all five are top-level
administrators from "big 10" environmental groups. No-
where is there a voice from the grassroots, nowhere a
biocentric attitude.

The presence on the Council of Kenneth Derr, chair-
man and CEO of Chevron Corporation, is particularly
instructive, because Chevron helps finance a number of
right-wing, anti-environmental groups, including the
Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow. Constructive
Tomorrow combats "environmental myths" and what it
calls efforts to "indoctrinate children with a dangerous
Green mentality." Chevron, which itself pled guilty to
65 violations of the Clean Water Act in 1992 and which
was ordered to pay $6.5 million in criminal fines, also
supports the infamous Pacific Legal Foundation, de-
fender of the most rapacious and expansive of indus-
tries, including mining, timber, nuclear, and real-estate
development (Anonymous 1994). Why are such people
on the President's Council? It shouldn't come as a sur-
prise, because the shared pen of our President and Vice-
President (Clinton & Gore 1992) produced the follow-
ing: "We will renew America's commitment to leave our
children a better nation ... whose leadership for sustainable global growth is unsurpassed [emphasis added]."

So effective has been the global blitz pressing for sustainable development that the multinational philosophy now permeates high-profile environmental organizations. As an example (and it is only an example), the following quotations are found in the January/February 1994 issue of Nature Conservancy. While the articles were written by different authors, one must assume that, taken collectively, they represent the ideology of the organization that published them in an issue devoted to understanding biodiversity. "Sustainable development's goal: Balancing economic growth with biodiversity preservation"; "Promising approaches [to sustainable development] include the efforts of Swiss businessman Stephen Schmidheiny and the Business Council for Sustainable Development, an international group composed of the heads of several dozen multinational corporations that, among other goals, attempts to improve interactions between business and environment" (Lovejoy 1994); "In practical terms, we can no longer afford to consider humans as externalities. Indeed, the continued success of our efforts to preserve biodiversity in the face of mounting threats will depend on our ability to integrate socioeconomic factors into our conservation equations" and "We are currently in the process of creating The Virginia Eastern Shore Sustainable Development Corporation—an institution to help implement sustainable development in the area" (Watson 1994).

The expressed view that the Business Council for Sustainable Development offers "promising approaches" is revealing because the organization, created by Swiss banker Schmidheiny, includes executives from the world's most powerful corporations, including Dow, Mitsubishi, Chevron, Shell, and Nissan. It is also noteworthy that the Business Council for Sustainable Development has hired Burson-Marsteller, one of the world's largest public relations firms, to advance the sustainable development concept (Ruiz-Marrero 1994). Burson-Marsteller has become known globally as a specialist in "green-washing"—the improving of environmental images—and in this capacity it has served Union Carbide, Exxon, Louisiana-Pacific, and other such groups. They were hired by the Mexican government to sell the idea of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in the U.S., and they are now working to promote Hydro-Quebec's James Bay II Project.

Sustainable development is one of the most insidious and manipulable ideas to appear in decades, and because the multifaceted, global offensive to sell it is essentially unopposed, it is perceived as something of an axiom by the public. This perception must be reversed because growth, which has grossly exceeded the bounds of reasonableness and which is ancestral to hosts of environmental and social ills, long ago became the enemy of the natural world. If this simple fact fails to sink into the global mind, then hopes of restoring ecosystems, countering the tide of extinctions, and dealing effectively with a vast array of environmental problems all will have to be recognized, in the end, as having been nothing more than pipe dreams.

Literature Cited