Why Not in My Back Yard?

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February 16, 2005

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Introduction

It has become standard operating procedure in the United States. On a daily basis, and at all levels of government, environmentally-inspired decisions are being made that are designed to prevent, halt, or markedly restrict resource extraction and primary processing of those resources. In region after region the environmental impacts of mining, smelting, drilling, sand and gravel extraction, timber harvesting, and even bottling of water are deemed to be unacceptable. A yard sign in a northern rural community located near a proposed new mining operation sums up what appears to be a prevailing attitude – "Not in Anyone's Back Yard!"

While to much of American society resource extraction is "out," consumption is most definitely "in." Houses, second homes, and vehicles are trending larger at the same time that personal consumption of a myriad of consumer goods is rising. Indeed, the U.S. government has periodically appealed to the citizenry over the past several decades to support the economy by spending and consuming more.

Homeowners protesting a proposed wind energy project in Australia.

http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/specials/wind/

It is apparent that increased consumption requires increasing quantities of resources to support that consumption. The implications of declining public support for domestic production of basic materials in the face of increasing consumption are also apparent: local actions to halt or prevent resource extraction are not halting these activities at all. The effect is to simply shift them to some other location – to someone else's back yard – a practice that the late Senator Mark Hatfield referred to over 20 years ago as "environmental imperialism."

Think Globally, Act Locally

In the mid-1970s following the first Earth Day, the slogan "Think Globally, Act Locally" was widely recognized across the United States. Appearing in the form of bumper stickers and billboards, the message resonated with much of society and appeared to signal a new level of environmental awareness. Subsequently, however, the idea of global thinking simply disappeared, leaving local action as the centerpiece of environmental thinking.

Award winning Sacramento Bee reporter Tom Knudson recently produced a series of articles under the heading "State of Denial" in which he chronicled environmentally-inspired actions in his home state of California that had the effect of shifting the environmental impacts of resource production to regions outside the borders of California and of the U.S. Focusing on commercial fishing and on production of petroleum, timber, and sand and gravel, Knudson noted that while initiatives to limit local production of resources have been vigorous and ongoing, local consumption of all raw materials, including fish, oil, wood, and aggregate, has been rising steadily. Moreover, there have been no significant actions of any kind to limit or even question local consumption of resources.

As a consequence of a ban on commercial fishing along the entire coast of California, fishing pressure has simply shifted to the waters off Newfoundland and other locations, creating large and negative impacts. Similarly, prohibition of new drilling activity within international waters along the California coast has had the effect of stimulating oil exploration and drilling in Ecuador, a country with few environmental regulations – in this case with devastating environmental consequences to Ecuador. Timber harvests and mining of sand and gravel have likewise been shifted elsewhere – in this case largely to Canada – partly because of environmentally inspired actions within the Golden State to curtail local logging and mining.

World's other forests feed state's appetite for timber

By Tom Knudson - Bee Staff Writer
Published Sunday, October 5, 2003

Thick as a phone book, a new state report on the environment cites a little-recognized danger to global forests: California.

By consuming "vast amounts of ... wood products" while increasingly protecting our own forests from logging, Californians are sharpening the pace of cutting elsewhere, including Canada, says a draft of the report "The Changing California, Forest and Range 2003 Assessment," obtained by The Bee.

http://www.sacbee.com/static/live/news/projects/denial/10052003.html

The phenomenon described by Knudson is not limited to California, as variations of the same story are replayed again and again across the U.S. It has become standard practice for citizen groups and those identifying themselves as environmentalists to protest, litigate, and generally obstruct in every way possible existing or new resource extraction activity within the U.S. For activity ranging from logging and mining to construction of heavy industry and even water bottling plants the message conveyed by activist groups and increasingly mimicked by the general population is striking similar – not in my back yard; not within this city, not within this county; not within this state; not within this nation!

It is abundantly clear that resource consumption beyond the ability or willingness to produce resources translates to net importation and associated transfer of environmental impacts linked to resource production. It is also clear that creation of layer upon layer of environmental regulations beyond those existing in other regions has the effect of discouraging industrial activity in the most highly regulated region and encouraging a shift of industrial activity to less regulated regions.

Due in part to ongoing efforts to protect the domestic environment in the absence of any corresponding effort to limit consumption, the United States has, over the past half-century, become a massive net importer of raw materials (Table 1). On the list are most minerals, petroleum, and wood. Today the U.S. is even a net importer of bottled water!

Learning to Think Globally

When Congress voted in 2002 to ban the establishment of new oil wells along the coast of California, it did so based on concern for the environment of California. Congressional action had earlier banned new drilling leases off the coasts of North Carolina, Alaska, and Florida. California Representative Lois Capps, cosponsor of the amendment to ban new drilling off the coast of her state, commented that "Californians oppose new drilling. . . More oil drilling is just not worth the risk to this environmentally and economically valuable area." In the debate preceding the vote, little consideration was given to where the petroleum might come from that would otherwise come from those new wells. No action was proposed to examine domestic consumption patterns or to assess where future petroleum resources might come from. Likewise, no consideration was given to what the environmental impacts of drilling might be in the region that would be called upon to produce the increasing volumes of petroleum consumed by Californians.

Table 1
Net U.S. Imports of Selected Materials as a Percent of Apparent Consumption - 2004, and by Major Foreign Sources

Material	% Imported	Principal Foreign Sources (2000-2003) [1, 2/]
Columbium	100	Brazil, Canada, Estonia, Germany
Manganese	100	S. Africa, Gabon, Australia, France
Strontium	100	Mexico, Germany
Bauxite/Alumina	100	Australia, Jamaica, Guinea, Suriname
Thallium	100	Belgium, France, Russia, UK
Indium	100	China, Canada, Japan, France
Rare earth metals	100	China, France, Japan, Estonia
Platinum group	91	S. Africa, UK, Germany, Canada, Russia
Bismuth	90	Belgium, Mexico, China, UK
Tin	88	Peru, China, Bolivia, Brazil
Diamond (industrial)	85	Ireland, Switzerland, UK, Russia
Titanium (sponge)	85	Kazakhstan, Japan, Russia
Palladium	81	Russia, S. Africa, UK, Belgium, Germany
Tantalum	80	Australia, Kazakhstan, Canada, China
Barium (Barite)	79	China, India
Rhenium	79	Chile, Kazakhstan, Mexico
Tungsten	73	China, Canada
Chromium	72	S. Africa, Kazakhstan, Zimbabwe, Russia
Silicon	56	S. Africa, Norway, Brazil, Russia
Zinc	56	Canada, Mexico, Peru
Petroleum	56	Canada, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Venezuela
Beryllium	55	Kazakhstan, Japan, Brazil, Spain
Silver	54	Mexico, Canada, UK, Peru
Lithium	>50	Chile, Argentina

Nickel	49	Canada, Russia, Norway, Australia
Magnesium compounds	48	China, Australia, Canada, Austria
Copper	43	Canada, Chile, Peru, Mexico
Aluminum	41	Canada, Russia, Venezuela, Mexico
Nitrogen (fixed)	38	Trinidad and Tobago, Canada, Russia
Lumber (softwood)	38	Canada, EU, Chile, N. Zealand, Mexico
Gypsum	26	Canada, Mexico, Spain
Cement (Portland/msry)	23	Canada, Thailand, China, Venezuela
Sulfur	20	Canada, Mexico, Venezuela
Iron and Steel	18	EU, Canada, Mexico, S. Korea
Wood/Wd. Prod.	11	Canada, China, Indonesia, Finland, N. Zealand, Chile, Brazil
Iron ore	8	Canada, Brazil, Australia, Chile
Phosphate rock	6	Morocco

Also significant import dependency for arsenic, asbestos, cesium, cobalt, diamond (dust/grit), fluorspar, gallium, garnet (industrial), gemstones, germanium, graphite, gypsum, iodine, iron and steel slag, leather, mica, natural rubber, perlite, potash, pumice, quartz, rhenium, rubidium, salt, selenium, stone (dimension), talc, titanium concentrates, vanadium, vermiculite, wool, yttrium, zirconium.

1/ Source: U.S. Geological Survey (2005).

2/ Sources of imports arranged with the most important supplier (in terms of volume) listed toward the middle, with suppliers of lesser volume listed progressively toward the right side of the table.

When a White House appointed panel of scientists recommended massive reductions in timber harvest in Washington, Oregon, and California as a strategy for protecting the northern spotted owl, it did so without considering where replacement timber might come from or whether there were rare or endangered species in potential new producing regions that might be adversely impacted. There was again no consideration given to whether it might be possible to modify domestic consumption patterns.

When President Clinton announced an executive order to block proposed mining development in the Grand Staircase region of Utah, an area with vast mineral and coal deposits, he cited environmental concerns and described his objective as to "free lands up from the threat of development so children of the future can enjoy these places." There was no parallel action to examine domestic consumption patterns for the minerals involved, nor any examination of where future resources might come from if not from the Grand Staircase region.

With each environmentally-based decision to block raw material extraction within the United States it is worth pausing to consider whether these same activities are likely to be

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
For Immediate Release
September 18, 1996

Establishment of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument's vast and austere landscape embraces a spectacular array of scientific and historic resources… NOW, THEREFORE, I WILLIAM J. CLINTON, President of the United States of America, by the authority vested in me by section 2 of the Act of June 8, 1906 (34 Stat. 225, 16 U.S.C. 431), do proclaim that there are hereby set apart and reserved as the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument…

http://www.ugs.state.ut.us/online/c/c-93/gseprocl.htm

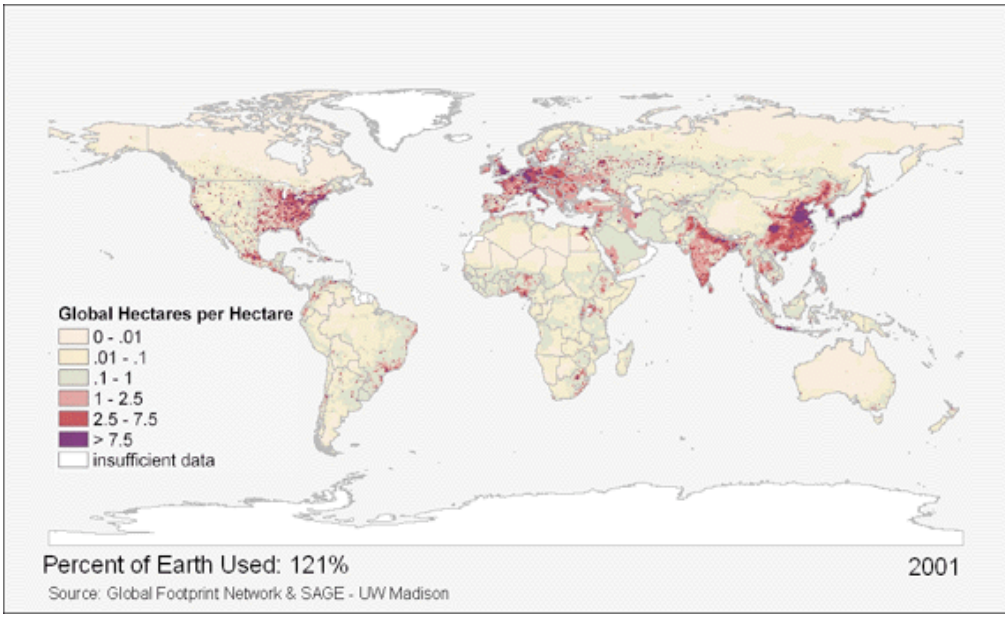
less damaging to the environments of other nations or more acceptable to residents of these countries. All too often the answer to both questions is an emphatic "no!"

Thinking globally requires careful consideration of the potential impacts of local environmental initiatives on not only the local ecosystem, but on ecosystem integrity of other regions and nations as well. Unfortunately, such thinking is almost totally absent in environmental decision-making.

Changing the Environmental Decision Making Process

Because likely global environmental impacts of actions designed to protect local environments are so often overlooked, it is now time to *require* global thinking in environmental planning and decision making. As things now stand, proposals for industrial expansion must be thoroughly examined through a formalized and exhaustive environmental impact evaluation. Curiously, there is no similar requirement for evaluation of environmentally-oriented proposals, such as those calling for establishment or expansion of reserve areas, or development of new land management rules or restrictions.

In the view of these authors there is a need for Global Environmental Impact Assessments (GEIA) of all proposals that would affect the status or management of forested or other lands. Such a requirement would help to ensure that actions vis-à-vis environmental sustainability are not haphazard, but are instead based on consideration of all the essential pillars of sustainability – ecological, economic, and social.



Ecological Footprint

The darker the colors, the higher the concentration of consumption.

http://www.footprintnetwork.org/gfn_sub.php?content=maps_page

Questions to be addressed in a GEIA include the following: Is the proposal based on scientifically based data using standard protocols? How will adoption of the proposal impact the net import situation for wood and other materials? Will adoption of the proposal shift environmental impacts elsewhere? If so, where, and what are the likely impacts? If a proposal will result in reduced production or extraction of a particular raw material, is there an accompanying initiative aimed at reducing consumption of that material?

Thinking in a different way could lead to a new and more responsible approach to environmentally oriented decision making. For instance, should we conclude that the impacts associated with production of raw materials needed to support domestic consumption are simply unacceptable from an environmental point of view, then perhaps our society and leadership will begin to seriously address consumption itself.

From an ethical perspective, the need for global thinking is obvious. Consideration of the global environment leads to a similar conclusion. In short, systematic attention to the question of "why *not* in my back yard" is an essential element of environmental planning and decision making, and steps are needed at this point to ensure that this occurs.

The Bottom Line

Environmental planning in the U.S. very seldom includes any consideration of the reality of consumption or of the accompanying need for raw materials. Consequently, decision after decision is made wholly on the basis of esthetics or biology, with no thought given to possible unintended consequences of such decisions. As a result, environmentally-based decision making in the U.S. has fostered increasing raw material importation along with a transfer of associated environmental impacts.

In view of the global negative environmental impacts of high consumption in the U.S. and other developed countries and recognizing that much of the impact is traceable to raw material importation, it is rather clear that developed countries, and the United States in particular, should accept more responsibility for their own consumption. Environmental decision makers must account for the impacts of consumption on the "back yards" of other nations and systematically evaluate both which location is likely to have the least total environmental impact and what consumption mitigation strategies are possible.

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This Dovetail Report is made possible through the generous support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Laird Norton Endowment Foundation and the McKnight Foundation.

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