

beyond reform

by James Gustave Speth

Many efforts have been made internationally over the past quarter century to cope with the major threats to the global environment. In many respects this exercise of planetary stewardship has been impressive. But, in reality, these efforts have been inadequate, and the disturbing trends that drove action in the first place by and large continue. The question, therefore, is how best to improve global environmental governance.

There are two main camps among the scholars and writers starting to look deeply into the issue — institutional reformists who want to make the system of treaty regimes and international institutions work much better and those who believe far deeper changes are necessary.

Reformists tend to believe that our first attempt at global environmental governance, which focusses mainly on international environmental law, is basically on the right track. The others agree on the need to strengthen the current approach, but believe that deeper and more difficult changes will be needed in order to move to environmental sustainability.

One reformist vision involves creating a World Environment Organization. If we were writing on a clean slate — approaching afresh the question of what international regulatory organizations should be created — the case for it would be very strong. We live in a world where pollution knows no boundaries and where trade, technology, and investment flows are increasingly international.

A WEO could be quite modest or quite powerful. In one model, UNEP would become a specialized agency of the United Nations, gaining in stature, size and independence. This would enlarge its financial resources and provide a more efficient and effective structure for governance and leadership. The next step would bring the various environmental treaties together under the new WEO. The most ambitious idea would create a world environment agency entrusted with setting international standards and enforcing them against laggard countries. In practice, it might be wise to begin at the modest end of the spectrum and gradually strengthen the new organization as trust and confidence build.

Another vision conceives of opening the door for the public to participate in the treaty process. Until citizens can have their say in international fora, get the information they need, submit petitions for action and complaints for noncompliance, participate in hearings and initiate judicial proceedings to enforce international law — all available in many countries in a domestic law context — international environmental law and policy will never have the dynamism it so badly needs.

A third reformist vision is to take a major step outside the world of conventional regimes and explore the idea of 'Global Issue Networks' to reach an effective 'global accord' on major environmental issues by a quite different path. This realizes that, while the intergovernmental system is often bogged down in

endless and ineffectual wordsmithing, there is enormous new potential in the world outside governments.

The most elaborate discussion of global issue networks is provided by J.F. Rischard in *High Noon: 20 Global Problems, 20 Years To Solve Them*. He sees one on, say, tropical deforestation, beginning with a 'constitutional phase' in which an existing agency hosts a event for stakeholders from governments, Northern and Southern NGOs, and potentially affected business and commercial interests. It then moves to the 'norm-producing phase' in which a rough consensus is arrived on key questions (What exactly is the problem? Where do we want to be in twenty years? How do we get there? What should the norms and standards be?). This, in turn, is followed by an 'implementation phase', in which the major emphasis is on "creating reputation effects through naming-and-shaming". Countries and other players are rated against the norms, public and peer pressure deployed to promote better performance from laggards.

These emerging processes would not be possible without the growing vitality and — thanks to the Internet — the growing connectivity of the international NGO community. There are estimated to be 100,000 NGOs working for environmental protection worldwide, and some have become transnational, focussing on global change. Of course, governments remain enormously important, and it would be essential also to involve their officials in these global issue networks.

By contrast with these reformist ideas, others argue that deeper changes must be undertaken to address underlying causes. Though they do not all agree on what the root causes are, some tend to see them deriving from structural factors having to do with economic inequality, absence of political representation, and undeveloped environmental sensibilities among most of the world's people. Some of those urging these alternative approaches see them as important complements to environmental regimes; others see little hope for this approach.

Three recent books — Lester Brown's *Plan B: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*, Paul and Anne Ehrlich's *One with Nineveh: Politics, Consumption and the Human Future*, and my own *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment* — contend that global environmental conditions are steadily worsening, current efforts to address them are inadequate, and that major new initiatives are needed to address the underlying drivers of deterioration. They share similar views on the need to slow population growth, bring on a new generation of environmentally benign technologies, end rampant consumerism, and make prices and market systems work for the environment. The first step in taking action to curb these drivers of deterioration is for governments, NGOs and business to decide that they must be addressed systematically: it then becomes possible to work out the specific steps the international community can take.

Meanwhile, Paul Hawken and Amory and Hunter Lovins seek to co-opt and green capitalism, not reject it — as the title of their book, *Natural Capitalism*, suggests. They describe the way new technology and techniques can be put to good use, and are clear that governments must intervene to make the market work for the environment rather than against it. They also offer a radical vision of how capitalism should work, backed by the hope that the business community will become the principal vehicle for addressing many global-scale environmental challenges.

Others — like those associated with the International Forum on Globalization doubt that such challenges can be addressed unless much is done to curb corporate power and reshape the present process of economic globalization. They believe that globalization is intrinsically harmful to the environment because it is based on ever-increasing consumption, exploitation of resources, and high energy use, and argue that not much can be done about negative environmental trends without far-reaching changes in the way economic and political power is distributed in modern society.

They see the solution in assertive local control. Indeed, a surprisingly diverse array of local organizations and communities — taking the slogan “Think Globally, Act Locally” to heart — are impatient with international processes and believe the way forward is to “just do it” by working toward sustainability in everyday life and in local communities.

Individuals and communities can also exert influence as voters and citizens, as investors, as consumers, as association members, as workers, as activists, and as educators. This is already beginning to happen in the United States, where citizen initiatives and local action are beginning to address the global problems of energy and climate change. Meanwhile, Washington itself does little.

Over the last 30 years, therefore, the international community's quest for planetary stewardship has encompassed a variety of intergovernmental, governmental and civil society initiatives. The results are mixed and generally conceded to be inadequate. The disturbing trends in deterioration continue. It is also widely conceded that a much stronger system of environmental regimes is essential, but those most deeply concerned have looked beyond this and asked what else must be done. Several themes run through their efforts:

- The intergovernmental processes that constitute regimes are too closely allied with the forces that gave rise to the problems in the first place to produce real change.
- Real change is only possible if we address the deeper issue of the forces underlying deterioration.
- The search for these underlying drivers leads quickly to institutions and ideas of extraordinary power: the large multinational corporations and their influence on major governments; an unflagging commitment to high rates of economic growth; a consumerist and anthropocentric culture.
- Efforts fundamentally to change this operating system are essential, whether through wooing and conversion, creating powerful new incentives and disincentives, cutting its power centers down to size, or eroding its monopoly through community-based and other bottom-up initiatives.
- None of this is likely unless civil society ascends to a new prominence and new roles, and engages in a new politics of the global environment.

Integral to the needed transformations is a change in values — a transition to new habits of thought and a new consciousness captured well in the *Earth Charter*, which urges us “to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.” 

