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please see article on page 17

How many planets?

A survey of the global environment | July 6th 2002



The great race

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Growth need not be the enemy of greenery. But much more effort is required to make the two compatible, says Vijay Vaitheeswaran

SUSTAINABLE development is a dangerously slippery concept. Who could possibly be against something that invokes such alluring images of untouched wildernesses and happy creatures? The difficulty comes in trying to reconcile the "development" with the "sustainable" bit: look more closely, and you will notice that there are no people in the picture.

That seems unlikely to stop a contingent of some 60,000 world leaders, businessmen, activists, bureaucrats and journalists from travelling to South Africa next month for the UN-sponsored World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Whether the summit achieves anything remains to be seen, but at least it is asking the right questions. This survey will argue that sustainable development cuts to the heart of mankind's relationship with nature—or, as Paul Portney of Resources for the Future, an American think-tank, puts it, "the great race between development and degradation". It will also explain why there is reason for hope about the planet's future.

The best way known to help the poor today—economic growth—has to be handled with care, or it can leave a degraded or even devastated natural environment for the future. That explains why ecologists and economists have long held diametrically opposed views on development. The difficult part is to work out what we owe future generations, and how to reconcile that moral obligation with what we owe the poorest among us today.

It is worth recalling some of the arguments fielded in the run-up to the big Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro a decade ago. A publication from UNESCO, a United Nations agency, offered the following vision of the future: "Every generation should leave water, air and soil resources as pure and unpolluted as when it came on earth. Each generation should leave undiminished all the species of animals it found existing on earth." Man, that suggests, is but a strand in the web of life, and the natural order is fixed and supreme. Put earth first, it seems to say.

Robert Solow, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, replied at the time that this was “fundamentally the wrong way to go”, arguing that the obligation to the future is “not to leave the world as we found it in detail, but rather to leave the option or the capacity to be as well off as we are.” Implicit in that argument is the seemingly hard-hearted notion of “fungibility”: that natural resources, whether petroleum or giant pandas, are substitutable.

Rio's fatal flaw

Champions of development and defenders of the environment have been locked in battle ever since a UN summit in Stockholm launched the sustainable-development debate three decades ago. Over the years, this debate often pitted indignant politicians and social activists from the poor world against equally indignant politicians and greens from the rich world. But by the time the Rio summit came along, it seemed they had reached a truce. With the help of a committee of grandees led by Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former Norwegian prime minister, the interested parties struck a deal in 1987: development and the environment, they declared, were inextricably linked. That compromise generated a good deal of euphoria. Green groups grew concerned over poverty, and development charities waxed lyrical about greenery. Even the World Bank joined in. Its World Development Report in 1992 gushed about “win-win” strategies, such as ending environmentally harmful subsidies, that would help both the economy and the environment.

By nearly universal agreement, those grand aspirations have fallen flat in the decade since that summit. Little headway has been made with environmental problems such as climate change and loss of biodiversity. Such progress as has been achieved has been largely due to three factors that this survey will explore in later sections: more decision-making at local level, technological innovation, and the rise of market forces in environmental matters.

The main explanation for the disappointment—and the chief lesson for those about to gather in South Africa—is that Rio overreached itself. Its participants were so anxious to reach a political consensus that they agreed to the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, which Daniel Esty of Yale University thinks has turned into “a buzz-word largely devoid of content”. The biggest mistake, he reckons, is that it slides over the difficult trade-offs between environment and development in the real world. He is careful to note that there are plenty of cases where those goals are linked—but also many where they are not: “Environmental and economic policy goals are distinct, and the actions needed to achieve them are not the same.”

No such thing as win-win

To insist that the two are “impossible to separate”, as the Brundtland commission claimed, is nonsense. Even the World Bank now accepts that its much-trumpeted 1992 report was much too optimistic. Kristalina Georgieva, the Bank's director for the environment, echoes comments from various colleagues when she says: “I've never seen a real win-win in my life. There's always somebody, usually an elite group grabbing rents, that loses. And we've learned in the past decade that those losers fight hard to make sure that technically elegant win-win policies do not get very far.”

So would it be better to ditch the concept of sustainable development altogether? Probably not. Even people with their feet firmly planted on the ground think one aspect of it is worth salvaging: the emphasis on the future.

Nobody would accuse John Graham of jumping on green bandwagons. As an official in President George Bush's Office of Management and Budget, and previously as

head of Harvard University's Centre for Risk Analysis, he has built a reputation for evidence-based policymaking. Yet he insists sustainable development is a worthwhile concept: "It's good therapy for the tunnel vision common in government ministries, as it forces integrated policymaking. In practical terms, it means that you have to take economic cost-benefit trade-offs into account in environmental laws, and keep environmental trade-offs in mind with economic development."

Jose Maria Figueres, a former president of Costa Rica, takes a similar view. "As a politician, I saw at first hand how often policies were dictated by short-term considerations such as elections or partisan pressure. Sustainability is a useful template to align short-term policies with medium- to long-term goals."

It is not only politicians who see value in saving the sensible aspects of sustainable development. Achim Steiner, head of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the world's biggest conservation group, puts it this way: "Let's be honest: greens and businesses do not have the same objective, but they can find common ground. We look for pragmatic ways to save species. From our own work on the ground on poverty, our members—be they bird watchers or passionate ecologists—have learned that 'sustainable use' is a better way to conserve."

Sir Robert Wilson, boss of Rio Tinto, a mining giant, agrees. He and other business leaders say it forces hard choices about the future out into the open: "I like this concept because it frames the trade-offs inherent in a business like ours. It means that single-issue activism is simply not as viable."

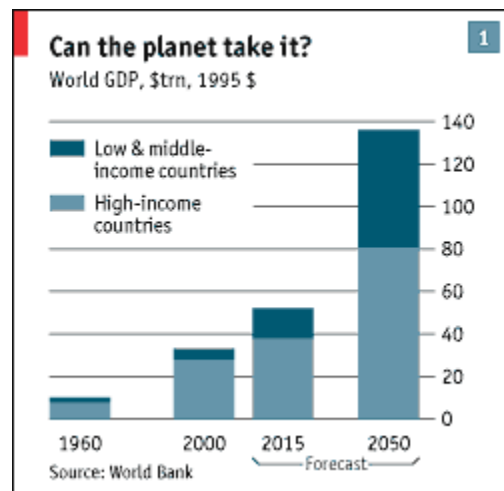
Kenneth Arrow and Larry Goulder, two economists at Stanford University, suggest that the old ideological enemies are converging: "Many economists now accept the idea that natural capital has to be valued, and that we need to account for ecosystem services. Many ecologists now accept that prohibiting everything in the name of protecting nature is not useful, and so are being selective." They think the debate is narrowing to the more empirical question of how far it is possible to substitute natural capital with the man-made sort, and specific forms of natural capital for one another.

The job for Johannesburg

So what can the Johannesburg summit contribute? The prospects are limited. There are no big, set-piece political treaties to be signed as there were at Rio. America's acrimonious departure from the Kyoto Protocol, a UN treaty on climate change, has left a bitter taste in many mouths. And the final pre-summit gathering, held in early June in Indonesia, broke up in disarray. Still, the gathered worthies could usefully concentrate on a handful of areas where international co-operation can help deal with environmental problems. Those include improving access for the poor to cleaner energy and to safe drinking water, two areas where concerns about human health and the environment overlap. If rich countries want to make progress, they must agree on firm targets and offer the money needed to meet them. Only if they do so will poor countries be willing to co-operate on problems such as global warming that rich countries care about.

That seems like a modest goal, but it just might get the world thinking seriously about sustainability once again. If the Johannesburg summit helps rebuild a bit of faith in international environmental co-operation, then it will have been worthwhile. Minimising the harm that future economic growth does to the environment will require the rich world to work hand in glove with the poor world—which seems nearly unimaginable in today's atmosphere poisoned by the shortcomings of Rio and Kyoto.

To understand why this matters, recall that great race between development and degradation. Mankind has stayed comfortably ahead in that race so far, but can it go on doing so? The sheer magnitude of the economic growth that is hoped for in the coming decades (see chart) makes it seem inevitable that the clashes between mankind and nature will grow worse. Some are now asking whether all this economic growth is really necessary or useful in the first place, citing past advocates of the simple life.



“God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West... It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve this prosperity. How many planets will a country like India require?”, Mahatma Gandhi asked half a century ago. That question encapsulated the bundle of worries that haunts the sustainable-development debate to this day. Today, the vast majority of Gandhi's countrymen are still living the simple life—full of simple misery, malnourishment and material want. Grinding poverty, it turns out, is pretty sustainable.

If Gandhi were alive today, he might look at China next door and find that the country, once as poor as India, has been transformed beyond recognition by two decades of roaring economic growth. Vast numbers of people have been lifted out of poverty and into middle-class comfort. That could prompt him to reframe his question: how many planets will it take to satisfy China's needs if it ever achieves profligate America's affluence? One green group reckons the answer is three. The next section looks at the environmental data that might underpin such claims. It makes for alarming reading—though not for the reason that first springs to mind

Flying blind

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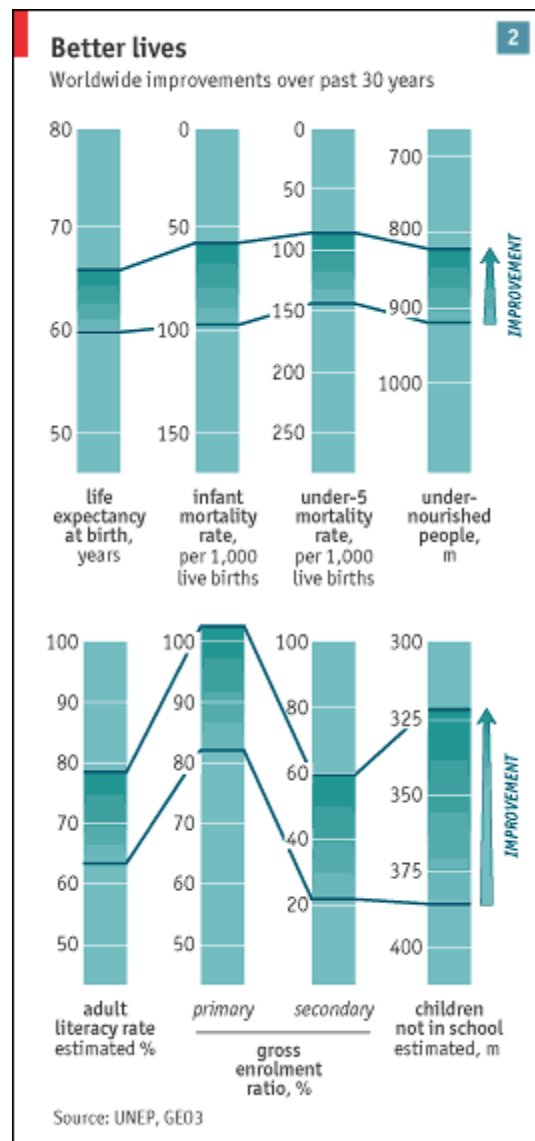
It comes as a shock to discover how little information there is on the environment

WHAT is the true state of the planet? It depends from which side you are peering at it. “Things are really looking up,” comes the cry from one corner (usually overflowing with economists and technologists), pointing to a set of rosy statistics. “Disaster is nigh,” shouts the other corner (usually full of ecologists and environmental lobbyists), holding up a rival set of troubling indicators.

According to the optimists, the 20th century marked a period of unprecedented economic growth that lifted masses of people out of abject poverty. It also brought technological innovations such as vaccines and other advances in public health that tackled many preventable diseases. The result has been a breathtaking enhancement of human welfare and longer, better lives for people everywhere on earth (see chart 2).

At this point, the pessimists interject: "Ah, but at what ecological cost?" They note that the economic growth which made all these gains possible sprang from the rapid spread of industrialisation and its resource-guzzling cousins, urbanisation, motorisation and electrification. The earth provided the necessary raw materials, ranging from coal to pulp to iron. Its ecosystems—rivers, seas, the atmosphere—also absorbed much of the noxious fall-out from that process. The sheer magnitude of ecological change resulting directly from the past century's economic activity is remarkable (see table 3).

To answer that Gandhian question about how many planets it would take if everybody lived like the West, we need to know how much—or how little—damage the West's transformation from poverty to plenty has done to the planet to date. Economists point to the remarkable improvement in local air and water pollution in the rich world in recent decades. "It's Getting Better All the Time", a cheerful tract co-written by the late Julian Simon, insists that: "One of the greatest trends of the past 100 years has been the astonishing rate of progress in reducing almost every form of pollution." The conclusion seems unavoidable: "Relax! If we keep growing as usual, we'll inevitably grow greener."



The ecologically minded crowd takes a different view. "GEO3", a new report from the United Nations Environment Programme, looks back at the past few decades and sees much reason for concern. Its thoughtful boss, Klaus Töpfer (a former German environment minister), insists that his report is not "a document of doom and gloom". Yet, in summing it up, UNEP decries "the declining environmental quality of planet earth", and wags a finger at economic prosperity: "Currently, one-fifth of the world's population enjoys high, some would say excessive, levels of affluence." The conclusion seems unavoidable: "Panic! If we keep growing as usual, we'll inevitably choke the planet to death."

"People and Ecosystems", a collaboration between the World Resources Institute, the World Bank and the United Nations, tried to gauge the condition of ecosystems by examining the goods and services they produce—food, fibre, clean water, carbon storage and so on—and their capacity to continue producing them. The authors explain why ecosystems matter: half of all jobs worldwide are in agriculture, forestry and fishing, and the output from those three commodity businesses still dominates the economies of a quarter of the world's countries.

The report reached two chief conclusions after surveying the best available environmental data. First, a number of ecosystems are "fraying" under the impact of human activity. Second, ecosystems in future will be less able than in the past to deliver the goods and services human life depends upon, which points to unsustainability. But it took care to say: "It's hard, of course, to know what will be truly sustainable." The reason this collection of leading experts could not reach a firm conclusion was that, remarkably, much of the information they needed was incomplete or missing altogether: "Our knowledge of ecosystems has increased dramatically, but it simply has not kept pace with our ability to alter them."

Another group of experts, this time organised by the World Economic Forum, found itself similarly frustrated. The leader of that project, Daniel Esty of Yale, exclaims, throwing his arms in the air: "Why hasn't anyone done careful environmental measurement before? Businessmen always say, 'what matters gets measured.'" Social scientists started quantitative measurement 30 years ago, and even political science turned to hard numbers 15 years ago. Yet look at environmental policy, and the data are lousy."

Gaping holes

At long last, efforts are under way to improve environmental data collection. The most ambitious of these is the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a joint effort among leading development agencies and environmental groups. This four-year effort is billed as an attempt to establish systematic data sets on all environmental matters across the world. But one of the researchers involved grouses that it "has very, very little new money to collect or analyse new data". It seems astonishing that governments have been making sweeping decisions on environmental policy for decades without such a baseline in the first place.

One positive sign is the growing interest of the private sector in collecting environmental data. It seems plain that leaving the task to the public sector has not

A century that changed the world 3	
Change between 1890 (=1) and 1990s	
Industrial output	40
Marine fish catch	35
Carbon dioxide emissions	17
Energy use	16
World economy	14
World urban population	13
Coal production	7
Air pollution	5
Irrigated area	5
World population	4
Horse population	1.1
Bird and mammal species	0.99
Forest area	0.8
Blue-whale population	0.0025

Source: "Something New Under the Sun" by John McNeill

worked. Information on the environment comes far lower on the bureaucratic pecking order than data on education or social affairs, which tend to be overseen by ministries with bigger budgets and more political clout. A number of countries, ranging from New Zealand to Austria, are now looking to the private sector to help collect and manage data in areas such as climate. Development banks are also considering using private contractors to monitor urban air quality, in part to get around the corruption and apathy in some city governments.

"I see a revolution in environmental data collection coming because of computing power, satellite mapping, remote sensing and other such information technologies," says Mr Esty. The arrival of hard data in this notoriously fuzzy area could cut down on environmental disputes by reducing uncertainty. One example is the long-running squabble between America's mid-western states, which rely heavily on coal, and the north-eastern states, which suffer from acid rain. Technology helped disprove claims by the mid-western states that New York's problems all resulted from home-grown pollution.

The arrival of good data would have other benefits as well, such as helping markets to work more robustly: witness America's pioneering scheme to trade emissions of sulphur dioxide, made possible by fancy equipment capable of monitoring emissions in real time. Mr Esty raises an even more intriguing possibility: "Like in the American West a hundred years ago, when barbed wire helped establish rights and prevent overgrazing, information technology can help establish 'virtual barbed wire' that secures property rights and so prevents overexploitation of the commons." He points to fishing in the waters between Australia and New Zealand, where tracking and monitoring devices have reduced over-exploitation.

Best of all, there are signs that the use of such fancy technology will not be confined to rich countries. Calestous Juma of Harvard University shares Mr Esty's excitement about the possibility of such a technology-driven revolution even in Africa: "In the past, the only environmental 'database' we had in Africa was our grandmothers. Now, with global information systems and such, the potential is enormous." Conservationists in Namibia, for example, already use satellite tracking to keep count of their elephants. Farmers in Mali receive satellite updates about impending storms on hand-wound radios. Mr Juma thinks the day is not far off when such technology, combined with ground-based monitoring, will help Africans measure trends in deforestation, soil erosion and climate change, and assess the effects on their local environment.

Make a start

That is at once a sweeping vision and a modest one. Sweeping, because it will require heavy investment in both sophisticated hardware and nuts-and-bolts information infrastructure on the ground to make sense of all these new data. As the poor world clearly cannot afford to pay for all this, the rich world must help—partly for altruistic reasons, partly with the selfish aim of discovering in good time whether any global environmental calamities are in the making. A number of multilateral agencies now say they are willing to invest in this area as a "neglected global public good"—neglected especially by those agencies themselves. Even President Bush's administration has recently indicated that it will give environmental satellite data free to poor countries.

But that vision is also quite a modest one. Assuming that this data "revolution" does take place, all it will deliver is a reliable assessment of the health of the planet today. We will still not be able to answer the broader question of whether current trends are sustainable or not.

To do that, we need to look more closely at two very different sorts of environmental problems: global crises and local troubles. The global sort is hard to pin down, but

can involve irreversible changes. The local kind is common and can have a big effect on the quality of life, but is usually reversible. Data on both are predictably inadequate. We turn first to the most elusive environmental problem of all, global warming

Blowing hot and cold

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Climate change may be slow and uncertain, but that is no excuse for inaction

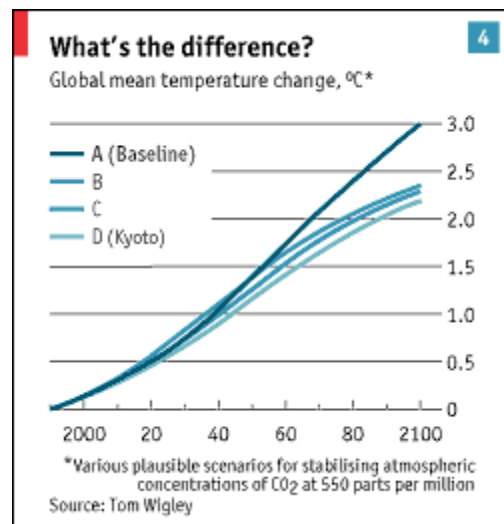
WHAT would Winston Churchill have done about climate change? Imagine that Britain's visionary wartime leader had been presented with a potential time bomb capable of wreaking global havoc, although not certain to do so. Warding it off would require concerted global action and economic sacrifice on the home front. Would he have done nothing?

Not if you put it that way. After all, Churchill did not dismiss the Nazi threat for lack of conclusive evidence of Hitler's evil intentions. But the answer might be less straightforward if the following provisos had been added: evidence of this problem would remain cloudy for decades; the worst effects might not be felt for a century; but the costs of tackling the problem would start biting immediately. That, in a nutshell, is the dilemma of climate change. It is asking a great deal of politicians to take action on behalf of voters who have not even been born yet.

One reason why uncertainty over climate looks to be with us for a long time is that the oceans, which absorb carbon from the atmosphere, act as a time-delay mechanism. Their massive thermal inertia means that the climate system responds only very slowly to changes in the composition of the atmosphere. Another complication arises from the relationship between carbon dioxide (CO₂), the principal greenhouse gas (GHG), and sulphur dioxide (SO₂), a common pollutant. Efforts to reduce man-made emissions of GHGs by cutting down on fossil-fuel use will reduce emissions of both gases. The reduction in CO₂ will cut warming, but the concurrent SO₂ cut may mask that effect by contributing to the warming.

There are so many such fuzzy factors—ranging from aerosol particles to clouds to cosmic radiation—that we are likely to see disruptions to familiar climate patterns for many years without knowing why they are happening or what to do about them. Tom Wigley, a leading climate scientist and member of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), goes further. He argues in an excellent book published by the Aspen Institute, "US Policies on Climate Change: What Next?", that whatever policy changes governments pursue, scientific uncertainties will "make it difficult to detect the effects of such changes, probably for many decades."

As evidence, he points to the negligible short- to medium-term difference in temperature resulting from an array of emissions “pathways” on which the world could choose to embark if it decided to tackle climate change (see chart 4). He plots various strategies for reducing GHGs (including the Kyoto one) that will lead in the next century to the stabilisation of atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ at 550 parts per million (ppm). That is roughly double the level which prevailed in pre-industrial times, and is often mooted by climate scientists as a reasonable target. But even by 2040, the temperature differences between the various options will still be tiny—and certainly within the magnitude of natural climatic variance. In short, in another four decades we will probably still not know if we have over- or undershot.



Ignorance is not bliss

However, that does not mean we know nothing. We do know, for a start, that the “greenhouse effect” is real: without the heat-trapping effect of water vapour, CO₂, methane and other naturally occurring GHGs, our planet would be a lifeless 30°C or so colder. Some of these GHG emissions are captured and stored by “sinks”, such as the oceans, forests and agricultural land, as part of nature's carbon cycle.

We also know that since the industrial revolution began, mankind's actions have contributed significantly to that greenhouse effect. Atmospheric concentrations of GHGs have risen from around 280ppm two centuries ago to around 370ppm today, thanks chiefly to mankind's use of fossil fuels and, to a lesser degree, to deforestation and other land-use changes. Both surface temperatures and sea levels have been rising for some time.

There are good reasons to think temperatures will continue rising. The IPCC has estimated a likely range for that increase of 1.4°C-5.8°C over the next century, although the lower end of that range is more likely. Since what matters is not just the absolute temperature level but the rate of change as well, it makes sense to try to slow down the increase.

The worry is that a rapid rise in temperatures would lead to climate changes that could be devastating for many (though not all) parts of the world. Central America, most of Africa, much of south Asia and northern China could all be hit by droughts, storms and floods and otherwise made miserable. Because they are poor and have the misfortune to live near the tropics, those most likely to be affected will be least able to adapt.

The colder parts of the world may benefit from warming, but they too face perils. One is the conceivable collapse of the Atlantic “conveyor belt”, a system of currents that gives much of Europe its relatively mild climate; if temperatures climb too high, say scientists, the system may undergo radical changes that damage both Europe and America. That points to the biggest fear: warming may trigger irreversible changes that transform the earth into a largely uninhabitable environment.

Given that possibility, extremely remote though it is, it is no comfort to know that any attempts to stabilise atmospheric concentrations of GHGs at a particular level will take a very long time. Because of the oceans' thermal inertia, explains Mr Wigley, even once atmospheric concentrations of GHGs are stabilised, it will take decades or

centuries for the climate to follow suit. And even then the sea level will continue to rise, perhaps for millennia.

This is a vast challenge, and it is worth bearing in mind that mankind's contribution to warming is the only factor that can be controlled. So the sooner we start drawing up a long-term strategy for climate change, the better.

What should such a grand plan look like? First and foremost, it must be global. Since CO₂ lingers in the atmosphere for a century or more, any plan must also extend across several generations.

The plan must recognise, too, that climate change is nothing new: the climate has fluctuated through history, and mankind has adapted to those changes—and must continue doing so. In the rich world, some of the more obvious measures will include building bigger dykes and flood defences. But since the most vulnerable people are those in poor countries, they too have to be helped to adapt to rising seas and unpredictable storms. Infrastructure improvements will be useful, but the best investment will probably be to help the developing world get wealthier.

It is essential to be clear about the plan's long-term objective. A growing chorus of scientists now argues that we need to keep temperatures from rising by much more than 2-3°C in all. That will require the stabilisation of atmospheric concentrations of GHGs. James Edmonds of the University of Maryland points out that because of the long life of CO₂, stabilisation of CO₂ concentrations is not at all the same thing as stabilisation of CO₂ emissions. That, says Mr Edmonds, points to an unavoidable conclusion: "In the very long term, global net CO₂ emissions must eventually peak and gradually decline toward zero, regardless of whether we go for a target of 350ppm or 1,000ppm."

A low-carbon world

That is why the long-term objective for climate policy must be a transition to a low-carbon energy system. Such a transition can be very gradual and need not necessarily lead to a world powered only by bicycles and windmills, for two reasons that are often overlooked.

One involves the precise form in which the carbon in the ground is distributed. According to Michael Grubb of the Carbon Trust, a British quasi-governmental body, the long-term problem is coal. In theory, we can burn all of the conventional oil and natural gas in the ground and still meet the most ambitious goals for tackling climate change. If we do that, we must ensure that the far greater amounts of carbon trapped as coal (and unconventional resources like tar sands) never enter the atmosphere.

The snag is that poor countries are likely to continue burning cheap domestic reserves of coal for decades. That suggests the rich world should speed the development and diffusion of "low carbon" technologies using the energy content of coal without releasing its carbon into the atmosphere. This could be far off, so it still makes sense to keep a watchful eye on the soaring carbon emissions from oil and gas.

The other reason, as Mr Edmonds took care to point out, is that it is net emissions of CO₂ that need to peak and decline. That leaves scope for the continued use of fossil fuels as the main source of modern energy if only some magical way can be found to capture and dispose of the associated CO₂. Happily, scientists already have some magic in the works.

One option is the biological “sequestration” of carbon in forests and agricultural land. Another promising idea is capturing and storing CO₂—underground, as a solid or even at the bottom of the ocean. Planting “energy crops” such as switch-grass and using them in conjunction with sequestration techniques could even result in negative net CO₂ emissions, because such plants use carbon from the atmosphere. If sequestration is combined with techniques for stripping the hydrogen out of this hydrocarbon, then coal could even offer a way to sustainable hydrogen energy.

But is anyone going to pay attention to these long-term principles? After all, over the past couple of years all participants in the Kyoto debate have excelled at producing short-sighted, selfish and disingenuous arguments. And the political rift continues: the EU and Japan pushed ahead with ratification of the Kyoto treaty a month ago, whereas President Bush reaffirmed his opposition.

However, go back a decade and you will find precisely those principles enshrined in a treaty approved by the elder George Bush and since reaffirmed by his son: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC). This treaty was perhaps the most important outcome of the Rio summit, and it remains the basis for the international climate-policy regime, including Kyoto.

The treaty is global in nature and long-term in perspective. It commits signatories to pursuing “the stabilisation of GHG concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous interference with the climate system.” Note that the agreement covers GHG concentrations, not merely emissions. In effect, this commits even gas-guzzling America to the goal of declining emissions.

Better than Kyoto

Crucially, the FCCC treaty not only lays down the ends but also specifies the means: any strategy to achieve stabilisation of GHG concentrations, it insists, “must not be disruptive of the global economy”. That was the stumbling block for the Kyoto treaty, which is built upon the FCCC agreement: its targets and timetables proved unrealistic.

Any revised Kyoto treaty or follow-up accord (which must include the United States and the big developing countries) should rest on three basic pillars. First, governments everywhere (but especially in Europe) must understand that a reduction in emissions has to start modestly. That is because the capital stock involved in the global energy system is vast and long-lived, so a dash to scrap fossil-fuel production would be hugely expensive. However, as Mr Grubb points out, that pragmatism must be flanked by policies that encourage a switch to low-carbon technologies when replacing existing plants.

Second, governments everywhere (but especially in America) must send a powerful signal that carbon is going out of fashion. The best way to do this is to levy a carbon tax. However, whether it is done through taxes, mandated restrictions on GHG emissions or market mechanisms is less important than that the signal is sent clearly, forcefully and unambiguously. This is where President Bush's mixed signals have done a lot of harm: America's industry, unlike Europe's, has little incentive to invest in low-carbon technology. The irony is that even some coal-fired utilities in America are now clamouring for CO₂ regulation so that they can invest in new plants with confidence.

The third pillar is to promote science and technology. That means encouraging basic climate and energy research, and giving incentives for spreading the results. Rich countries and aid agencies must also find ways to help the poor world adapt to climate change. This is especially important if the world starts off with small cuts in emissions, leaving deeper cuts for later. That, observes Mr Wigley, means that by

mid-century “very large investments would have to have been made—and yet the ‘return’ on these investments would not be visible. Continued investment is going to require more faith in climate science than currently appears to be the case.”

Even a visionary like Churchill might have lost heart in the face of all this uncertainty. Nevertheless, there is a glimmer of hope that today's peacetime politicians may rise to the occasion.

Miracles sometimes happen

Two decades ago, the world faced a similar dilemma: evidence of a hole in the ozone layer. Some inconclusive signs suggested that it was man-made, caused by the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). There was the distant threat of disaster, and the knowledge that a concerted global response was required. Industry was reluctant at first, yet with leadership from Britain and America the Montreal Protocol was signed in 1987. That deal has proved surprisingly successful. The manufacture of CFCs is nearly phased out, and there are already signs that the ozone layer is on the way to recovery.

This story holds several lessons for the admittedly far more complex climate problem. First, it is the rich world which has caused the problem and which must lead the way in solving it. Second, the poor world must agree to help, but is right to insist on being given time—as well as money and technology—to help it adjust. Third, industry holds the key: in the ozone-depletion story, it was only after DuPont and ICI broke ranks with the rest of the CFC manufacturers that a deal became possible. On the climate issue, BP and Shell have similarly broken ranks with Big Oil, but the American energy industry—especially the coal sector—remains hostile.

The final lesson is the most important: that the uncertainty surrounding a threat such as climate change is no excuse for inaction. New scientific evidence shows that the threat from ozone depletion had been much deadlier than was thought at the time when the world decided to act. Churchill would surely have approved.

Local difficulties

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Greenery is for the poor too, particularly on their own doorstep

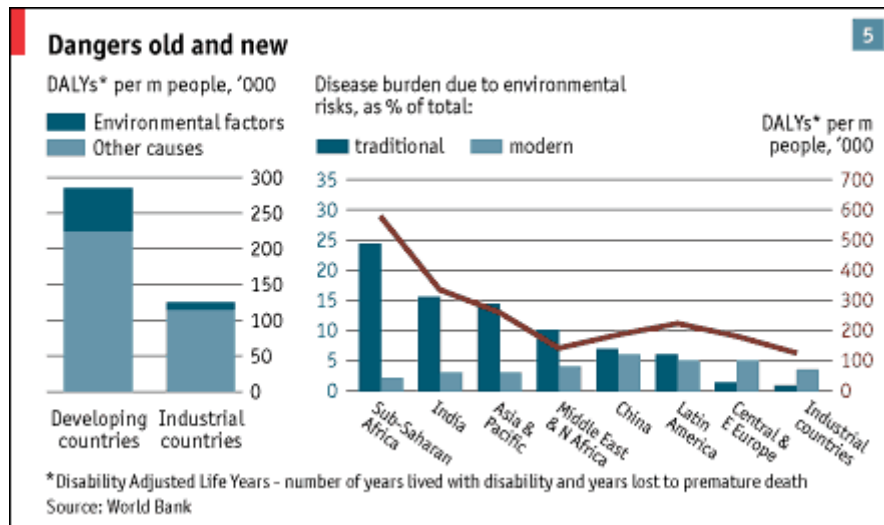
WHY should we care about the environment? Ask a European, and he will probably point to global warming. Ask the two little boys playing outside a newsstand in Da Shilan, a shabby neighbourhood in the heart of Beijing, and they will tell you about the city's notoriously foul air: “It's bad—like a virus!”

Given all the media coverage in the rich world, people there might believe that global scares are the chief environmental problems facing humanity today. They would be wrong. Partha Dasgupta, an economics professor at Cambridge University, thinks the current interest in global, future-oriented problems has “drawn attention away from the economic misery and ecological degradation endemic in large parts of the world today. Disaster is not something for which the poorest have to wait; it is a frequent occurrence.”

Every year in developing countries, a million people die from urban air pollution and twice that number from exposure to stove smoke inside their homes. Another 3m unfortunates die prematurely every year from water-related diseases. All told, premature deaths and illnesses arising from environmental factors account for about

a fifth of all diseases in poor countries, bigger than any other preventable factor, including malnutrition. The problem is so serious that Ian Johnson, the World Bank's vice-president for the environment, tells his colleagues, with a touch of irony, that he is really the bank's vice-president for health: "I say tackling the underlying environmental causes of health problems will do a lot more good than just more hospitals and drugs."

The link between environment and poverty is central to that great race for sustainability. It is a pity, then, that several powerful fallacies keep getting in the way of sensible debate. One popular myth is that trade and economic growth make poor countries' environmental problems worse. Growth, it is said, brings with it urbanisation, higher energy consumption and industrialisation—all factors that contribute to pollution and pose health risks.



In a static world, that would be true, because every new factory causes extra pollution. But in the real world, economic growth unleashes many dynamic forces that, in the longer run, more than offset that extra pollution. As chart 5 makes clear, traditional environmental risks (such as water-borne diseases) cause far more health problems in poor countries than modern environmental risks (such as industrial pollution).

Rigged rules

However, this is not to say that trade and economic growth will solve all environmental problems. Among the reasons for doubt are the "perverse" conditions under which world trade is carried on, argues Oxfam. The British charity thinks the rules of trade are "unfairly rigged against the poor", and cites in evidence the enormous subsidies lavished by rich countries on industries such as agriculture, as well as trade protection offered to manufacturing industries such as textiles. These measures hurt the environment because they force the world's poorest countries to rely heavily on commodities—a particularly energy-intensive and ungreen sector.

Mr Dasgupta argues that this distortion of trade amounts to a massive subsidy of rich-world consumption paid by the world's poorest people. The most persuasive critique of all goes as follows: "Economic growth is not sufficient for turning environmental degradation around. If economic incentives facing producers and consumers do not change with higher incomes, pollution will continue to grow

unabated with the growing scale of economic activity." Those words come not from some anti-globalist green group, but from the World Trade Organisation.

Another common view is that poor countries, being unable to afford greenery, should pollute now and clean up later. Certainly poor countries should not be made to adopt American or European environmental standards. But there is evidence to suggest that poor countries can and should try to tackle some environmental problems now, rather than wait till they have become richer.

This so-called "smart growth" strategy contradicts conventional wisdom. For many years, economists have observed that as agrarian societies industrialised, pollution increased at first, but as the societies grew wealthier it declined again. The trouble is that this applies only to some pollutants, such as sulphur dioxide, but not to others, such as carbon dioxide. Even more troublesome, those smooth curves going up, then down, turn out to be misleading. They are what you get when you plot data for poor and rich countries together at a given moment in time, but actual levels of various pollutants in any individual country plotted over time wiggle around a lot more. This suggests that the familiar bell-shaped curve reflects no immutable law, and that intelligent government policies might well help to reduce pollution levels even while countries are still relatively poor.

Developing countries are getting the message. From Mexico to the Philippines, they are now trying to curb the worst of the air and water pollution that typically accompanies industrialisation. China, for example, was persuaded by outside experts that it was losing so much potential economic output through health troubles caused by pollution (according to one World Bank study, somewhere between 3.5% and 7.7% of GDP) that tackling it was cheaper than ignoring it.

One powerful—and until recently ignored—weapon in the fight for a better environment is local people. Old-fashioned paternalists in the capitals of developing countries used to argue that poor villagers could not be relied on to look after natural resources. In fact, much academic research has shown that the poor are more often victims than perpetrators of resource depletion: it tends to be rich locals or outsiders who are responsible for the worst exploitation.

Local people usually have a better knowledge of local ecological conditions than experts in faraway capitals, as well as a direct interest in improving the quality of life in their village. A good example of this comes from the bone-dry state of Rajasthan in India, where local activism and indigenous know-how about rainwater "harvesting" provided the people with reliable water supplies—something the government had failed to do. In Bangladesh, villages with active community groups or concerned mullahs proved greener than less active neighbouring villages.

Community-based forestry initiatives from Bolivia to Nepal have shown that local people can be good custodians of nature. Several hundred million of the world's poorest people live in and around forests. Giving those villagers an incentive to preserve forests by allowing sustainable levels of harvesting, it turns out, is a far better way to save those forests than erecting tall fences around them.

To harness local energies effectively, it is particularly important to give local people secure property rights, argues Mr Dasgupta. In most parts of the developing world, control over resources at the village level is ill-defined. This often means that local elites usurp a disproportionate share of those resources, and that individuals have little incentive to maintain and upgrade forests or agricultural land. Authorities in Thailand tried to remedy this problem by distributing 5.5m land titles over a 20-year period. Agricultural output increased, access to credit improved and the value of the land shot up.

Name and shame

Another powerful tool for improving the local environment is the free flow of information. As local democracy flourishes, ordinary people are pressing for greater environmental disclosure by companies. In some countries, such as Indonesia, governments have adopted a "sunshine" policy that involves naming and shaming companies that do not meet environmental regulations. It seems to achieve results.

Bringing greenery to the grass roots is good, but on its own it will not avert perceived threats to global "public goods" such as the climate or biodiversity. Paul Portney of Resources for the Future explains: "Brazilian villagers may think very carefully and unselfishly about their future descendants, but there's no reason for them to care about and protect species or habitats that no future generation of Brazilians will care about."

That is why rich countries must do more than make pious noises about global threats to the environment. If they believe that scientific evidence suggests a credible threat, they must be willing to pay poor countries to protect such things as their tropical forests. Rather than thinking of this as charity, they should see it as payment for environmental services (say, for carbon storage) or as a form of insurance.

In the case of biodiversity, such payments could even be seen as a trade in luxury goods: rich countries would pay poor countries to look after creatures that only the rich care about. Indeed, private green groups are already buying up biodiversity "hot spots" to protect them. One such initiative, led by Conservation International and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), put the cost of buying and preserving 25 hot spots exceptionally rich in species diversity at less than \$30 billion. Sceptics say it will cost more, as hot spots will need buffer zones of "sustainable harvesting" around them. Whatever the right figure, such creative approaches are more likely to achieve results than bullying the poor into conservation.

It is not that the poor do not have green concerns, but that those concerns are very different from those of the rich. In Beijing's Da Shilan, for instance, the air is full of soot from the many tiny coal boilers. Unlike most of the neighbouring districts, which have recently converted from coal to natural gas, this area has been considered too poor to make the transition. Yet ask Liu Shihua, a shopkeeper who has lived in the same spot for over 20 years, and he insists he would readily pay a bit more for the cleaner air that would come from using natural gas. So would his neighbours.

To discover the best reason why poor countries should not ignore pollution, ask those two little boys outside Mr Liu's shop what colour the sky is. "Grey!" says one tyke, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "No, stupid, it's blue!" retorts the other. The children deserve blue skies and clean air. And now there is reason to think they will see them in their lifetime.

Working miracles

Jul 4th 2002
From The Economist print edition

Can technology save the planet?

"NOTHING endures but change." That observation by Heraclitus often seems lost on modern environmental thinkers. Many invoke scary scenarios assuming that resources—both natural ones, like oil, and man-made ones, like knowledge—are fixed. Yet in real life man and nature are entwined in a dynamic dance of development, scarcity, degradation, innovation and substitution.

The nightmare about China turning into a resource-guzzling America raises two questions: will the world run out of resources? And even if it does not, could the growing affluence of developing nations lead to global environmental disaster?

The first fear is the easier to refute; indeed, history has done so time and again. Malthus, Ricardo and Mill all worried that scarcity of resources would snuff out growth. It did not. A few decades ago, the limits-to-growth camp raised worries that the world might soon run out of oil, and that it might not be able to feed the world's exploding population. Yet there are now more proven reserves of petroleum than three decades ago; there is more food produced than ever; and the past decade has seen history's greatest economic boom.

What made these miracles possible? Fears of oil scarcity prompted investment that led to better ways of producing oil, and to more efficient engines. In food production, technological advances have sharply reduced the amount of land required to feed a person in the past 50 years. Jesse Ausubel of Rockefeller University calculates that if in the next 60 to 70 years the world's average farmer reaches the yield of today's average (not best) American maize grower, then feeding 10 billion people will require just half of today's cropland. All farmers need to do is maintain the 2%-a-year productivity gain that has been the global norm since 1960.

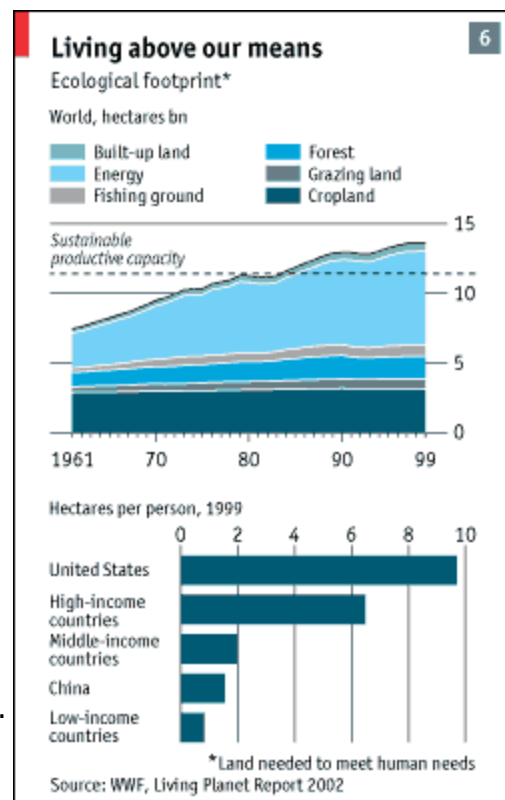
"Scarcity and Growth", a book published by Resources for the Future, sums it up brilliantly: "Decades ago Vermont granite was only building and tombstone material; now it is a potential fuel, each ton of which has a usable energy content (uranium) equal to 150 tons of coal. The notion of an absolute limit to natural resource availability is untenable when the definition of resources changes drastically and unpredictably over time." Those words were written by Harold Barnett and Chandler Morse in 1963, long before the limits-to-growth bandwagon got rolling.

Giant footprint

Not so fast, argue greens. Even if we are not going to run out of resources, guzzling ever more resources could still do irreversible damage to fragile ecosystems.

WWF, an environmental group, regularly calculates mankind's "ecological footprint", which it defines as the "biologically productive land and water areas required to produce the resources consumed and assimilate the wastes generated by a given population using prevailing technology." The group reckons the planet has around 11.4 billion "biologically productive" hectares of land available to meet continuing human needs. As chart 6 shows, WWF thinks mankind has recently been using more than that. This is possible because a forest harvested at twice its regeneration rate, for example, appears in the footprint accounts at twice its area—an unsustainable practice which the group calls "ecological overshoot".

Any analysis of this sort must be viewed with scepticism. Everyone knows that environmental data are incomplete. What is more, the biggest factor by far is the land required to absorb CO₂ emissions of fossil fuels. If that problem could be managed some other way, then mankind's ecological footprint would look much more sustainable.



Even so, the WWF analysis makes an important point: if China's economy were transformed overnight into a clone of America's, an ecological nightmare could ensue. If a billion eager new consumers were suddenly to produce CO₂ emissions at American rates, they would be bound to accelerate global warming. And if the whole of the developing world were to adopt an American lifestyle tomorrow, local environmental crises such as desertification, aquifer depletion and topsoil loss could make humans miserable.

So is this cause for concern? Yes, but not for panic. The global ecological footprint is determined by three factors: population size, average consumption per person and technology. Fortunately, global population growth now appears to be moderating. Consumption per person in poor countries is rising as they become better off, but there are signs that the rich world is reducing the footprint of its consumption (as this survey's final section explains). The most powerful reason for hope—innovation—was foreshadowed by WWF's own definition. Today's "prevailing technologies" will, in time, be displaced by tomorrow's greener ones.

"The rest of the world will not live like America," insists Mr Ausubel. Of course poor people around the world covet the creature comforts that Americans enjoy, but they know full well that the economic growth needed to improve their lot will take time. Ask Wu Chengjian, an environmental official in booming Shanghai, what he thinks of the popular notion that his city might become as rich as today's Hong Kong by 2020: "Impossible—that's just not enough time." And that is Shanghai, not the impoverished countryside.

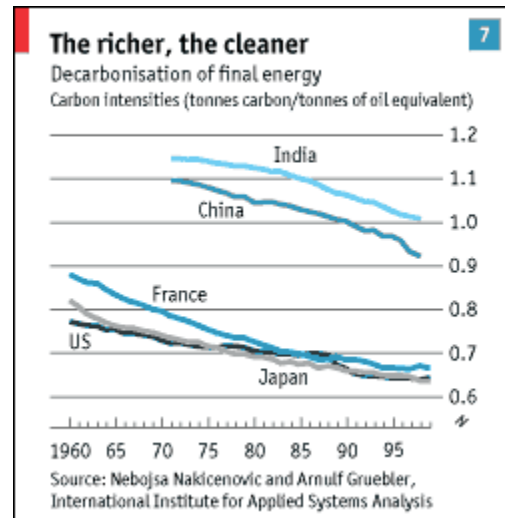
Leaps of faith

This extra time will allow poor countries to embrace new technologies that are more efficient and less environmentally damaging. That still does not guarantee a smaller ecological footprint for China in a few decades' time than for America now, but it greatly improves the chances. To see why, consider the history of "dematerialisation" and "decarbonisation" (see chart 7). Viewed across very long spans of time, productivity improvements allow economies to use ever fewer material inputs—and

to emit ever fewer pollutants—per unit of economic output. Mr Ausubel concludes: “When China has today's American mobility, it will not have today's American cars,” but the cleaner and more efficient cars of tomorrow.

The snag is that consumers in developing countries want to drive cars not tomorrow but today. The resulting emissions have led many to despair that technology (in the form of vehicles) is making matters worse, not better.

Can they really hope to “leapfrog” ahead to cleaner air? The evidence from Los Angeles—a pioneer in the fight against air pollution—suggests the answer is yes. “When I moved to Los Angeles in the 1960s, there was so much soot in the air that it felt like there was a man standing on your chest most of the time,” says Ron Loveridge, the mayor of Riverside, a city to the east of LA that suffers the worst of the region's pollution. But, he says, “We have come an extraordinary distance in LA.”



Four decades ago, the city had the worst air quality in America. The main problem was the city's infamous “smog” (an amalgam of “smoke” and “fog”). It took a while to figure out that this unhealthy ozone soup developed as a result of complex chemical reactions between nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds that need sunlight to trigger them off.

Arthur Winer, an atmospheric chemist at the University of California at Los Angeles, explains that tackling smog required tremendous perseverance and political will. Early regulatory efforts met stiff resistance from business interests, and began to falter when they failed to show dramatic results.

Clean-air advocates like Mr Loveridge began to despair: “We used to say that we needed a ‘London fog’ [a reference to an air-pollution episode in 1952 that may have killed 12,000 people in that city] here to force change.” Even so, Californian officials forged ahead with an ambitious plan that combined regional regulation with stiff mandates for cleaner air. Despite uncertainties about the cause of the problem, the authorities introduced a sequence of controversial measures: unleaded and low-sulphur petrol, on-board diagnostics for cars to minimise emissions, three-way catalytic converters, vapour-recovery attachments for petrol nozzles and so on.

As a result, the city that two decades ago hardly ever met federal ozone standards has not had to issue a single alert in the past three years. Peak ozone levels are down by 50% since the 1960s. Though the population has shot up in recent years, and the vehicle-miles driven by car-crazy Angelenos have tripled, ozone levels have fallen by two-thirds. The city's air is much cleaner than it was two decades ago.

“California, in solving its air-quality problem, has solved it for the rest of the United States and the world—but it doesn't get credit for it,” says Joe Norbeck of the University of California at Riverside. He is adamant that the poor world's cities can indeed leapfrog ahead by embracing some of the cleaner technologies developed specifically for the Californian market. He points to China's vehicle fleet as an example: “China's typical car has the emissions of a 1974 Ford Pinto, but the new Buicks sold there use 1990s emissions technology.” The typical car sold today produces less than a tenth of the local pollution of a comparable model from the 1970s.

That suggests one lesson for poor cities such as Beijing that are keen to clean up: they can order polluters to meet high emissions standards. Indeed, from Beijing to Mexico city, regulators are now imposing rich-world rules, mandating new, cleaner technologies. In China's cities, where pollution from sooty coal fires in homes and industrial boilers had been a particular hazard, officials are keen to switch to natural-gas furnaces.

However, there are several reasons why such mandates—which worked wonders in LA—may be trickier to achieve in impoverished or politically weak cities. For a start, city officials must be willing to pay the political price of reforms that raise prices for voters. Besides, higher standards for new cars, useful though they are, cannot do the trick on their own. Often, clean technologies such as catalytic converters will require cleaner grades of petrol too. Introducing cleaner fuels, say experts, is an essential lesson from LA for poor countries. This will not come free either.

There is another reason why merely ordering cleaner new cars is inadequate: it does nothing about the vast stock of dirty old ones already on the streets. In most cities of the developing world, the oldest fifth of the vehicles on the road is likely to produce over half of the total pollution caused by all vehicles taken together. Policies that encourage a speedier turnover of the fleet therefore make more sense than “zero emissions” mandates.

Policy matters

In sum, there is hope that the poor can leapfrog at least some environmental problems, but they need more than just technology. Luisa and Mario Molina of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who have studied such questions closely, reckon that technology is less important than the institutional capacity, legal safeguards and financial resources to back it up: “The most important underlying factor is political will.” And even a techno-optimist such as Mr Ausubel accepts that: “There is nothing automatic about technological innovation and adoption; in fact, at the micro level, it's bloody.”

Clearly innovation is a powerful force, but government policy still matters. That suggests two rules for policymakers. First, don't do stupid things that inhibit innovation. Second, do sensible things that reward the development and adoption of technologies that enhance, rather than degrade, the environment.

The greatest threat to sustainability may well be the rejection of science. Consider Britain's hysterical reaction to genetically modified crops, and the European Commission's recent embrace of a woolly “precautionary principle”. Precaution applied case-by-case is a undoubtedly a good thing, but applying any such principle across the board could prove disastrous.

Explaining how not to stifle innovation that could help the environment is a lot easier than finding ways to encourage it. Technological change often goes hand-in-hand with greenery by saving resources, as the long history of dematerialisation shows—but not always. Sports utility vehicles, for instance, are technologically innovative, but hardly green. Yet if those SUVs were to come with hydrogen-powered fuel cells that emit little pollution, the picture would be transformed.

The best way to encourage such green innovations is to send powerful signals to the market that the environment matters. And there is no more powerful signal than price, as the next section explains

The invisible green hand

Jul 4th 2002
From The Economist print edition

Markets could be a potent force for greenery—if only greens could learn to love them

“MANDATE, regulate and litigate.” That has been the environmentalists' rallying cry for ages. Nowhere in the green manifesto has there been much mention of the market. And, oddly, it was market-minded America that led the dirigiste trend. Three decades ago, Congress passed a sequence of laws, including the Clean Air Act, which set lofty goals and generally set rigid technological standards. Much of the world followed America's lead.

This top-down approach to greenery has long been a point of pride for groups such as the Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC), one of America's most influential environmental outfits. And with some reason, for it has had its successes: the air and water in the developed world is undoubtedly cleaner than it was three decades ago, even though the rich world's economies have grown by leaps and bounds. This has convinced such groups stoutly to defend the green status quo.

But times may be changing. Gus Speth, now head of Yale University's environment school and formerly head of the World Resources Institute and the UNDP, as well as one of the founders of the NRDC, recently explained how he was converted to market economics: “Thirty years ago, the economists at Resources for the Future were pushing the idea of pollution taxes. We lawyers at NRDC thought they were nuts, and feared that they would derail command-and-control measures like the Clean Air Act, so we opposed them. Looking back, I'd have to say this was the single biggest failure in environmental management—not getting the prices right.”

A remarkable mea culpa; but in truth, the command-and-control approach was never as successful as its advocates claimed. For example, although it has cleaned up the air and water in rich countries, it has notably failed in dealing with waste management, hazardous emissions and fisheries depletion. Also, the gains achieved have come at a needlessly high price. That is because technology mandates and bureaucratic edicts stifle innovation and ignore local realities, such as varying costs of abatement. They also fail to use cost-benefit analysis to judge trade-offs.

Command-and-control methods will also be ill-suited to the problems of the future, which are getting trickier. One reason is that the obvious issues—like dirty air and water—have been tackled already. Another is increasing technological complexity: future problems are more likely to involve subtle linkages—like those involved in ozone depletion and global warming—that will require sophisticated responses. The most important factor may be society's ever-rising expectations: as countries grow wealthier, their people start clamouring for an ever-cleaner environment. But because the cheap and simple things have been done, that is proving increasingly expensive. Hence the greens' new interest in the market.

Carrots, not just sticks

In recent years, market-based greenery has taken off in several ways. With emissions trading, officials decide on a pollution target and then allocate tradable credits to companies based on that target. Those that find it expensive to cut emissions can buy credits from those that find it cheaper, so the target is achieved at the minimum cost and disruption.

The greatest green success story of the past decade is probably America's innovative scheme to cut emissions of sulphur dioxide (SO₂). Dan Dudek of Environmental Defence, a most unusual green group, and his market-minded colleagues persuaded

the elder George Bush to agree to an amendment to the sacred Clean Air Act that would introduce an emissions-trading system to achieve sharp cuts in SO₂. At the time, this was hugely controversial: America's power industry insisted the cuts were prohibitively costly, while nearly every other green group decried the measure as a sham. In the event, ED has been vindicated. America's scheme has surpassed its initial objectives, and at far lower cost than expected. So great is the interest worldwide in trading that ED is now advising groups ranging from hard-nosed oilmen at BP to bureaucrats in China and Russia.

Europe, meanwhile, is forging ahead with another sort of market-based instrument: pollution taxes. The idea is to levy charges on goods and services so that their price reflects their "externalities"—jargon for how much harm they do to the environment and human health. Sweden introduced a sulphur tax a decade ago, and found that the sulphur content of fuels dropped 50% below legal requirements.

Though "tax" still remains a dirty word in America, other parts of the world are beginning to embrace green tax reform by shifting taxes from employment to pollution. Robert Williams of Princeton University has looked at energy use (especially the terrible effects on health of particulate pollution) and concluded that such externalities are comparable in size to the direct economic costs of producing that energy.

Externalities are only half the battle in fixing market distortions. The other half involves scrapping environmentally harmful subsidies. These range from prices below market levels for electricity and water to shameless cash handouts for industries such as coal. The boffins at the OECD reckon that stripping away harmful subsidies, along with introducing taxes on carbon-based fuels and chemicals use, would result in dramatically lower emissions by 2020 than current policies would be able to achieve. If the revenues raised were then used to reduce other taxes, the cost of these virtuous policies would be less than 1% of the OECD's economic output in 2020.

Such subsidies are nothing short of perverse, in the words of Norman Myers of Oxford University. They do double damage, by distorting markets and by encouraging behaviour that harms the environment. Development banks say such subsidies add up to \$700 billion a year, but Mr Myers reckons the true sum is closer to \$2 trillion a year. Moreover, the numbers do not fully reflect the harm done. For example, EU countries subsidise their fishing fleets to the tune of \$1 billion a year, but that has encouraged enough overfishing to drive many North Atlantic fishing grounds to near-collapse.

Fishing is an example of the "tragedy of the commons", which pops up frequently in the environmental debate. A resource such as the ocean is common to many, but an individual "free rider" can benefit from plundering that commons or dumping waste into it, knowing that the costs of his actions will probably be distributed among many neighbours. In the case of shared fishing grounds, the absence of individual ownership drives each fisherman to snatch as many fish as he can—to the detriment of all.

Of rights and wrongs

Assigning property rights can help, because providing secure rights (set at a sustainable level) aligns the interests of the individual with the wider good of preserving nature. This is what sceptical conservationists have observed in New Zealand and Iceland, where schemes for tradable quotas have helped revive fishing stocks. Similar rights-based approaches have led to revivals in stocks of African elephants in southern Africa, for example, where the authorities stress property rights and private conservation.

All this talk of property rights and markets makes many mainstream environmentalists nervous. Carl Pope, the boss of the Sierra Club, one of America's biggest green groups, does not reject market forces out of hand, but expresses deep scepticism about their scope. Pointing to the difficult problem of climate change, he asks: "Who has property rights over the commons?"

Even so, some greens have become converts. Achim Steiner of the IUCN reckons that the only way forward is rights-based conservation, allowing poor people "sustainable use" of their local environment. Paul Faeth of the World Resources Institute goes further. He says he is convinced that market forces could deliver that holy grail of environmentalism, sustainability—"but only if we get prices right."

The limits to markets

Economic liberals argue that the market itself is the greatest price-discovery mechanism known to man. Allow it to function freely and without government meddling, goes the argument, and prices are discovered and internalised automatically. Jerry Taylor of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, insists that "The world today is already sustainable—except those parts where western capitalism doesn't exist." He notes that countries that have relied on central planning, such as the Soviet Union, China and India, have invariably misallocated investment, stifled innovation and fouled their environment far more than the prosperous market economies of the world have done.

All true. Even so, markets are currently not very good at valuing environmental goods. Noble attempts are under way to help them do better. For example, the Katoomba Group, a collection of financial and energy companies that have linked up with environmental outfits, is trying to speed the development of markets for some of forestry's ignored "co-benefits" such as carbon storage and watershed management, thereby producing new revenue flows for forest owners. This approach shows promise: water consumers ranging from officials in New York city to private hydro-electric operators in Costa Rica are now paying people upstream to manage their forests and agricultural land better. Paying for greenery upstream turns out to be cheaper than cleaning up water downstream after it has been fouled.

Economists too are getting into the game of helping capitalism "get prices right." The World Bank's Ian Johnson argues that conventional economic measures such as gross domestic product are not measuring wealth creation properly because they ignore the effects of environmental degradation. He points to the positive contribution to China's GDP from the logging industry, arguing that such a calculation completely ignores the billions of dollars-worth of damage from devastating floods caused by over-logging. He advocates a more comprehensive measure the Bank is working on, dubbed "genuine GDP", that tries (imperfectly, he accepts) to measure depletion of natural resources.

That could make a dramatic difference to how the welfare of the poor is assessed. Using conventional market measures, nearly the whole of the developing world save Africa has grown wealthier in the past couple of decades. But when the degradation of nature is properly accounted for, argues Mr Dasgupta at Cambridge, the countries of Africa and south Asia are actually much worse off today than they were a few decades ago—and even China, whose economic "miracle" has been much trumpeted, comes out barely ahead.

The explanation, he reckons, lies in a particularly perverse form of market distortion: "Countries that are exporting resource-based products (often among the poorest) may be subsidising the consumption of countries that are doing the importing (often among the richest)." As evidence, he points to the common practice in poor countries of encouraging resource extraction. Whether through licences granted at below-market rates, heavily subsidised exports or corrupt officials tolerating illegal

exploitation, he reckons the result is the same: "The cruel paradox we face may well be that contemporary economic development is unsustainable in poor countries because it is sustainable in rich countries."

One does not have to agree with Mr Dasgupta's conclusion to acknowledge that markets have their limits. That should not dissuade the world from attempting to get prices right—or at least to stop getting them so wrong. For grotesque subsidies, the direction of change should be obvious. In other areas, the market itself may not provide enough information to value nature adequately. This is true of threats to essential assets, such as nature's ability to absorb and "recycle" CO₂, that have no substitute at any price. That is when governments must step in, ensuring that an informed public debate takes place.

Robert Stavins of Harvard University argues that the thorny notion of sustainable development can be reduced to two simple ideas: efficiency and intergenerational equity. The first is about making the economic pie as large as possible; he reckons that economists are well equipped to handle it, and that market-based policies can be used to achieve it. On the second (the subject of the next section), he is convinced that markets must yield to public discourse and government policy: "Markets can be efficient, but nobody ever said they're fair. The question is, what do we owe the future?"

Insuring a brighter future

Jul 4th 2002

From The Economist print edition

How to hedge against tomorrow's environmental risks

SO WHAT do we owe the future? A precise definition for sustainable development is likely to remain elusive but, as this survey has argued, the hazy outline of a useful one is emerging from the experience of the past decade.

For a start, we cannot hope to turn back the clock and return nature to a pristine state. Nor must we freeze nature in the state it is today, for that gift to the future would impose an unacceptable burden on the poorest alive today. Besides, we cannot forecast the tastes, demands or concerns of future generations. Recall that the overwhelming pollution problem a century ago was horse manure clogging up city streets: a century hence, many of today's problems will surely seem equally irrelevant. We should therefore think of our debt to the future as including not just natural resources but also technology, institutions and especially the capacity to innovate. Robert Solow got it mostly right a decade ago: the most important thing to leave future generations, he said, is the capacity to live as well as we do today.

However, as the past decade has made clear, there is a limit to that argument. If we really care about the "sustainable" part of sustainable development, we must be much more watchful about environmental problems with critical thresholds. Most local problems are reversible and hence no cause for alarm. Not all, however: the depletion of aquifers and the loss of topsoil could trigger irreversible changes that would leave future generations worse off. And global or long-term threats, where victims are far removed in time and space, are easy to brush aside.

In areas such as biodiversity, where there is little evidence of a sustainability problem, a voluntary approach is best. Those in the rich world who wish to preserve pandas, or hunt for miracle drugs in the rainforest, should pay for their predilections. However, where there are strong scientific indications of unsustainability, we must act on behalf of the future—even at the price of today's development. That may be expensive, so it is prudent to try to minimise those risks in the first place.

A riskier world

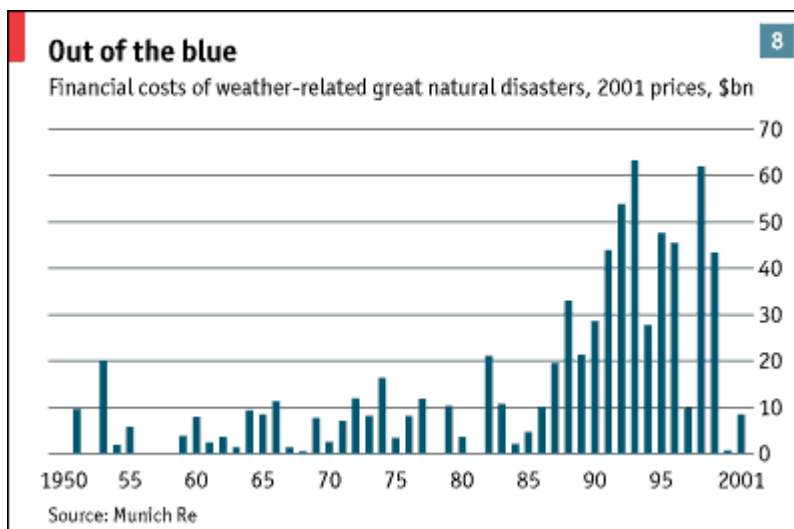
Human ingenuity and a bit of luck have helped mankind stay a few steps ahead of the forces degrading the environment this past century, the first full one in which the planet has been exposed to industrialisation. In the century ahead, the great race between development and degradation could well become a closer call.

On one hand, the demands of development seem sure to grow at a cracking pace in the next few decades as the Chinas, Indias and Brazils of this world grow wealthy enough to start enjoying not only the necessities but also some of the luxuries of life. On the other hand, we seem to be entering a period of huge technological advances in emerging fields such as biotechnology that could greatly increase resource productivity and more than offset the effect of growth on the environment. The trouble is, nobody knows for sure.

Since uncertainty will define the coming era, it makes sense to invest in ways that reduce that risk at relatively low cost. Governments must think seriously about the future implications of today's policies. Their best bet is to encourage the three powerful forces for sustainability outlined in this survey: the empowerment of local people to manage local resources and adapt to environmental change; the encouragement of science and technology, especially innovations that reduce the ecological footprint of consumption; and the greening of markets to get prices right.

To advocate these interventions is not to call for a return to the hubris of yesteryear's central planners. These measures would merely give individuals the power to make greener choices if they care to. In practice, argues Chris Heady of the OECD, this may still not add up to sustainability "because we might still decide to be greedy, and leave less for our children."

Happily, there are signs of an emerging bottom-up push for greenery. Even such icons of western consumerism as Unilever and Procter & Gamble now sing the virtues of "sustainable consumption." Unilever has vowed that by 2005 it will be buying fish only from sustainable sources, and P&G is coming up with innovative products such as detergents that require less water, heat and packaging. It would be naive to label such actions as expressions of "corporate social responsibility": in the long run, firms will embrace greenery only if they see profit in it. And that, in turn, will depend on choices made by individuals.



Such interventions should really be thought of as a kind of insurance that tilts the odds of winning that great race just a little in humanity's favour. Indeed, even some of the world's most conservative insurance firms increasingly see things this way. As losses from weather-related disasters have risen of late (see chart 8), the industry is getting more involved in policy debates on long-term environmental issues such as climate change.

Bruno Porro, chief risk officer at Swiss Re, argues that: "The world is entering a future in which risks are more concentrated and more complex. That is why we are pressing for policies that reduce those risks through preparation, adaptation and mitigation. That will be cheaper than covering tomorrow's losses after disaster strikes."

Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University agrees: "When you think about the scale of risk that the world faces, it is clear that we grossly underinvest in knowledge...we have enough income to live very comfortably in the developed world and to prevent dire need in the developing world. So we should have the confidence to invest in longer-term issues like the environment. Let's help insure the sustainability of this wonderful situation."

He is right. After all, we have only one planet, now and in the future. We need to think harder about how to use it wisely.

Sources and acknowledgments

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