

"A LITTLE GREEN OASIS IN A DESERT OF BLACKNESS"

Jerry Mander

□ "Is the ecology message getting across?"

I'm afraid that my personal answer to that question is, "So far, it is not."

It is true enough that five years ago most Americans did not know that the water they were drinking was poisoned, likewise the fish, meat and air. Now they know these things are poisoned. That message has gotten through. They know there are too many beer cans on the roadside, and the majority of people are beginning to perceive that DDT is unhealthy.

The average American is aware of pollution. But the trouble is that most people still confuse "pollution" questions with "ecology."

Notwithstanding the efforts of dozens of groups to help people gain a true understanding of the idea that ecology is something broader than pollution, the effort has thus far failed, largely because the movement has been upstaged by, first of all, a government that wishes us to believe it is solving things so that we will allow it to continue to be our government. And secondly, by commercial interests.

Last year, industry spent more than \$2 billion on what has been called "ecopornography," which is the effort to convince an aroused public through advertising that industry is cleaning things up. God save us, ad men have discovered ecology!

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We've all got our favorite examples of ecopornography, of course, but mine is the ad for a gasoline additive, F-310, sponsored by an oil company in California which had the headline "the most long-awaited gasoline development in history" and showed two big balloon bags attached to two exhaust pipes. One balloon was clear and one was black and the implication was clearly that F-310 solved the air pollution problem.

But the fact is that F-310 is an ordinary detergent additive, which is nothing new. It reduces unburned hydrocarbon emissions somewhat, but only if you've got a dirty engine such as those found in very old cars. Once your engine is cleaned, or if your car is newish, F-310 does nothing at all. Even on dirty engines, F-310 does nothing about ozone or nitrogen oxides, and therefore next to nothing about smog. It also does nothing about lead emissions.

Another favorite of mine is a large steel company ad showing a forester working away at making sure the forests are preserved in their pristine fashion while the firm mines its ore. The ad says that "because of mining methods used many years ago," some of the company's properties (iron and coal mines) had "gradually become eyesores," adding, "that is why we took our first step toward scientific control and restoration of woodlands more than 40 years ago."

The truth is, most of the same strip mining techniques used then are still being used today, especially by that firm. And it's not just a problem of planting trees. Whole mountains in Kentucky and West Virginia have had giant bare strips gouged around them; tremendous mud slides have ruined mountainsides, blocked rivers and destroyed homes; and the rivers have been seriously poisoned by "mine water," sometimes killing every living thing in them.

Whatever this forester does for





the firm isn't enough. If he's anything like the good guy the ad says he is, he should go on strike until the company gives up strip mining altogether and turns over its six-figure antipollution advertising budget to reforestation.

Worse than the fact that a majority of ads which mention pollution or ecology are misleading or even lying in a number of instances (Ralph Nader says 80 percent of them), is the fact that they are destroying the word "ecology." The classic ad along these lines was one by Pacific Gas and Electric Company which had a headline advocating "a balance between ecology and energy." Ecology is not a thing that is balanced against anything else. The word describes the science of the interrelatedness of all things that make up the natural life support system. You don't go around balancing it, because it *is* everything.

P.G.&E. has a classically narrow view. It is interested in getting you and me to believe that it creates "clean power"—as if that were possible—that would be an "ecological solution" of some sort. And the Alyeska pipeline people, who are hungry to place a hot oil line across Alaska, want us to believe that if they can build a pipe which will never erupt—which, of course, they can't—that would be some sort of "ecological solution."

The trouble with both of those examples is that they fail to take what some ecologists call a whole-system view. They fail to consider that the result of more oil or more power plants will be more cars, more roads, more plastic baggies, more planes, more junk, more polychlorinated biphenyls, more noise and smog—none of which does the whole system any good nor, fundamentally, makes anyone a happier person.

People do not perceive what the ecology metaphor really means—that it requires thinking in whole systems,

that it requires thinking of ourselves as like any other form of wildlife, that it requires purging from our minds all presumptions about the way the world operates. *That* message has *not* gotten through.

For example, a few months ago I was invited to speak at a dinner meeting of the San Francisco Association of Industrial Advertisers. I described to them the inevitability, in my view, that we would soon have some kind of economy which is not based upon the idea of continued economic growth.

I explained to them that the recent pictures of Earth, taken from space, established that we live in a kind of oasis in space, a tiny island of life somewhere in an effectively uncrossable sea.

I then made what is really an elementary observation: When you live in a finite system, on an island, the possibility of an ever-expanding economy is nonsense to state it mildly, increasingly unpleasant to put it more accurately, and suicide eventually, at least if the economy is involved with technological exploitation and production and waste creation as we now know it.

Any system which feeds on itself simply cannot keep eating forever.

I had expected, frankly, to be attacked by this industrial group for the nonsense about a no-growth economic system which didn't include, somewhere, advertising the annual style change. Instead, the response, after the first few moments, was giggling, chattering under the breath, staring at the ceiling and a lot of hard drinking. Nobody was the slightest bit upset. *Nobody was listening.*

To be fair, many people fear that without growth, we will all soon stagnate. Actually I agree, but it is *growth* I am writing about, not *economic* growth. There still remains emotional growth, spiritual growth, psychic and intellectual growth. Then too, there is also change—dynamics—

which is quite capable of functioning without any absolute expansion outward. I'm all for a growing rapid transit industry and publishing industry, for example, but a declining auto industry.

There is also the social welfare argument. One keeps hearing that there are many poor people who will be left high and dry if we don't keep expanding the economy to absorb them. That argument has very little merit, in my view, considering that we have had a rapidly expanding economy for a long time and poor people only seem to be getting poorer. The reason for this, as economist Louis Kelso points out, is that most of the fruits of business expansion go to the owner of the capital which finances the expansion. He points out that in America, 80 percent of the means of production is owned by 10 percent of the people and it is to *ownership* that real economic gain, in the form of profits, accrues. It is clear to me, anyway, that a far more effective and speedy way to eliminate poverty is to redistribute already available resources to those who do not presently have them.

If everyone were sharing more evenly the fruits of today's production level, we would already have eliminated poverty, lowered prices and maintained a good *enough* standard of living, especially if we also started proselytizing about what Howard Gossage used to call "expanding the individual, not the economy." The goal of life is to live it happily, is it not? The fact is *economic growth* is not a synonym for a rich and satisfying life.

In Western society we are not educated to think in whole systems, but rather in very narrow linear terms. We see the problem with cars as "pollution," rather than the fact that we have given away some of our humanness to them. The point is that cars, and much of our technology, keep people away from their own senses, from their humanness, from their own connection to the rest of the natural order, to the cosmic forces which created them. Our car culture encourages us to forget that men are made from the same stuff as the rest of the chemical organic natural system, that we grew from the original primordial gases and energies just as everything else did, that it is just some kind of evolutionary accident that we went out onto the *people* branch of life instead of evolving as we otherwise might have into just another kind of fish or tree or plant which also had the same sources.

I ask you to consider a more biocentric view of things, in which man is

just another of the possibilities of life.

Western society, goal and task-oriented as it is, tends to think of things as being separate and isolated; life is a kind of curriculum vitae which separates us from the rest of the living universe, and therefore the doing of something to a living thing, a tree or another human being, is not thought of as something which affects us. Being isolated from our connections with nature, we are also isolated from nature within ourselves, from our instincts and feelings and senses. We are split between our minds and our bodies. We think, but we don't feel and sense as much. My Lai is therefore possible, and so is abstract war where we don't even know the person we are killing.

A brilliant new book by a 23-year-old ecologist, Mark Terry, called *Teaching for Survival*, puts the new ecology point this way: "The problem of environmental awareness is at root, the problem of sensory awareness . . . sensing and *feeling* the connections."

Until recently, even conservationists failed to understand the full meaning of the ecological metaphor. Many of us have been content to fight what we saw as the separate tragedy of a dam, the outrage of pollution, the spread of ugliness and environmental degradation. We have not perceived all the connections either.

It has been as though wars are not as much of an interference with the natural system as are dams. Or that an air pollution hazard in Los Angeles is a more significant danger to life than bombs landing upon people. It has been as though DDT in our vital tissues is worse than wartime chemical defoliants in the tissues of pregnant Vietnamese women, or the defoliation of 5,000 square miles of forest.

But they are all of equal order, deriving as they do from that same mentality which places all life and the vital sources in a position somehow subordinate to isolated abstractions like politics, power, profit or a growing economy. It is a mentality that cannot think in whole systems.

During the last few months, there has been a sudden awareness that the ecology struggle is not even slightly different from the struggle against the Vietnam War, or wars in general; it is no different from the struggle against racism in society, or to eliminate poverty when there are demonstrably ample resources available to do so. For that matter, the ecology struggle is no different from the general struggle of people to free their minds sufficiently to achieve some level of joy or ecstasy in their lives,

some degree of internal personal freedom, to fulfill the outermost possibilities of being alive.

The root causes of all these problems are always the same: the tendency to think in isolated linear terms, the assumption that one life form is somehow superior to another, when in fact all are utterly dependent upon each other. It is this assumption of superiority, the assumption that it is possible to isolate and control things, which makes possible the sort of brutality which runs as a thread through all of these issues.

It is either man brutalizing nature. Or man brutalizing another man—racism. Or man brutalizing woman—sexism. Or man brutalizing animals—whales, dolphins, seals, buffalo—specieism. Or one individual man brutalizing himself, his own senses and feelings.

We fail to fully understand that it is impossible to just do it to *them*. We are also doing it to ourselves.

The Vietnam War, as we can see, is taking place in America, though it is destroying minds and feelings rather than people and hillsides. Smog over London blows over and contaminates Sweden. An A-bomb explosion spreads radiation everywhere. Americans using 20 times the resources of people in Calcutta increase the starvation problem there. Too many chemicals here in this country could kill the whole human race. These are not just existential homilies. They illustrate the very meaning of ecology, and in them resides the level of consciousness that must be achieved.

I recently met a reporter who had worked in *Newsweek's* bureau in Houston, covering the various Apollo space missions. I asked him about the astronauts, what sort of people they were, and he said they were one kind of person if they had never been out in space—sort of the ultimate technological automated man—and in most cases a different sort if they had been. He said the experience changed them, that it was sometimes tough to perceive it right off—they are so protected by officials and press officers and so on—but that in his opinion there was no doubt of it.

And then he reminded me that one astronaut had actually decided to devote the rest of his life to ecology and another pointed out during one of those missions that "Earth looks like a little green oasis in a desert of blackness." And another one who, while viewing the earth from out there somewhere, said "All wars are civil wars."

That is what I would call "ecological consciousness." □