

Frugal Living: Do We Have a Choice?

We say to humanity: the time has come when you must take the great step and rise out of a material existence into the higher, deeper and wider life towards which humanity moves. The problems which have troubled mankind can only be solved by conquering the kingdom within . . .

Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo was an enlightened and progressive teacher in India who founded an ashram (a place for learning, meditation, and Integral Yoga) near Pondicherry, India, in 1926. Associated with the ashram is Auroville, an international community that promotes a sustainable lifestyle and compassion for all. The ashram's activities include free medical care and a publishing house, as well as support for cottage industries, such as growing spirulina (which is packaged and marketed), making non-polluting and healthy incense, and making a large line of handmade papers.¹

This community is an example of frugal living, but what if humankind in general continues to do nothing about using more resources than Earth can regenerate? The default (failure to do that which is necessary) position will expose humans to the universal laws of biology, chemistry, and physics. The consequences of overuse of resources for all species are starvation, disease, and death.

In 2011, about 1 billion humans are water stressed (i.e., not enough, not potable), and agricultural productivity is declining in many areas of the world due to insufficient water for irrigation. About 1,000 tons of water is needed to produce 1 ton of corn. Approximately 1.2 billion humans went to bed hungry in 2010, and another 2 billion were malnourished and had inadequate medical care, poor housing, and inadequate education. The human population is nearing 7 billion in 2011 and may reach 9 billion in 2050. In short, resources (e.g., water) are declining and the human population is increasing.

The basic mistake people perpetuate in decision making is asking "Can I afford it?" instead of asking "Can Earth afford it?" An important component of the problem of living unsustainably is the present culture. Envy of another's possessions leads to spending more time and money trying to acquire them. In addition, footprint size is affected by the country of residence. For example, the highest rank in footprint size of countries is the United Arab Emirates at 15.99; next is the United States at 12.22; Germany is #14 at 6.31; China is #77 at 1.84; Bangladesh is #141 at 0.6. The weighted world average is 3.1 (http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/env_eco_foo-environment-ecological-footprint). Much can be learned from this simple list of footprint size; a few illustrative examples follow.

- (1) The US footprint size is approximately twice that of Germany. Is the quality of life in the United States twice as good as Germany's?
- (2) The footprint size of China is lower than the weighted world average. China is a growing economic power and is beginning to compete for both renewable and non-renewable resources in the global marketplace. China's footprint size will probably increase rapidly, which will increase the global ecological overshoot beyond the current (2011) 150%. Should nations with a large footprint size reduce it to prevent a major catastrophe?
- (3) Individuals should assess their footprint size and determine if they plan to reduce it.

At the beginning of 2011, predictions of major issues for the coming year gave little attention to factors such as: global climate change, exponential human population growth, ecological overshoot, resource depletion, biodiversity loss, diseases, increases in agricultural pests, and the malnourished people of the planet. These factors may have been mentioned, but people want optimistic news, despite the fact that ignoring bad news can be fatal. Of course, a gunman who shot 18 people and killed 6 at a political meeting received the usual, temporary, mass coverage in the news media. The US economy was the dominant motivator in this catastrophe, and some solutions for prevention of such an event in the future involved eliminating/reducing entitlements, reducing taxes, and making cuts in education funding. Certainly, humankind needs to re-examine its value system.

Human society is not even coming close to living sustainably and has a lifestyle that, if continued, will be catastrophic. In the United States and elsewhere, people had been optimistic until the global financial meltdown occurred, leading to job losses, repossession of individual's possessions such as homes and

¹I am indebted to Karen Cairns, who has spent 2-3 months in India annually for many years, for this information.

automobiles, and termination of health insurance. In addition to this financial meltdown, Earth is in an ecological meltdown, which will worsen unless human society develops an “ecological civilization” (Magdoff 2011): “Given the overwhelming harm being done to the world’s environment and to its people, it is essential today to consider how we might organize a truly ecological civilization – one that exists in harmony with natural systems – instead of trying to overwhelm and dominate nature.”

All humankind is in these global crises together, and, if something is not done now, all humans will suffer, possibly die, together. The persistent attacks on scientists and their science by a handful of well financed deniers is more than a way for the news media to entertain viewers, listeners, and readers. The US National Academy of Sciences, the UK Royal Society, and their equivalents in other sovereign nations have confirmed that the preponderance of evidence in peer-reviewed, scientific journals shows that humans are a major factor in global climate change, including global warming. If humankind fails to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, ecological overshoot, and exceeding Earth’s carrying capacity for humans, Mother Nature (i.e., the universal laws of biology, chemistry, and physics) will do so, and the consequences will be appalling. “Business as usual” is a dream world that is not good for either humankind or its posterity. The measures needed to reduce risk are known and could be put in place immediately. The consequences of inaction are so severe that precautionary measures are well justified.

Acknowledgment. I am indebted to Darla Donald for transcribing the handwritten draft and for editorial assistance in preparation for publication.

LITERATURE CITED

Magdoff, F. 2011. Ecological civilization. 9Jan Global Research
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=22701>.