

## THE VISION THING\*

*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*

Proverbs 29:18, *Bible*

*Great leadership does not mean running away from reality. Sometimes the hard truths might just demoralize the company, but at other times sharing difficulties can inspire people to take action that will make the situation better.*

John Kotter

*Vision without action is a dream. Action without vision is simply passing the time. Action with vision is making a positive difference.*

Joel Barker

*Knowledge is love and light and vision.*

Helen Keller

*No one is less ready for tomorrow than the person who holds the most rigid beliefs about what tomorrow will contain.*

Winston Churchill

*We can chart our future clearly and wisely only when we know the path which has led to the present.*

Adlai E. Stevenson

The Biosphere is being badly damaged, and most of the general public and its political representatives have failed to express any dismay or even concern about these events. No vision exists for what the Biosphere would be like if humanity nurtured it or what it could become if humankind continues business as usual. In addition, scientists and the evidence they produce are being denigrated or worse (e.g., science is a hoax, a conspiracy, mere money grabbing) by a handful of individuals, only a few of whom are credentialed scientists with climate change research experience. The media continues to present both sides of the issue of climate change even though a huge number of mainstream scientists represent one side and a handful of credentialed scientists the other. However, the preponderance of scientific evidence confirms that anthropogenic greenhouse gases are causing global climate change. The scientific results are in, and the scientific debate has moved from the big picture to small but important details. However, the major missing component is vision. Humanity badly needs leaders with broad vision because, without renewable resources from the Biosphere, jobs and the financial economy will disappear.

Manus (1992) defines *vision* as a “. . . realistic, credible, attractive future for your organization.” The words *realistic* and *credible* are extremely appropriate in considering solutions for global problems, although their real meanings may not be attractive in the near term to citizens, politicians, and economists. A short-term sacrifice will be necessary to attain an attractive future, which requires both knowledge and wisdom. The world’s great philosophers have included all aspects of the human condition — compassion, empathy, community, civility, common spirit, responsibility to the larger whole, values, justice, honesty, love, hope, and so on — in the words *vision* and *wisdom*, whose spirit is essential for the survival of civilization.

The thin layer of living material that surrounds Earth is the Biosphere. The sixth and present one is the environment in which *Homo sapiens* evolved and, at times, flourished. The five previous biospheres operated on conditions that were not favorable, even hostile, to humans. Consequently, the present Biosphere should be protected and nurtured for humanity’s survival. This Biosphere maintains conditions favorable to humans, is the source of

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\*Attributed to US President George Herbert Walker Bush. Currently used as a description “for any politician’s failure to incorporate a greater vision in a campaign, and has often been applied in the media to other politicians or public figures” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision\\_thing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_thing)).

renewable resources essential to the human economy, and functions as an interactive system (e.g., Lovelock 1988) that is more than a collection of plants and animals. However, similar to all complex systems, the Biosphere has tipping points beyond which irreversible change occurs. The biggest threat to humanity is neither terrorists nor a recession, but the collapse of the present Biosphere. Because of the short life span of individuals, they assume that the present Biosphere will always exist; however, the collapse of the previous five biospheres before humans evolved should indicate this belief is unjustified. Scientists are continually learning more about the Biosphere, but the fact that it is humankind's life support system and the source of renewable resources critical to the human economy should be sufficient reason to protect and nurture it.

Although scientists have generated much evidence on human effects on climate change, the treatment of scientists increasingly lacks civility. The citizens of the United States and the politicians elected to represent them have an unwritten social contract to live and work with one another with civility and responsibility. Past generations had a high regard for compassion, empathy, and reason (Connelly 2011). In their place, current generations now have a growing "civility deficit" (Connelly 2011). In order to survive, *Homo sapiens* must strengthen its social bond and restore respect for civility, compassion, science, and reason. When humanity consisted of small tribes, as it did for most of the time that *Homo sapiens* has been on the planet, mutualistic, cooperative behavior for survival was the norm — now it is not.

At the very least, humankind needs a global vision of the planet that future generations will inhabit. Economic growth, the present "vision," has not worked because billions of humans are hungry or malnourished and have little or no financial security. Humankind has yet to acknowledge that it inhabits a finite planet with finite resources, i.e., the carrying capacity for humans on the planet is finite. Limits exist to growth! A humane vision must include many generations of *Homo sapiens* and the 30+ million other species with which humans share the planet. Sustainable use of the planet is by far the optimal choice for a global system, but humankind is far from achieving this vision. A global vision must be centered on the Biosphere that is shaped by the universal laws of biology, chemistry, and physics, as were all the preceding biospheres. Consequently, the global vision must be congruent with these natural laws as they are presently understood.

The loss of the present Biosphere is an existential risk, i.e., one that *Homo sapiens* has not faced during the 200,000 years the species has been on Earth. Both the oceanic and terrestrial portions of the Biosphere are in peril and are a cause for deep concern. Ironically, at the same time that rapid Biosphere decline is in progress, both regulations to protect the environment and the agencies that enforce them are being eliminated or have had significant cuts in funding.

Above all, the biophysical reality must be accepted – a finite planet with finite resources that has limits to growth. Exceeding Earth's carrying capacity for any species, including humans, has severe consequences. Economic growth, as presently practiced, will deplete renewable resources more rapidly than they can be regenerated. Any achievable vision must recognize this reality. Life is exceedingly rare! It only exists on Earth in this solar system, and, even in the galaxy of which Earth is a part, no robust evidence exists to show life except on Earth. Life probably does exist somewhere in the universe, and, even if it does, life is still both rare and precious. So why did the US Supreme Court give corporations more protection from risk than is given to living creatures? (Hartmann 2011). "Corporations are neither physical nor metaphysical phenomena. They are socioeconomic ploys — legally enacted game-playing — agreed upon only between overwhelmingly powerful socioeconomic individuals and by them imposed upon human society and its all unwitting members" (Buckminster Fuller 1983, p. 25). Corporations are now destroying Earth's life support system in the name of economic growth.

### **Globalizing the Consumption Model**

Some developing countries, such as China, can now afford increased consumption of coal, paper, grain, and oil. Why should China's citizens not enjoy these commodities? Even though they can now afford to purchase biospheric resources beyond regenerative capacity does not mean they should do so. Many individuals may now be able to afford such consumption, but the Biosphere cannot afford to have high resource consuming individuals and nations. Humankind's vision must be one that nurtures the Biosphere rather than a high consumption vision that destroys it.

Brown (2011) gives a concrete statement of the future if business as usual continues: "For almost as long as I can remember we have been saying that the United States, with 5 percent of the world's people, consumes a third or more of the earth's resources. That was true. It is no longer true. Today China consumes more basic resources than the United States does."

### **A Viable Vision**

Living in harmony with the present Biosphere is a viable vision since *Homo sapiens* did so for approximately 200,000 years. Ecological overshoot/debt began in December 1987 and with it came damage to natural capital and the present Biosphere. Perpetual economic growth on a finite planet is not a viable vision because it is damaging

Earth's life support system and, if continued, will result in the collapse of the present Biosphere. Humankind must have a vision of living within the resource limits of a finite planet, which requires living within Earth's carrying capacity for humans. Some means other than misery, starvation, disease, and death must be found to stop exponential population growth. A vision of growth in knowledge and wisdom is compatible with the vision of sustainable use of the planet. The view of other life forms (i.e., species) must be replaced by a vision of life as a rare and precious entity that occurs only on Earth. Above all, a vision of civility is badly needed — effective solutions to global problems require civility.

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