



A Push in the Right Direction

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (Sep., 2003), p. 350

Published by: [Ecological Society of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3868184>

Accessed: 08/08/2012 10:32

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A push in the right direction

Just as good leaders engender hope, good institutions and culture, including government, should support our collective best interests. Otherwise our altruistic acts and intentions erode over time: the thermostat creeps up, farmland gets paved, vehicle fuel efficiency drops, the square footage of houses increases, recycling gets boring, “sustainability” gets redefined as “growth as usual”, memory fades, and history is forgotten. Above some threshold group population, above some level of affluence (above Sudan’s but below America’s?), and below some threshold of perceived external threat (above bin Laden but below Hitler?), we shift from being cooperative to competitive.

With competition, bigger is almost always better. If over-consumption is a problem for the rich of the world, how does our culture send us a credible signal to do something about it? Positive leadership is important – and lacking in the US today – but inadequate alone. In order to buy in (to not buy in), we must be convinced that everyone is affected and doing his or her part. This signal is, unfortunately, best delivered by crisis, scarcity, or high prices; recall the oil embargo of 1973 or the last major war, WWII, when we saved toothpaste tubes (which were then made of lead!).

What we need is a gentle, relentless phasing in of economic prices that reflect biophysical realities and true costs. This is a signal to which we all respond, and a strong message from the relatively new field of ecological economics. Preserving natural capital, attending to matters of scale such as carrying capacity, discouraging “bads” such as resource depletion and pollution, and encouraging “goods” such as renewable energy and human development in general, are all astronomically more tractable if prices back them up. Western Europe offers some examples, such as much higher gasoline taxes.

Of course the true path combines actions and, especially, connections at the individual, community, regional, and global levels. However, we also need a reassuring nudge that what we are doing is the norm and makes sense. Economics is a drag, and a dirty word, but it works if deployed wisely. In a general sense, it is the only thing that works in a free society.

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Ecology and human affairs

For decades, many of the members of ESA have felt that ecology should not spread too broadly into human affairs. Reasons for this opinion are readily understandable: human ecology is vague and diffuse, and the very term “ecology” is often usurped by sociologists, economists, even politicians, with little or no background in biology. Furthermore, the extension of ecology into human affairs has erased any definable boundaries of our science.

Yet, we fully recognize that humans are the most influential species on earth. Despite our considerable differences from all other species, and despite the claims of some technocrats that our growth has no limits, we will ultimately be constrained by ecological principles. As a member of the ESA since the early 1950s, I was delighted to see the articles and commentary in the June issue of *Frontiers* (2003; 5) which dealt with the intersections of human affairs and ecology. Those comments on, for example, overpopulation, human health and reactive nitrogen, economic incentives for restoring African grasslands, Everglades wildfires, human–fire interactions in Alaska, and biodiversity and climate – all are highly relevant to ecology and environmental quality. These and other topics covered in *Frontiers* show the critical linkages between basic ecology and global issues. My compliments to the editors and boards of *Frontiers* for



broadening our outlook – a great step forward for the ESA!

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Biodiversity and the public

Often when I tell people that the organization I work for communicates with the public about “biodiversity”, their response is a blank stare. These experiences confirm results from our 2002 national poll on biodiversity, which shows that despite an increase in awareness, nearly 70% of Americans still don’t recognize the term. Even those that do understand what biodiversity is are not sure what they can actually do to stem the loss of species and habitat.

Protecting the natural world seems like an overwhelming task to most people. For those of us that understand both the immensity of the problem and the potential for everyone to help, it is our job to get the message out about individual actions that make a difference. It is important for ecologists, with their deep understanding of the systems that are affected, to communicate to individuals that each one of us is connected to the diversity of life on earth.

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