

The Environmental Future

How Do We Get There From Here?

By Gaylord Nelson

Gaylord Nelson is a former U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, an early environmentalist in the Senate, the originator of the first Earth Day in 1970, and one of the most distinguished names in environmentalism. He is now Counselor to The Wilderness Society. We reprint here, slightly abridged, the text of his statement for the 30th Earth Day. We do so because we believe readers will be interested in the immediate practical steps he proposes to work towards environmental sustainability in the United States: an annual Presidential State of the Environment message; Congressional hearings focused upon the preservation of our national lands and upon U.S. population growth and its leading source, immigration; and finally, public involvement, particularly by the youth of the country.

Forging and maintaining a sustainable society is The Challenge for this and all generations to come. At this point in history, no nation has managed to evolve into a sustainable society. We are all pursuing a self-destructive course of fueling our economies by drawing down our natural capital – that is to say, by degrading our resource base – and counting it on the income side of the ledger. This, obviously, is not a sustainable situation over the long term.

Earth Day and Sustainability

Thirty years ago on April 22, 1970, Earth Day burst onto the political scene. Twenty million people demonstrated their concern over what was happening to the natural world around them – polluted rivers, lakes, trout streams, ocean shores, the air we breathe and much more. The people cared, but the political establishment seemed oblivious to it all. The specific objective on Earth Day was to stir up a public demonstration big enough to shake up the establishment and force the environmental issue onto the national political agenda. Earth Day was a truly astonishing grassroots explosion. It achieved everything I had hoped for. At long last, the environment was on the national agenda, where it will remain as a constant reminder for this and future generations.

This brief essay speaks to the fundamental issue of our time – forging a sustainable society. A sustainable society may be described in several ways: a society whose activities do not exceed the carrying

capacity of its resource base; or a society that manages its environmental and resource systems so that their ability to support future generations is not diminished. Every nation on the planet faces the same challenge.

Since the first Earth Day, we have tried a lot of things. We have learned a lot, and we have achieved a lot. It has been a kind of piecemeal approach to the environmental challenge. We tackled the most obvious and threatening problems – air pollution, water pollution, etc. Even after 30 years there is still much to do in these areas. We have learned that almost all environmental problems are either preventable – or at least manageable. With this new knowledge we now stand at the threshold of a “Golden Opportunity” to change the course of history. We can do it by turning away from the uneconomic practice of fueling our economy by consuming our natural capital. Forging an economically sustainable society is the practical and profitable alternative. We know all we need to know to launch a long-term program that will lead us to sustainability.

After three decades of discussion, debate, legislation and education, there has evolved a new level of understanding and concern over what is happening around us. The public is prepared and, in the end, will support those measures necessary to forge a sustainable society if the President and the Congress present a well-documented and convincing case. Failing to achieve sustainability is not an acceptable option. That would be a disaster for future generations.

Political Leadership: The Only Direct Path To Sustainability

The presidency and the Congress are the political institutions with the position and authority to take advantage of this opportunity before it is too late.

- **The President** must jump-start the move to sustainability if we are to get this enterprise off the ground in a timely fashion. He can do so by delivering to Congress the first State of the Environment message in the history of our nation. That will be front-page news across the nation. The message should come this spring or early summer. It is important that sustainability become an active issue in politics if we are to get this matter on the national agenda.
- **The Congress** - Congressional hearings on sustainability are a critical part of the process. These hearings will need to cover the whole spectrum of environmental problems and extend over a period of several years. Public understanding of the issues is the key to broad support for doing what is necessary to achieve sustainability.
- **The National Academy of Sciences** would serve as consultant and make annual recommendations to the President and Congress on environmental problems and priorities.

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Youth Involvement

Message to the Youth of America - Because this is the future of our country, the campaign for sustainability will rely heavily on youthful participation and enthusiasm. Grade school, high school, and college students furnished much of the energy that invigorated Earth Day in 1970. We welcome your participation again.

I also suggest you get involved in the campaign for sustainability. This is a non-partisan issue, not a Republican or Democratic issue. Make your voices heard – you will have to live with the result.

Write letters to your candidates for Congress and the candidates for President asking their views on sustainability. Specifically, ask the candidates for Congress whether they will actively support Congressional

hearings on sustainability and the candidates for President whether they, if elected, would submit an annual State of the Environment address to the Congress.

Sustainability must become an important part of the debate along with every other issue. Indeed, sustainability is more significant for the future of the nation than any other issue that will be raised during the 2000 election campaign.

Further Thoughts on Sustainability

We have finally come to understand that the real wealth of a nation is its air, water, soil, forests, minerals, rivers, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats and biodiversity. Take this resource base away, and all that is left is a wasteland. That's the whole economy. That is where all the economic activity and all the jobs come from. These biological systems contain the sustaining wealth of the world. All around the planet these systems are under varying degrees of stress and degradation in almost all places, including the United States. As we continue to degrade them, we are consuming our capital. And, in the process, we erode living standards and compromise the quality of our habitat. We are veering down a dangerous path. We are not just toying with nature; we are compromising the capacity of natural systems to do what they need to do to preserve a livable world. We can - and must - forge a sustainable society, but it will take more vigorous leadership in the future. Fortunately, the ranks of the concerned and committed are rapidly expanding. The ultimate goal is to nurture a society imbued with a guiding environmental ethic. That ethic has been evolving, and ultimately, it will save us from many costly blunders. The British jurist, Lord Moulton, summarized the matter in one sentence - "The measure of a civilization is the degree of its compliance with the unenforceable." That is our goal.

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Scientists and Sustainability - In a dramatic and sobering joint statement (1992), the United States National Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of London, two of the world's leading scientific bodies, addressed the state of the planet in the following words:

“If current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued poverty for much of the world...

... Sustainable development can be achieved, but only if irreversible degradation of the environment can be halted in time...”

Late in the day, it has finally dawned on the political establishments around the world that environmental deterioration threatens both economic and environmental stability. This prompted the international community to organize two conferences on sustainability: 1992 in Rio and 1994 in Cairo. Next was the International Conference on Global Warming. These conferences were the first formal manifestations of serious international concern over the challenge of sustainability.

Global Warming - The Transition from Fossil Fuels - We can begin the process of forging a sustainable society now. We can begin the long and necessary transition from fossil fuels to solar energy; we can reduce air and water pollution to a level that is easily managed by nature; we can stop over-drafting the supply of ground waters, depleting our fisheries, deforesting the land, poisoning the land with pesticides, eroding the soil, degrading the public land, urbanizing farm lands, and destroying wetlands.

We can do this and much more. One thing is certain – we cannot afford to delay fixing problems here at home while we wait for the rest of the world to act. We can help, but we cannot wait. As a nation we have it in our power to do most things necessary to achieve sustainability, but the longer we delay, the more we undermine the livable quality of the environment and the resource base that undergirds the economy.

How Do We Transition to Sustainability?

The President and the Congress have the key leadership roles, while the public has the key support role. The failure of any one of these elements spells failure of the enterprise. The challenge is to forge a society that is economically and environmentally sustainable. Since this is primarily a political challenge, we start with those two political institutions, which share the key to the whole enterprise. Success or failure will turn on what kind of leadership comes from the President and the Congress. To be successful, their joint leadership must be vigorous and sustained over a period of several years.

The Presidency

To crank up the political machinery for a move down the path to sustainability, someone has to spark the engine. The President is in the best position to do

that. He owns the bully pulpit; he is the chief educator of the nation, the superstar, the only one who can command top billing in the papers and on television and radio, whenever he wishes.

We have come a long way in the past 30 years. Opinion polls show upwards of eighty percent (80%) of the U.S. population is concerned about the state of the environment. It is now time for the key political leadership, the President and the Congress, to join a non-partisan effort to design a plan of action for the future. It took three decades of effort to get where we are and it will take at least that long to get to where we want to go. An annual State of the Environment address to the Congress, coupled with regular Congressional hearings on sustainability, would inspire the kind of public dialogue that must precede major decisions on controversial matters.

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While there is a well-established tradition of an annual message to the Congress on the State of the Union, there is no tradition of a message on the State of the Environment. This, despite the fact that the actual “State of the Union” is totally dependent on the state of the environment and its resource base.

Presenting the Congress with a State of the Environment message on sustainability would set a powerful precedent that would be difficult, if not impossible, for future candidates and Presidents to ignore. That would be a proud legacy for any President to leave to the nation.

The Congress

Education and Legislation - The Congress is the other key player. Its primary and critical role will be a combination of education and legislation. Public opinion polls show overwhelming concern for the environment and support for whatever measures may be required to maintain a clean environment. However, what particular measures may be required is not broadly understood. Until it is, the public won’t support – and the Congress won’t pass – the necessary legislation. This means several years of hearings, debate and legislative enactments involving the broad spectrum of issues that must be addressed on the way to sustainability. In many ways, this may appear to be an onerous and intimidating challenge because it will extend over considerable time and involve much de-

bate and controversy. However, the only rational choice is to begin the process without delay.

To make this undertaking succeed will require a cooperative non-partisan effort unlike any other in our peacetime history. The state of the environment, and its impact upon the economy and the quality of life, needs to be much better understood. This is the function of the hearings, which should be held at least once or twice a month over the next several years, preferably by a joint Congressional committee. This would require about four to eight hours a month – certainly not a burdensome task. For example, during the ten-year period between 1969 and 1979, the Senate Small Business Committee conducted 135 hearings on prescription drugs – their pricing, uses and abuses. The hearings were newsworthy and regularly covered by the press and network TV. The famous Truman Committee conducted even more extensive hearings. Both of these sets of hearings had a significant impact on public policy.

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Of necessity, sustainability hearings must range over all significant issues on the environmental spectrum. That will include exploring: how we make a transition from our overwhelming reliance on fossil fuels to a significant reliance on solar energy; how we move to restore ocean fisheries; how we reduce air and water pollution to a level manageable by nature; how we preserve our magnificent heritage of public lands; how we shrink our excessive reliance on herbicides and pesticides; how we stop over-drafting ground water, reduce soil erosion; and how we preserve wetlands, forests and biodiversity.

Congressional Hearings on Sustainability - Congressional hearings on sustainability could start almost any place. My choice would be public lands because almost everyone has some familiarity with National Parks, National Forests, wildlife refuges or Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. These lands are a rare heritage of almost one million square miles totaling about twenty-six percent of the U.S. landmass. No other nation on Earth preserved such a vast mosaic of mountains, wetlands, lakes, rivers, seashores, islands, plains, forests, grasslands and deserts. Within these bounds, a sample of almost every major American land form is represented. These are the only large expanses of natural areas left in the lower forty-eight states. Here are lands that would be recognized by

our forefathers, lands inhabited by wildlife that cannot survive elsewhere, a rare condition of quiet undisturbed by man-made noises, and immense vistas of scenic beauty that cannot be found any other place. If this is not a rare asset deserving our most caring attention, then there is no such place.

Public Lands

National Parks: The Best Idea We Ever Had - Early in the 20th Century, when the national park system was new in this country and unknown in any other, James Bryce, an Englishman, characterized it as “the best idea America ever had.” Yellowstone National Park was created in 1872, the world’s first national park. Since then, more than one hundred countries have established national parks.

The national park system was formally established by the 1916 Organic Act and now encompasses some 80 million acres. The Organic Act specified that parks be managed with the purpose of conserving -

“...the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

What a wonderful thing it would be if the park system were managed in compliance with the spirit and letter of the law. Sadly, it is not. Over many years, a succession of Presidents and Congresses have defaulted in their responsibilities and permitted all kinds of incompatible activities to proliferate, much to the detriment of the system. Obviously, those activities that adversely affect wildlife, pollute the air, destroy the peace and quiet of the parks, and otherwise degrade the enjoyment of these special places, violate the mandate to leave these parks “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

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The Best Idea We Ever Had Is Rapidly Falling Apart - The whole national park system is in varying degrees of serious decline. Park visitations have ballooned from 30 million in 1950 to almost 300 million today, resulting in traffic and noise pollution. Auto-

mobile traffic should be drastically reduced or eliminated in most parks. Snowmobiles are causing air pollution and noise pollution in Yellowstone National Park. At Yosemite, several thousand visitors stay in cabins and tents, creating a virtual city that has been described as “looking like downtown Los Angeles at midnight.” In Grand Canyon National Park, 100,000 commercial tourism flights a year fly down the canyon, disturbing wildlife and the peace and quiet of that special place. In 1985, then-Governor Bruce Babbitt of Arizona testified that the noise in the canyon is “equivalent to being in downtown Phoenix at rush hour...and that’s not what a national park is for.” Contrast this with what Zane Gray wrote on the Grand Canyon in 1906: “One feature of this ever changing spectacle never changes: its eternal silence.”

This is just a quick peek at what is happening to the crown jewels of our public land system. At the current rate of degradation, the National Parks as we know them will be gone within thirty years. They will be modified theme parks or Disneylands. The same thing is happening to our National Forests and the Bureau of Land Management lands – only much worse because they don’t have the legal level of protection that the National Parks do. These lands are being degraded by all kinds of four-wheel drive vehicles, motorcycles, snowmobiles, jet skis, and more.

Doesn’t all this degradation at least justify extensive hearings to inform the Congress and the public what is happening to twenty-six percent of the United States’ land base? It is my view that the use of off-road vehicles on public lands should be phased out and that cattle grazing should be re-evaluated and reduced or phased out wherever it is compromising the resource base. This is controversial stuff and begs for public discussion.

Hearings On Population

What will America look like and be like when the population doubles from about 265 million to 520 million within the next 75 to 80 years? If we permit that to happen, it will have a dramatic and pervasive impact on almost all aspects of our living condition. Indeed, the Rockefeller Report to the President and the Congress in 1972 concluded that there would be no benefit to the country from further population growth and recommended that we move to stabilize our population. Since that report, the United States’ population has ballooned by another 70 million.

If stabilization is to be achieved, it will require a substantial reduction in the immigration rate, and that is attacked as racist by some pro-immigration groups. This has silenced almost everyone, including many distinguished newspapers and other journals of opin-

ion. Joseph McCarthy, from my state of Wisconsin, used exactly the same tactics – it is now called McCarthyism.

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Since population density affects all aspects of our lives in quite significant ways, it should not be driven out of the market place of public discussion by McCarthyism or any other demagogic contrivance. Surely, this is an issue that ought to be explored in public hearings.

The Opportunity For Leadership

This generation of political leaders has a golden opportunity to launch a program that will reverberate through history.

There have been two international conferences on sustainability during the past eight years. Finally, the international political community has come to recognize the threat of environmental deterioration. This is an important step. However, we cannot afford to delay addressing our own environmental problems while we wait for the international community. Now that we know that forging a sustainable society is the key to our future well-being, and that of succeeding generations, where and how do we start? That is simple enough: it must all start with the President and the Congress because the legal authority is in their hands alone.

Most of us have many chances to do the right thing during our lives, but very few among us are afforded the opportunity to be key players in launching a program that will reverberate down through history as an act of vision and statesmanship. The President and this Congress have that chance.

This is that Golden Opportunity for the President and the Congress to heed Bismarck’s elegant observation “The best a statesman can do is listen to the rustle of God’s mantle through history and try to catch the hem of it for a few steps.”

RECENT NPG PUBLICATIONS

1. *Is Smart Growth Enough? Maryland's Population in 2050* by Dr. Leon Bouvier and Sharon Stein: In this booklet, Maryland's booming population of five million to over seven million by 2050 is examined and contrasted to Governor Glendening's policy of smart growth. Maryland's current rapid growth will develop an amount of land in twenty-five years that took the past 366 years to develop in Maryland. Overpopulation is the culprit of sprawl, congestion, and loss of natural resources, and while smart growth has its merits, it can not adequately accommodate over two million new people by 2050.

2. *Maryland Voter Survey July 2000* conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research: In this poll 631 registered voters were surveyed concerning a diverse set of issues, including population growth, traffic, education, and immigration. Sixty-nine percent of those surveyed believed quality of life would deteriorate if population growth continued on its present course. Commensurately, sixty-eight percent were concerned with the immigration level into the state. Population related issues were a serious concern of Maryland voters.

3. *Paying the Price for Uncontrolled Growth: Virginia's Population in 2050* by Dr. Leon Bouvier and Sharon Stein: In this booklet, Virginia's population explosion from seven million to possibly over nine million residents by 2050 is analyzed. The danger of overpopulation is demonstrated in the sprawling conditions that will create a megalopolis stretching from Northern Virginia to Richmond to Norfolk. Virginians' quality of life will continue to degenerate as their state government turns a blind eye to the effects of development and massive population growth within the state.

4. *Virginia Voter Survey July 2000* conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research: In this poll, 636 registered voters were surveyed concerning a diverse set of issues, including population growth, traffic, edu-

cation, and immigration. A majority of Virginians believe their quality of life will deteriorate due to further population growth. Northern Virginians, already living in congested and overpopulated conditions, found traffic, sprawl, and overcrowding to rank among their first concerns and these foreshadow increased similar concerns for less developed regions of Virginia in the present state of massive population growth.

5. *Toward a Stationary U.S. Population* by Dr. Leon Bouvier: In this booklet, the United States' fast approach to 300 million inhabitants, which exacerbates the overcrowding of schools, sprawl, and overconsumption of natural resources, is examined. The best interest of the U.S. is to have a stationary population to improve quality of life, protect the fragile environment, and bequeath to our children a more sustainably manageable population upon which to build their futures.

6. *The Fate of America* by Tim Palmer: In this NPG *Forum*, the current levels of destruction of the American environment, due to overpopulation is described. Ninety-eight percent of old-growth forests are already destroyed, while a third of America's plants and animals could face extinction. Sprawl consumes three million acres of farmland and green space each year. If population growth is not halted and eventually reversed, the future environmental consequences could prove catastrophic.

7. *Growth Management Strategies for Stopping Growth in Local Communities* by Dr. Gabor Zovanyi: In this NPG *Forum*, Dr. Zovanyi presents arguments for debunking traditional pro-growth mythology, techniques for stopping growth in local communities, and suggestions for countering claims that local government actions to stop growth are illegal. Contrary to common belief, a community often saves money by purchasing and preserving its land, rather than having new development.



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Negative Population Growth

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