

Historical Lessons in Ecology.



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Environmental conservation is currently one of the hottest issues widely debated across the disciplines and receiving increasing attention in the government and private sectors. Wherever we go-in urban and rural areas, disturbing signs of environmental degradation and abuse of national resources stare us in the face. The deteriorating conditions came about as the direct consequences of the hectic pace of material and technological progress in the twentieth century, as reflected in the unending spiral of economic growth figures of practically all nations. Although it is still debatable about the critical extent of the situation, the issue cannot but be of serious concern to policymakers as well as ordinary people because the growing menace heavily affects the quality of our life.

At many tourist destinations, for instance, land and water resources are stretched to the limits and worse,

even twisted out of shape while new and virgin spots are being encroached upon daily. Because of environmental ignorance and absence of enlightened management, exploitation is rampant in the name of quick profits without consideration for the generations of tomorrow. Often, local people's rights to share in managing the land and reaping its fruits are violated, revoked or misappropriated through legal and influential channels. The signs and symptoms are familiar : extinction of flora and fauna, destruction of irreplaceable features, pollution, impairment of landscape, poor facilities, social and cultural disruptions, etc. Sadly, the tourist attractions are no longer attracting visitors and nature lovers like they used to. Nowhere is the distressing evidence so palpable as in these places-the last preserves for man's escape from pressures of modern living.

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It was no surprise therefore that the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 came like a wake-up call to mankind to face up to the truth. With accelerating consumption comes responsibility and need for reshaping our values and notions of the environment and economic and social development. Yet nations have a long way to go before they can work out environmental, not economic, strategies and programs of action so that sustainable global development and equitable distribution of benefits can become a reality. Meanwhile, the environmental revolution is now in progress and must be taken seriously.

It is a misconception, however, to suppose that man has only recently wakened up to the revolution. Although the urgency of conservation may have become apparent on a global scale in recent decades, the concept is probably as old as man's existence. Ancient people and communities, despite being considerably less sophisticated than their modern counterparts, displayed amazing sensitivity and understanding of the sound tenets of environmental protection. Here in Asia cases of ancient conservation practices were well-documented in India and China.

In the Book of Vinaya (Discipline) in the Pali Canon (Tri-Pitaka), which dates back to the times of the Buddha over 2,500 years ago, a clear code of environmental ethics was laid down. The injunctions, violation of which constituted a punishable offence, were imposed on monks with the intention of purifying and strengthening their character in preparation for spiritual progress toward enlightenment and thus serving as model for the

emulation by lay disciples. Though appearing in fragmentary form, they had a conservation function. The monastic traditions have been preserved and, as a whole, are still observed by the Sangha community up to the present day. The following is a brief overview of some of the pertinent passages.

In precept 6, Teresakanda, Mahavibhangga, monks were exhorted to refrain from shamelessly mendicant conduct in the demarcation and construction of dwellings which had to be modest and sturdy only. They were commanded to avoid pestering the people, to first seek out abandoned quarters and landplots, and to build their abode with donated or unclaimed recycled cement and soil.

According to precept 1, Bhutagamavagga, Mahavibhangga, cutting trees and grass and even mosses, assigning other people to such action, and all forms of uprooting for any purposes were not allowed. According to precept 5, Ratana-vagga, monks might build a bed or a stool with legs that are no more than eight inches high. It will be noted that similar tree-related prohibitions and suggestions abound in the scripture. All of them were aimed to encourage economical use of wood as well as nurture intimate man-plant relationships that will in turn discourage plundering a forest of its products.

Water and animal conservation measures were also urged in the Buddhist scripture. According to precept 7, Surapa-navagga, monks were not to take too many baths within fortnight time except in hot weather or when sick. According to Bhutagamavagga and Sappanaka-vagga, monks were not to consume or use water with

living things in it and not to pour the water onto grass or soil, or ask other people to have it so poured.

Furthermore (in Sekhiyakanda), monks would, when sound and healthy, not evacuate or make water or spit on green vegetation and waterways. This latter injunction, by way of extension, can be likened to a modern-day waste management program, an absolute necessity in dealing with the aftermath of economic development and prodigal lifestyle.

That these ecological notions are grounded in religious doctrines has not in any way lessened their potential to serve as the framework in which to foster public awareness of the importance of ecosystem preservation. The injunctions arose out of the Buddha's immediate response to lay people's complaints against monks' careless conduct that was found to disturb the continuation and well-being of the local community. Apparently he took it upon himself morally and emotionally to intercede on behalf of the people by requiring accountable conduct from his monk disciples and thus prevent them from becoming coldly detached from the supporting lay community.

Indeed, this important element must be present in any ecological program for it to be efficacious. Knowledge and values (and emotions) cannot be separated because man is an integral part of the real world of nature, outside of which he is meaningless. The task of ecology is to redirect our emotions into the role each of us must play to preserve the optimal order of the biosphere. We cannot save our planet through rational, impersonal decisions, signing an ecological contract with

it on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis.

Some three hundred years later, a unique episode in the history of ecology was being enacted in China, another center of great Asian civilization. In December 1975, archaeological excavations of twelve tombs in Yun Meng district, Hupei province in central China uncovered many sets of official edicts transcribed on bamboo scrolls. One of them, titled Tian Lu (meaning literally 'farmland law'), was found to be fragments of an environmental conservation law, the first of its kind in China or maybe in the world. Proclaimed during the Ch'in dynasty, about 2,200 years ago, it detailed man's concern for preservation and maintenance of the ecological balance of nature and its biological diversity.

According to the legislation, all forest use had to cease from the second month at the start of the spring to the seventh month. Such activities as cutting and burning trees for fuel and other purposes; blocking waterways; poaching young animals, fledgling and eggs; poisoning and trawling fish; trapping and hunting game animals were strictly prohibited. During the breeding season, people were not allowed to take hunting dogs into forest preserves, which were considered the breeding ground. Any hunting dogs, if found to have killed or injured game animals, were exterminated accordingly.

Although we were left with no clear explanation of the circumstances and motive behind these enactments, it is apparent that the legislative effort was aimed at promoting and preserving the harmonious relations between man and the environment. In this respect, the ancient Chinese, despite their humanist bent,

showed remarkable recognition of man's interdependence with nature and kinship with myriad creatures. This attitude underscores one core element of Asian spiritual traditions, Indian or Chinese, which views man and all other living entities as fellow wayfarers in quest of enlightened liberation and sharing in the joys and sorrows in this life. Each and every one of them must learn to live in peaceful co-existence.

Now it looks as if man has completely forgotten the teaching. The most frightening aspect of modern economic miracles is the unrestrained exploitation of the Earth's resources. The pace of environmental destruction and subjugation of nature has been unparalleled in the short span since the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century as against millions of years of the natural evolution of life and its relative constancy in the long past. It is anyone's conjecture how long it will take humanity-through its leaders, governments, cliques to break through the barrier of anthropocentric myopia and see the whole picture. Chief Seattle of the Suquamish Indian tribe said it well, over 140 years

ago: 'Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.'

The awareness of the world around us and man's oneness with all that is in it must have originated back in the primeval corridor of human consciousness. It grew out of our sense of awe of mysterious powers in nature and our helpless dependence on them. With fear came respect, and slowly it dawns on us, We are the environment and the environment is us, and that all things, living or inanimate, are connected on the Earth.

If the ancients living in the midst of relative natural abundance already displayed active concern for nature conservation, how pressing it must be to modern man to follow suit. The time is ripe for us to begin recognising our limits, to realize that use and conservation are essentially two sides of the same coin: to use without conservation is to commit suicide. Let us follow in the footsteps of our ancestors in working out the kind of programs that suit our times, just as they did with theirs.



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