

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#437 - Rush Limbaugh With Book Learning

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Until recently, there were only three camps in the environmental movement. Now some journalists are trying to start a fourth camp.

The original three camps are distinguished by where they place blame for environmental problems: The first says the general public is at fault. The second blames powerful economic and social institutions, chiefly in the "private sector." The third camp blames government.

People in the first camp want to solve environmental problems by recycling newspapers, planting trees, and putting a brick in their toilet tank to reduce water use.

The second camp wants the public to recognize that there really is no "private sector" because all "private" industrial decisions have profound impacts on public health and well being. They want the public involved in decisions about technology.

A third camp blames government. They favor eliminating weak laws, poor regulations, inept officials, and ineffective agency structures.[1]

Now a fourth camp is trying to emerge. This camp says the sources of environmental distress lie somewhere in the murky past, but solutions are staring us right in the face; however, we can't reach these solutions because environmentalists in the first three camps are so negative, so focused on doom-saying, so cynically intent on making money by frightening the public through direct mail appeals.

This new, fourth camp has just published its manifesto, calling itself "ecorealism." Ecorealism is upbeat, positive, buoyantly optimistic. Its basic premise is that most environmental problems either don't exist or would soon disappear if environmentalists would just stop exaggerating.

The ecorealists' manifesto is Gregg Easterbook's 745-page encyclopedia of feel-good optimism, called *A MOMENT ON THE EARTH*. [2] Here is a sampling:

** Human population is not a problem, if you just take the long view of it (pg. 491);

** Genetic engineering is more natural than soccer fields and rock concerts (because nature engages in genetic engineering itself [cross-pollination, for example] but nature never made a soccer field without human help) (pg. 419);

** No research has ever shown that industrial chlorine releases cause any public health or general ecological harm (pg. 414);

** New landfills, incinerators, and factories usually do not have emission problems (pg. 467);

** In the western world, the age of pollution is nearly over, because by the year 2004 society will have "almost painlessly" adopted a zero discharge philosophy (pgs. xvi, 206, 256, 648);

** Whatever industry's stance may have been in the past, today industry's attitude is "respectful environmental behavior" (pg. 623);

** Nature makes far worse environmental problems than people do (pgs. xvii, 21, 145);

** No one in the general public has ever been harmed by radiation associated with nuclear power reactors (pg. 493) and humans are not exceptionally sensitive to radiation exposure (pg. 506);

** Radioactive waste disposal is not really a problem because even at the WIPP site in southern New Mexico, built to hold long-lived transuranic military wastes, most of the radioactivity will have disappeared within 300 years (pg. 514);

** There is no ozone hole over the north pole (pg. 539);

** Toxic waste isn't an important problem because the National Academy of Sciences in a 1991 report said there is "no clear relationship between proximity to toxic wastes and cancer;" (pg. 604);

** Environmental problems developed in the old days, back when "government was tucked snugly in bed with industry" but times have changed (pg. 372);

** Chemicals are, today, assumed to be dangerous, and the burden of proof is on the manufacturers of chemicals to prove safety before new chemicals can be introduced into commerce (pg. 231);

** Most forms of cancer are in decline (pg. 246);

** Dioxin is in the same chemical family as table salt (pg. 414); the largest study of dioxin and human health found only a "slight" increase in cancer (pg. 235); dioxin is natural, caused mainly by forest fires (pg. 238); and, anyway, new emissions of dioxin have already been "nearly eliminated" (pg. 238).

I'll stop here because the catalog of optimism goes on and on, but the drift is clear to everyone.

Unfortunately, most of the ecorealists' platform is simply wrong. Let's examine some of its assertions.

** According to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has been "reassessing" dioxin for the past 4 years, at least half of the dioxin sources in the U.S. have not been identified (REHW #390, #391), so Gregg Easterbrook cannot know that new sources of exposure have been eliminated. EPA says forest fires are a minor source of dioxin and even that minor source may be caused not by nature but by industrial releases of chlorine settling onto the leaves of trees. The largest study of dioxin and human health found a 46% increased hazard of cancer among workers whose exposure lasted at least a year and began at least 20 years ago (thus allowing the cancer latency period to run its course); 46% is not a "slight" increase by any reasonable person's reckoning (REHW #219, #270, #290, #353). True, dioxin is a chlorinated chemical, and so is table salt, but dioxin is only in the "same family" as table salt in the sense that an AK-47 and a pea shooter are in the "same family" --both can be used as weapons to hurt people.

** The incidence rates of 14 out of 16 types of cancer are increasing, not decreasing. The death rates for 8 of 16 types of cancer are increasing. (See REHW #385.) Easterbrook is wrong when he says most forms of cancer are in decline.

** Today in the U.S., new chemicals are introduced at the will of the manufacturer, and it is up to the public to prove that they cause harm before a chemical can even be regulated, much less banned. Mr. Easterbrook has it backwards.

** What the National Academy of Sciences actually said about toxic wastes and human health was this: "A limited number of epidemiologic studies indicate that increased rates of birth defects, spontaneous abortion, neurologic impairment, and cancer have occurred in some residential populations exposed to hazardous wastes. We are concerned that other populations at risk might not have been adequately identified." And the Council said, "Millions of tons of hazardous materials are slowly migrating into groundwater in areas where they could pose problems in the future, even though current risks could be negligible." (REHW #272, #371)

** No ozone hole over the north pole? In 1993, Canadian scientists reported measuring 35% more ultraviolet light on the ground in Toronto, due to a large hole in the ozone layer over the north pole.[3]

** Most WIPP radioactive wastes gone in 300 years? The WIPP radioactive waste dump in New Mexico is slated to hold, at a minimum, one ton of plutonium-239 with a half-life of 24,400 years. Plutonium is one of the two or three most potent carcinogens around. According to the government's environmental impact statement, WIPP may eventually hold up to 44 tons of plutonium. It will take 10 half-lives, or 240,400 years (far longer than HOMO SAPIENS has walked the earth), for this plutonium to decay away, not 300 years.

** No one ever harmed by nuclear power reactors? The International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), the industry-dominated standards-setting body for the nuclear industry worldwide, estimates that nuclear reactors in the U.S. (annually producing 80 gigawatt-years of power) cause 4000 deaths and 2500 serious genetic defects each year in future populations. (REHW #200, #201, #202) The U.S. National Academy of Sciences estimates that the true number is 50% greater than the ICRP's estimate. Long after the reactors have been shut down, this damage will continue year after year for aeons into the future as radioactive gases waft into the air from uranium mill tailings piles, and other radioactive wastes. Just because the deaths will not occur today does not mean nuclear energy is "clean." Dead is dead, and immoral is immoral, today and tomorrow.

** Humans are insignificant compared to nature's damage? True for hurricanes and earthquakes. But for long-term distribution of toxic chemicals and certain key nutrients into the environment, humans surpassed nature some decades ago. For example, each year humans inject twice as much arsenic into the atmosphere as nature does, seven times as much cadmium, and 17 times as much lead. Measured by the elements that nature moves into the oceans via river discharges, we humans mobilize (through mining) 13 times as much iron as nature does each year, 36 times as much phosphorous, and 110 times as much tin. Nature mobilizes 63 million tons of nitrogen each year, but humans (through fertilizer and fossil fuel combustion) mobilize 215 million tons. Yes, nature is large and sturdy, but in several important respects, human activities have already dwarfed natural processes. (REHW #155).

Gregg Easterbrook reserves special treatment for the main problem that drives the grass-roots environmental movement: health damage from toxic chemicals. He begins by sneering at the first scientist who reported harm to the children living near Love Canal, Dr. Beverly Paigen. Easterbrook says "Paigen essentially assumed that if a Love Canal resident stated that a health condition was caused by toxic wastes, it must be so." (pg. 605) With that, Easterbrook dismisses health problems among children living near Love Canal and lays the foundation for his claim that toxic chemicals aren't a serious problem. But anyone who reads Paigen's work can see that she did not rely merely on peoples' claims that toxic waste had harmed them. Using objective measures, Paigen and others clearly revealed a pattern of harm to children and wildlife near Love Canal. At least six peer-reviewed studies have indicated harm to living things near Love Canal (REHW #104, #276, #371). Easterbrook's account is disgracefully distorted and false.

Gregg Easterbrook has been an environmental writer for NEWSWEEK for several years. He has traveled the world, gleaning first-hand information reported in this book. He has read hundreds of scientific studies, and he spent 5 years preparing his manuscript. Yet he feels compelled to support his case by omissions, distortions, and fabrications. As a consequence, none of the book seems trustworthy, or even worth reading. Easterbrook comes across as a sophisticated Rush Limbaugh. What a sad waste of a talented writer.

--Peter Montague

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[1] Sylvia N. Tesh, "Causal Debates in Environmentalism," JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY (Autumn 1994), pgs. 298-309.

[2] Gregg Easterbrook, A MOMENT ON THE EARTH (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995); \$27.95 but not worth it.

[3] J.B. Kerr and C.T. McElroy, "Evidence for Large Upward Trends of Ultraviolet-B Radiation Linked to Ozone Depletion," SCIENCE, Vol. 262 (Nov. 12, 1993), pgs. 1032-1034.

Descriptor terms: environmentalists; environmental movement; environmentalism; public policy; journalism; ecorealism; population; genetic engineering; chlorine; landfilling; incineration; natural disasters; radioactivity; radiation; radioactive waste; military toxics; ozone depletion; toxic waste dumps; superfund; onus; reverse onus; dioxin; epa; dioxin reassessment; cancer; plutonium; wipp; uranium; heavy metals; nutrients; beverly paigen; love canal; wildlife; gregg easterbrook; international commission on radiological protection;