

Talking points at Foreign Correspondence Club BKK 10th November, 2008

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According to recent report by Global Footprint Network, at the current rate of resource use and waste production, we will require by the mid-2030s, the resources of two planets to meet our demands. Just two years ago, the Global Footprint Network data showed humanity is on track to reach the two-planet mark by 2050. The shortening of the timeframe shows that we are actually in a much worse situation than we had thought we were.

This data comes at a critical time, as the economic crisis felt around the globe has made it painstakingly clear: Debt and overspending can continue for a while but ultimately we have to face the dire consequences. Our demand on nature, just as on the economy, is reaching a critical tipping point.

“Continued ecological deficit spending will have severe economic consequences,” said Dr. Mathis Wackernagel, executive director of Global Footprint Network. “Resource limitations and ecosystem collapses would cause food and energy costs to skyrocket, while the value of long-term investments would plummet.”

Humanity is living off its ecological credit card," said Dr. Wackernagel. "While this can be done for a short while, overshoot ultimately leads to liquidation of the planet's ecological assets, and the depletion of resources, such as the forests, water and agricultural land upon which our economy depends."

Turning more specifically to water, when water is diverted or blocked from its natural path we inevitably create an ecological deficit. The “gain” we make from this extraction is usually used without full scale study of who benefits and who loses. More often than not, such diversion tends to benefit the few and mainly for luxury consumption – new housing projects for the upper or middle class; golf courses; industrial parks at the expense of impact on existing communities, etc. The consequence is often creation of more waste and pollution. These negative impacts are generally omitted in the computation of economic progress. So far we are quite afraid to include them for fear that we will not show any economic growth. Because of this, we actually have been turning blind eyes to our ecological deficits.

For how long can we continue to ignore growing ecological deficit? Al Gore and scientists have sounded the alarm a long time ago, but so far not everyone wants to listen. It is such an inconvenient truth. Our greed for physical comfort and our corrupted minds continue to tell us to compete for economic growth and delay taking action to mend the environment. It is this greed that feeds in our addiction

to over-consumption in form of careless and mindless desire for more and more material goods and greater and greater material wealth.

Studies have shown that after some point greater material wealth does not bring corresponding happiness. In fact it often leads to greater emotional and psychological stress and insecurities.

The financial melt down should be alarming enough for us to take responsible actions, individually and communally. We can start with our Mekong region which is now under great and greater environmental threat. Let's raise awareness and be pro-active in reducing our ecological deficit in the Mekong region. The main strategy should be using the lessons of the current financial melt down to draw parallels of the consequences of the ecological melt down of the Mekong River Basin and what kinds of impact this would have on the human communities, plant life and riverine resources. At the same time we demonstrate with evidence how the Mekong region can become an ecological surplus, or at least, not a deficit. We should use information - historical, cultural, economic, and scientific evidence - to communicate these consequences, present and future, to policy-makers, economists, social scientists, but most importantly to the local communities themselves, so that all can make informed choices in the way we use resources in the Mekong Basin. It is only by doing so that we can move towards securing our economy, our livelihoods, our cultural identity, and our ecology for our children and our children's children.

This means we should look at development more holistically and not measuring progress only through GDP, which by the way generally is the main contributor to ecological destruction. We should look more at sustainable development and use Happiness or "Liveability" as our ultimate goal in life. To do that we really need to review our education process and our media content. Currently, our education and media systems are not paying much attention to the consequences of their action or lack of action. Through irresponsible advertisements and promotion of inappropriate lifestyles, the public, especially the young people, in and out of school, are taught to be careless and mindless consumers.

Societies can break out of the current unsustainable lifestyles by starting with using our education system to systematically promote sustainable development, and to involve the media and businesses to act more responsibly and constructively. We need to teach our children to link water to life and to link life to happiness or "liveability". Let's not forget that access to adequate clean/safe water and sanitation is also a basic human right for all and for just for a few.

To do this we should start young in helping the next generation change its behaviour. We do this by taking advantage of the way the human brain learns. Studies have shown that we are all born with our brains equipped with innate intelligences and high emotional abilities to love and care (and to hate also). This is

why children from a very young age are inquisitive to know and understand. Young children show a great propensity to love and enjoy nature and animals. Such innate capacities to love and care for nature are dulled if children are not stimulated to develop these innate capacities as they grow. Our mass schooling system (formal or informal) unfortunately has not learned to nurture this ability in the young to its full potential in a positive and constructive way. Instead we are doing the opposite by delinking our children from nature and their natural environment by forcing rote learning in school, followed by mindless bombardment of advertisement from the TV. Just think about how much time a child spends in front of the TV and how much time he spends memorizing facts for school and you will know what I mean.

Our children have no time to exercise their innate curiosities and capacities to explore their world and its links with nature. They have no encouragement to develop their innate emotions of love and care of life and for nature. Time spent by children for nature walks and studying in the open are now replaced by spending time either in extra tuition classes (more cramming and rote learning), in shopping malls, in digital gaming parlors, or in front of the TV. The models of success for children are largely determined by what money can buy. No wonder, their aspirations are all geared around materialism and short-term gratification, and eventually mindless greed.

This need not be so, if only we can promote an education process that does not delink the child from their natural inclination to be close to nature. For example, children in kindergarten and primary school age can learn about how water is linked to life not just as something they study in a science text book but as something they “experience”, “touch” and “observe” through learning from in nature in an integrated manner. Water and life can permeate as a theme in math, language, science, culture, sports, even music. We should try to get children’s learning as much as possible away from being classroom-based through talk and chalk, with emphasis on using symbols over reality. We should get our children to smell, touch and work as much as possible from real life, especially if we are dealing with such concrete substances like water, plants, and soil, and real livelihoods of people.

If we can make every child start to know, learn, and care about their natural environment – water, air, plants and biological species, I think we still have time to turn the situation around and ensure that our Mekong Basin can continue to sustain life for all those who live within it as it had done for thousands of years. The key is to use education in the broadest sense to promote sustainable development by encouraging every person to 1) understand the present; 2) learn from our past experiences; and 3) plan and build the future together.