

**PERSPECTIVE: ON THE HEALTH OF OUR PLANET**  
**BY BEVERLY BAGANS**  
**ISLA DE CULEBRA, PUERTO RICO**

I welcome the broader discussion of the environmental issues in the pages of the *World Tribune*, something which I have long felt is overdue. I think much more needs to be included in the *World Tribune* in the way of informed opinion and particularly on this vital topic. SGI President Ikeda's support of the Earth Charter process is one indication that these are pressing matters requiring our attention. While I am not a trained biologist, I have done my best to be well informed on a subject that concerns me deeply.

Some personal background: I have a small tree nursery and do horticultural consulting. My home is on the island of Culebra, only about five miles long, lying 20 miles to windward of Puerto Rico. The ferry ride to civilization is long and cumbersome, and the air service is unreliable and expensive, so I'm out of touch with fellow Buddhists other than by phone contact with some sisters in faith. The *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism* are critical to my understanding and practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

As pleased as I was to read the essay on the environment by Frank Hotchkiss in the Oct. 1 issue, I found his tone and emphasis to be off the mark. His characterization of environmentalists as being people nostalgically longing for a sparsely populated world does an injustice to the legions of scientists and citizen activists who are struggling to work out, in theory and in practice, a sustainable interface between our burgeoning humanity and the natural world that supports it.

By some calculations, the homo sapiens population is on a trajectory to pass the 6 billion threshold this month (October) and all thinking people know this crush of humanity isn't going away any time soon, although there are a number of ways we might contribute to our own suffering and in the process carelessly do ourselves out of a habitable planet.

This is not doom and gloom, this is possibility. In the "Rissho Ankoku Ron" (On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land), when Nichiren Daishonin cautioned the leaders of the nation about the dire consequences of flouting the Mystic Law, he did not strike a chirpy note. The repercussions he listed then—famine, disease and war—far from being eliminated in the ensuing centuries, have been escalating right along with our numbers and exacerbated by our ignorance of the ecological effects of our "progress." Wars are fought over limited, natural resources—oil now, water and arable land in the not too distant future. Germplasm of food crops is being commandeered by agribusiness. Does it not behoove us all as perpetrators of pollution, desertification, extinction, and yes, global warming, to take an eyes-wide-open look at these processes and the role we play in them?

Buddhism as I understand it is not about just cultivating a can-do positive attitude. There is a profound teaching here about our place in the universe. It is the best elucidation I have encountered of the role of humans, embedded as we are in the matrix of life. While we each have to thrash out the details in our own life—and practice to the Gohonzon gives us the wisdom and power to do that—the core teaching expounds cause and effect, which brooks no exception. *Esho funi*—the oneness of life and its environment—is a concept that was ahead of its time. The much heralded notion of sustainability grows from such an understanding.

Soka Gakkai founders Makiguchi and Toda were educators. President Ikeda educates us with his vast repertoire of teachings harvested from worldwide history, literature, culture

and science. He encourages us to be well informed, to educate ourselves on matters of vital interest to humanity and to engage freely in dialogue.

Before emotionally throwing ourselves into this fray, it would be helpful to have good information. For instance, the problem of extinction is not just a matter of a handful of species, but rather thousands of species, plant, animal and microbe, that are vanishing for eternity as our kind eliminates their habitat.

Granted, all is not gloom; there are some success stories such as the Mauritius kestrel, which was miraculously brought back to the optimum population the island can support from only four known individuals. But the extinction issue is not just about pandas and seal pups, propping up warm and fuzzy creatures at the expense of human development. Our particular form of life, as well as all species, exists at the sufferance of the web of life with its complex interactions. We come forth from the living universe—dependent origination. Again, Buddhism was explaining this relationship well in advance of the sciences that today seek to unravel the mechanisms of co-evolution and species/habitat interaction.

To say don't worry, they're discovering more oil all the time neglects not only the myriad documented unhealthy effects of hydrocarbon pollution, but the salient fact that no more oil is being created. Such a casual attitude arrogantly assumes that science will come up with a techno-fix in plenty of time, and smacks of "scientism," worship of the techogod. Topsoil loss, falling water tables, loss of genetic diversity in vital food crops—these problems are not likely to see any quick fixes forthcoming, and the biotech is poised to place us in a new and perhaps irreversible predicament as genetically modified germplasm escapes into wild plant populations.

One criterion of sustainability is that we not use up resources faster than we replace them. To argue quantitatively, that we have more trees in parts of the U.S. now belies the fact that they are qualitatively different, many being industrial monocultures or depauperated biomes, and ignores the global balance sheet, the larger problem of tropical deforestation, where human cultures are being eliminated along with the plants and animals they rely on.

Another tenet of sustainability is that we not produce wastes faster than they can be absorbed and broken down. Hooray for every local that has been brought to health, but much of the wastes that humans shed end up in the oceans, unseen by all but oceanographers who are alarmed at what their body of data is telling them about temperatures, chemicals, and species.

Environmentalists such as little old me are trying to stimulate dialogue and promote understanding in our communities. Culebra is a small island of great natural richness that is much impacted by development. I'm concerned about the sooty tern colony, the leatherback turtles that nest here and our coral reefs that are becoming weakened and diseased by antropogenic stressors; I also care about the quality of my all-too-human life, the livelihood of the fishermen and the natural heritage of the Culebrense people.

Environmentalists engaged in the larger contest are trying to fathom how we're ever going to get away with the growth that mainstream economists tout as the solution to society's problems. The health of our planet is very much bound up with the advance of the transnational economic juggernaut. There are issues of social and economic justice that need to be worked out if our remaining tropical forests, home to the majority of the Earth's species, are to be saved from decimation, if everyone is to have access to safe water, adequate nutrition and breathable air, if the various human cultures and traditions are not

Title: On The Health Of Our Planet

Subject: World Tribune 11/12/99 n.3268 p.2 WT991112p02

Author: Beverly Bagans

Keywords: Bagans Beverly Environment Health Perspective Planet Tribune World

swallowed up and leveled by global consumerism. These are human issues no less than environmental issues, and there are no easy answers. But the right questions must be asked and evaluations made by a well informed public. Solutions will come only by pooling the wisdom of many sciences and disciplines. And only if we look the problems square in the eye and confront these obstacles to the enlightenment of humanity.

Following is a list of suggested reading for those who would like to know more of the facts and some of the recent scientific thinking. Most of them were written by scientists eminent in their fields and all of them make for fascinating reading: *Billions and Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium* by Carl Sagan; *The Diversity of Life* by Edward O. Wilson; *Divided Planet: The Ecology of the Rich and the Poor* by Tom Athanasiou; *Dominion* by Niles Eldridge; *The Dying of the Trees: The Pandemic in America's Forests* by Charles E. Little; *The Last Harvest: The Genetic Gamble that Threatens to Destroy American Agriculture* by Paul Raeburn; *Sea Change: A Message of the Oceans* by Sylvia Earle; *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of the Earth and the Future of Mankind* by Richard Leakey; *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinction* by David Quammen.

Title: On The Health Of Our Planet

Subject: World Tribune 11/12/99 n.3268 p.2 WT991112p02

Author: Beverly Bagans

Keywords: Bagans Beverly Environment Health Perspective Planet Tribune World