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# LIVING

# When growth kills

*The way modern economies function is a worry for everyone with a stake in the future of this planet*

Terry Carpenter, special to The Examiner

One cannot have an interest in nature in the 21st century without being continually reminded of all that's being lost. From species extinction and habitat destruction, to the loss of clean air, clean water and a stable climate, every day seems to bring more depressing news. It doesn't require much effort to connect the

dots and to realize that the developed world's hyper-consumptive ways are at the heart of the problem. So, as we prepare to cast our ballots in the upcoming election, I'd like to reflect this week on where our present economic model and patterns of consumption are leading us. And

don't get me wrong. I see my own lifestyle as being as problematic as anyone else's. We are all caught up in our consumer society, and there is relatively little we can do as individuals to change things, especially in the absence of government leadership and sweeping reforms. The way modern economies function is not just a concern for those of us who value nature; it is a worry for everyone with a stake in the future of this planet. As I will try to explain, the biggest reason to adopt a new economic model stems from what is happening right now in China.

Mass media and especially advertising all convey the message that everyone can have it all, from a big car to a big house, along with all the stuff to fill it up that you could ever imagine. Therefore, it's not surprising that most politicians follow suit. Their central message seems to be that everything from one's personal level of consumption to the size of the Canadian economy as a whole must always continue to grow forever. When do our so-called leaders ever discuss limits to growth or consumption? To listen to most of them talk, you would think that our economy exists in some sort of vacuum,

immune to what happens to our air, water, soil, forests and biological diversity.

To the old parties, "the environment" is seen as one concern among many. There is supreme confidence that any environmental problems that may be out there are manageable. All we need to do is occasionally throw some money and technology at them. The old parties are still focused on an issue-by-issue approach to environmental ills — cleaning up a lake or river here, marginally reducing some greenhouse gases there or maybe offering a tiny bit of tax relief if you use public transit.

However, the unsustainability of our present model of economic growth and consumption has suddenly become much clearer. Why? Because of what is taking place in China. Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute, in his new book *Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*, makes it very clear that we are heading towards economic and environmental disaster.

China has now surpassed the U.S. in the consumption of the world's most basic resources like grain, meat, oil, coal and steel. With its economy expanding at eight per cent a year, China's per person income will reach the current U.S. level by 2031. So, in 25 years time, if the projected 1.45 billion Chinese behave like us and consume at the same level that North Americans do right now, they will devour two-thirds of the current world grain harvest and twice the world's current paper production. The number of cars in China will grow to 1.1 billion and will require 99 million barrels of oil a day. The entire world only produces 84 million barrels a day right now. To make matters worse, by 2031, India is projected to have a population even larger than China's. In addition, there will be another three billion people living in the rest of the developing world. All of these people, too, have the same dream of living just like us.

What hope will there be for the earth's remaining natural areas and resources as huge wealthy cor-

porations, such as those of China, scour the entire planet for raw materials to feed their burgeoning economies? How will the world's forests, including the boreal forest of Canada and the tropical forests of Latin America, ever survive the demand for lumber and paper products? How can there be any future for the bountiful bird species we presently enjoy in the Kawarthas when the destruction of so much of their breeding and wintering grounds is just a matter of time?

Like it or not, business as usual and the days of the old economy are numbered. We are living in a new world and have no choice but to build a new economic framework to go with it. According to Brown, it must have three components: 1) a restructuring of the global economy so that it can sustain civilization; 2) an all-out effort to eradicate poverty and stabilize population growth; and 3) a systematic effort to restore natural systems.

Glimpses of the "new economy" can already be seen in Europe's wind farms, the fast-growing hybrid car fleet of the United States, the reforested mountains of Korea and the bicycle-friendly streets of Amsterdam. Brown believes that nearly everything we need to do in order to build a sustainable economy is already being done, albeit on a small scale, somewhere in the world. By 2020, nearly 200 million Europeans will be getting their residential electricity from wind. In addition, if the U.S. replaced all of its passenger vehicles with gas-electric hybrids over the next 10 years, gasoline consumption would be cut in half and greenhouse gas emissions would fall drastically.

The move to a new economy requires a cooperative, worldwide effort. In order to do so, eradicating poverty is absolutely necessary. This will involve major investments in primary education, basic village-level health care and family planning services. Getting rid of poverty is crucial if there is to be a shift to smaller families.

However, none of this will make any difference if the environmental

support systems of the developing world continue to collapse. In addition to addressing global warming, there must be an earth restoration budget which, according to Brown, would be used to restore fisheries, reforest much of the planet, eliminate overgrazing, stabilize water tables and protect biological diversity. Brown estimates that all of these measures would require an additional annual expenditure of about \$161 billion dollars. This may seem like a lot until you remember that the world is presently spending \$975 billion annually for military purposes. The military budget of the U.S. for 2006 is \$492 billion. In other words, it's not a lack of money that's the problem but rather obsolete priorities. Brown adds: "The military threats to national security today pale beside the trends of environmental destruction and disruption that threaten the economy and thus our early 21st century civilization itself." How much discussion has there been in this election about these concerns? None. Incredibly, Stephen Harper wants to actually lower the GST by two percentage points, a policy which is designed to encourage even more consumption! Clearly, as humanity's demands on the earth skyrocket, and perilous threats such as climate change worsen (a problem that neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives appear to take seriously), we may be approaching the point of no return.

More than anything, we need politicians who are willing to focus on the long term. As a starter, Canada needs to radically change its present models of energy production, drastically reduce fossil fuel consumption and invest much more heavily in areas such as public transit and foreign aid. We must move towards a sustainable economy that can become a model for the developing world. How can we expect it to change if we don't? This does not mean we have to fall into self-denial or sacrifice in the sense that people unselfishly give up their own interests. We have to see that our own interests are served by

environmental protection and a sustainable economy. Is it not self-evident that maintaining a healthy, diverse natural environment must be the central value of society if there is to be any hope for the future? Everything else, from peace, security, freedom, health, recreation and spiritual well-being to goods and services and fulfilling work — depends on this core value.

The American theologian Thomas Berry made the following observation about business and political leaders in describing their reaction to the environmental crisis. "Many good, intelligent, competent persons dedicated to the improvement of the human situation simply do not understand the actual consequences of their actions - totally committed persons, simply catastrophic in their judgment."

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## Correction Wrong photographer

The photo above, which appeared in last week's column, was taken by Karl Egressy. The photographer was incorrectly identified in the credit line. We apologize.