

Ecological debt and climate change

Andrew Simms

Humanity's current inability to react adequately to a warming biosphere suggests that we may be more stupid than frogs.

Put a frog in gradually warming water – so the story goes – and it will let itself be cooked to death. Frogs are allegedly incapable of identifying the moment at which the temperature of the water around them becomes life-threatening.

“Rubbish!” say the people who know about frogs. “If a frog had a means of getting out, it certainly would,” according to the curator of amphibians at the US national Museum of Natural History. The story appears to be the pond equivalent of urban myth.

Still, the myth looks like a perfect analogy for the human situation, faced as we are with global warming. As a species, we just don't “get” it, despite the clear warning signs

After more than three decades of high-profile activism the green movement still struggles to find a story to tell that is strong enough to displace the grip that the fossil fuel hungry economic system has on our imaginations.

Perhaps they've been overcomplicating things. Margaret Thatcher's devastating economic revolution was sold on the ‘homely wisdom’ of a girl who grew up

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above a grocer's, and told us that she knew how to keep shop. Yet something like her formula could be put to much better use. Good environmental stewardship, after all, should be the same as good household management.

What could be simpler than the notion of living within our means? Climate change, seen through an economic lens, then becomes a problem of ecological debt. In fact, the homily becomes even stronger in the context of environmental capital. The difference between the real world of natural resources, and the abstract world of money creation, is that there is no natural bank capable of either quickly lending more fossil fuels into existence, or radically increasing the atmosphere's ability to safely absorb greenhouse gases.

We cannot, for example, after buying that third gas guzzling SUV, realise we've become environmentally over-extended apply for ‘bankrupt’ status in the court of nature, in the hope of starting afresh. In an age of global warming, there's no coming back from runaway climate change.

So the first thing we have to do is explain to people how the whole world has no choice but to live within its carbon budget, and then work out how much carbon we've got to ‘spend’. The first part of this

equation means winning the argument at the household level. The second means agreeing a global constitutional framework to cap emissions, and then negotiating how fast to shrink them both to the desired level, and to a point where every global citizen is entitled to a logically equal share.

The importance of doing so is emphasised by a double dynamic of threat and opportunity. On one hand the world is committed to a whole series of poverty reduction targets that will all be blown off course by global warming. On the other, there is still a largely hard-wired link between orthodox wealth generation, and the use of fossil fuels on which the global economy relies.

So, unless rich countries who, per capita, consume vastly more than their sustainable share of fossil fuels, cut back and get out of the environmental space of poor countries, any public commitment to poverty reduction by the rich remains as cynical, empty rhetoric. Conversely, the trading of spare entitlements between rich and poor, by 'over' and 'under' consumers, in the framework envisaged above, could create substantial new and additional resources to finance development.

Given that this is little more than good household management of the planet's bio-capacity, maybe it's no surprise that with so many men in charge who have so little domestic experience, we have so disastrously failed to balance nature's books.

So it was that on the 17 March this year that the sound of falling crockery echoed around the world. News emerged of the nomination of Paul Wolfowitz to be president of the World Bank. A candidate whose skills lay in formulating autocratic and aggressive military strategy, was guaranteed to provide maximum shock factor for a bank publicly committed to democracy, internationalism and poverty reduction (and you have to wonder, if he ran his home like he ran America's foreign policy, what would that be like?).

If today's challenge for international institutions is managing an ecological debt crises, the choice was

even worse given that the bank, under the more highly regarded Jim Wolfensohn, had already grossly mismanaged the Third World's financial debt crisis. But in fact, as Wolfowitz takes up his job, he is only emulating his predecessor, Robert McNamara.

Much of today's commitment to global poverty reduction can be traced back to McNamara's term of office, even though that reputation was largely ill-earned. Between 1968 and 1981 when McNamara was president, less than 10 per cent of World Bank loans actually went to areas that target poverty directly like health, education and supplying clean water.

Failure to alleviate global poverty and move towards environmental sustainability has been one consistent theme at the World Bank under every president. Even at the time of Robert McNamara's in 1968 the challenges has already been put in to perspective by by three questions posed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). These questions are still unanswered today: 'How to live on a finite earth? How to live a good life on a finite earth? How to live a good life on a finite earth at peace and without destructive mismatches?'

In other words, they were asking, how do we prevent a devastating ecological debt crisis? Answer? Live fairly, and within nature's means. Put the question straightforwardly, and messages dismissed by governments as being impossible to communicate to the general public, suddenly sound like embarrassingly obvious common sense.

The language of restraint on public spending permeates neo-liberal economics. Yet the concept of living within our environmental means still escapes mainstream economics. That will have to change if our children are to have a 'good life on a finite earth at peace and without destructive mismatches.' To do that we'll have to tackle our own ecological debt crisis, and do it before we all croak.

Andrew Simms' new book "Ecological Debt: the health of the planet and the wealth of nations" is published on May 16 by Pluto Books.

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