

The Globalization of Environmental Degradation

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Figuratively speaking, a ginormous asteroid is hurtling to a cataclysmic rendezvous with earth, but we are not supposed to notice. The asteroid is the rising threat from environmental degradation. Evidence is accumulating that environmental degradation is becoming global.

We can either act responsibly by accepting the challenge or take refuge in denial and risk the consequences.

There is nothing new about climate change. It has been ongoing for as long as earth has had an atmosphere. Through change nature produced an atmosphere supportive of life. We know for a fact that human activities can have adverse impacts on the air, water, and land resources. If these impacts become global, as independent scientists believe, life on earth might be at risk.

We're in a state of perpetual crisis

Moreover, environmental degradation can contribute to, and be worsened by, other changes that are not under our control. Presently humanity is challenged by three revolutions which collectively constitute a perpetual crisis: the technological revolution that is displacing humans in the production of goods and services, the volatility and instability of the global financial system, and environmental degradation. Our focus is on environmental degradation.

It's a matter of balance

The weight of the atmosphere, at 14.7 PSI, has remained relatively constant throughout much of earth's existence. What has varied is the makeup of the atmospheric gaseous mix. The mixes that existed prior to the current era would prove toxic to the contemporary biosphere. As the biosphere evolved over the hundreds of millions of years prior to the current era, the gaseous mix of the atmosphere and the biosphere came into perfect, or indeed as some might say, heavenly balance.

Indeed, our very existence as well as the existence of the biosphere depends on this balance. There is no question that human activities can affect this balance. Perhaps not enough that nature wouldn't eventually be able to reset the balance, but perhaps enough to end civilization before nature could correct the disturbance. While some are cavalierly dismissive, others have concluded that things are already so irreversibly out of balance that civilization as we know it will cease before the middle of this century.

Easter Island is an example of death by environmental degradation on a local level. When the island was first settled, it was covered by a forest. Soil analysis suggests that the natural

environment was reasonably diverse and, absent human settlement, resilient enough to recover from natural disturbances that included volcanic eruptions. The humans that settled on Easter Island thrived until the population degraded the environment to the point that it could not support the population.

Tree removal was one of the activities that proved detrimental to the island's natural balance. As trees were removed, so too was the island's natural diversity and its ability to support human habitation. Many have wondered what Easter Islanders were thinking as they cut down the last tree.

Environmental degradation's role in the collapse of civilizations is well told in Jared Diamond's book, *Collapse*. At least two pre-Columbian empires fell to sudden environmental collapse. Environmental degradation even contributed to Rome's fall. Throughout history, empires and civilizations have collapsed once they degrade the environment below its capacity to carry the human footprint imposed on the environment.

Global warming introduces a difference. In the past environmental destruction was local or regional. But what is now underway appears to be global. It can take a long time to unbalance the biosphere, but once the line is crossed, collapse can be rapid and irreversible.

Global Warming a hoax?

Humans and animals convert oxygen to carbon-dioxide, and trees and plants convert carbon-dioxide to oxygen. It's a simple truth that burning fossil fuels increases atmospheric carbon-dioxide. Carbon-dioxide is one of several greenhouse gases so named because they contribute to atmospheric warming. The atmospheric carbon-dioxide molecular count has steadily increased since measurements were first made decades ago. Analysis of ice cores extracted from glaciers and polar ice indicate that carbon dioxide levels were never as high as they are now for millions of years prior to the Industrial Revolution. In addition, vast amounts of woodlands have been cleared thus reducing the biosphere's capacity to absorb and process carbon-dioxide. For example, by 2030 it's predicted that just 40% of the Amazon rain forest, itself a massive percentage of the biosphere, will remain.

But carbon-dioxide isn't the only concern. In addition, vast amounts of methane, also known to be a potent greenhouse gas, are also being released into the atmosphere.

The oceans also contain gasses that if released into the atmosphere could prove toxic to the biosphere. The earth itself contains gasses, such as methane, which is routinely released into the atmosphere through coal and petroleum extraction operations. Animal farming adds more methane. Even larger amounts of methane are estimated to be locked up in polar ice. Based on recent measurements and observations, vast amounts of methane, estimated to be in excess of ten times as much as is presently contained in the atmosphere, are predicted to be released in a sudden volcanic-like eruption as the ice melts. A sudden release of methane could cause the atmosphere to rapidly heat to a temperature where most agricultural activities, except perhaps for hydroponic operations housed in controlled environments, would cease.

The Pace is Quickening

From one day to the next it is difficult to discern changes in the environment. Yet those of us old enough to have been around for decades know that the weather has changed.

Predictions made by scientists are being met sooner than expected. Carbon dioxide levels are increasing faster and glaciers and polar ice are melting faster. The release of methane locked in arctic ice could quicken environmental change so that it is noticeable in real time.

The simple truth is that the atmospheric gaseous mix is changing and altering the natural balance. This is in addition to the historical kinds of local and regional environmental degradation associated with human activity. When humans destroy watersheds with deforestation, turn fertile lands into deserts, and pollute local sources of water, they can move on. But when the global environment degrades, there is no where else to go.

As climate changes, so does the geographical location for the best crop yields. Climate change has produced a new occupation: climatologists who predict for Wall Street investment bankers the best geographical locations for the highest crop yields.

Environmental changes, even a temporary one such as a multi-year drought, can cause turmoil in societies that result in deadly conflict. During the three years that preceded the “Arab Spring” of 2011, the Levant (Eastern Mediterranean) suffered from an extended drought. In Syria as water became more scarce, the government favored the most loyal elements of the population. Crop failures in the disfavored regions prompted a migration to the cities and produced political unrest. The US used this unrest to intervene against the Assad government which had alienated the US by pursuing an independent foreign policy.

The global spread of corporate monoculture agriculture and the global timber corporations’ exploitation of the remaining virgin forests are spreading environmental fragilities. On Easter Island the population declined into disappearance. For a thousand years after the Roman Empire collapsed the Italian peninsula was an environmental disaster with soils so depleted, agriculture was reduced to marginal subsistence farming barely sufficient to support a population a fraction of what it had been. Unlike our time, the Romans achieved environmental degradation without burning fossil fuels or fertilizing their fields with toxic petrochemicals and herbicides known to deplete soils to the point where continued land use is predicated on artificial fertilizers and ever larger applications of herbicides, the runoffs from which produce algae blooms and destroy marine life.

Today in locations where multinational agribusiness has replaced traditional farming, it can take years for soils to regain their natural fertility and for the societies to regain their economic balance from the imbalance that agricultural monoculture produces.

Environmental degradation can be destructive irrespective of global warming. Throughout history, humans have degraded their environments to the point that their societies failed or were weakened to the point that they were conquered in whole or part by invaders. However, global environmental failure can terminate life in general.

Environmental failure can result from ignorance, careless practices, and the short time horizon associated with profit maximization which encourages disposing of waste products directly into the environment where they damage, air, water, and land resources. When emissions alter the atmospheric balance, what has historically been local and regional damage becomes global.

In other words, human activities can put life in general at risk. This risk is too total to justify dismissing accumulated evidence as a hoax or as “a plot against capitalism.” We must assess the risk without being shouted down by material interests. There is no prospect of

finding a solution to an unacknowledged risk.

Just as Easter Islanders did not understand the consequences for them of deforestation, today many in government do not acknowledge the risks of global degradation. President Trump has appointed a climate change skeptic as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency. This is not enough for US Rep. Matt Gaetz who wants the EPA abolished. Is humanity now globally on the same path and in the same denial as led to the extinction of human life on Easter Island?

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