

# THE ANATOMY OF GLOBAL WARNING

by  
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*The entire history of mankind is an endless sequence of crises. Since the industrial revolution a new, persistent crisis is evolving with global dimensions and an increasing threat of destroying the ecosphere if not resolved. It worsens with population growth and unrestricted demands for resources and the wastes it returns to the environment. The situation may be close to irreversibility, or as some believe it, has already gone beyond it. There are abundant warnings, diagnosing the threat warning of the dangers of inaction and missed opportunities. However, warnings can be, and often are, ignored. More immediate problems are used for excuses. An analysis of the way we signal the danger, issue the warning may help us to make it more effective to fit into our everyday reality*

## Introduction

There are times when reading an article, one gets a strange feeling that the words are conveying much more than their conventional meaning. Buzz Nixon's paper *Sustainable Development, A Mirage and a Dangerous Trap*, March 1993, was such an article. It caused a resonance in me that brought on an image of resigning to the inevitable, hopelessness about a safe and rational future, and a vision of wrong turns taken in the tortuous path of human evolution towards an unknown destiny.

It made me recognize that the prerequisites to solve ecological problems and the quasi-unchangeability of the root causes, may have already passed beyond the point of no return. The necessary efforts and resources required to change genetic and historical behaviour and the diverse econopolitical systems, may simply exceed humanity's collective capacity. Perhaps the time has come to look beyond repetitive situation analysis and reflect upon the real possibility that the ecological Titanic is only a few hundred meters away from hitting the iceberg. So the immediate challenge is to look at the effectiveness of conventional warning and the immense inertia that has to be overcome to change the present course of events.

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The thesis of the Nixon paper is that the phrase: **Sustainable Development** is deceiving and should be replaced with **Sustainable Ecology**. The former is shown to be an oxymoron, and the latter as the only

path to avoid the much dreaded **global disaster**. There are pragmatic reasons for the relative acceptance of sustainable development and the low probability of success for sustainable ecology. The enormity of the challenge to bring about the changeover may be beyond individual and collective comprehension. The question, whether the changeover can be activated by increasing the volume and intensity of warning without realistically assessing the agents of, and impediments to change needs an honest answer.

The Nixon warning is just one of countless others. Most of them in the past were relegated to oblivion. Genuine efforts to change course are

substituted by clever deception including oxymorons, grandiose gibberish and conceptual ambiguity. Perhaps a thorough examination of the anatomy of global disaster warning and a critical look at reality will give us a clearer picture to plan for changing the present path to doom.

## The Nature of the Problem

Very few would argue the existence of, or the threat of a major global problem if the present course is not altered significantly. In its simplest terms the problem is the result of a resource-use imbalance. The global resource system is made up of renewable and non-renewable resources. The non-renewables are finite; only their rate of exhaustion is variable. The renewables have capacity limitations. Soil, water and air have a definite pollution limit. Exceeding limits destroys the capacity of the resource system. Since the non-renewables will be exhausted at some future time, it is also wise to develop alternatives to them. Within these parameters looms a critical point of irreversibility. This is the essence of the global concern.

The problem is well understood and analyzed. We know where we are and where we don't want to be. However, we still don't know how to avoid getting there. We might even have some notion about requirements, but cannot offer practical and valid recommendations to provide them. There are strict limits to what resources are available, and what economic and political risks are involved in transferring those resources from the traditional anthropocentric priorities to a still somewhat distant and ill-defined ecocentric deployment.

Time is a critical element. More immediate and traditional problems preoccupy global planners. It is hard to break the mould of history. We are sending messages about the future and should question their effectiveness. Are these messages hitting their targets? Are those targets continually changing, making the messages and warnings ineffective? If yes, are there better alternatives? How could we design the **warning** to fit the need for implementing the greatest challenge for change mankind has ever faced? Let us look at some of the variables.

### Expression of concern:

Three possibilities exist: Concern can be voiced by individuals, groups of individuals collectively, and by **Institutions of Power**. This term includes governments nationally and such supranational forums as the United Nations and various multinational

military or economic alliances. Each of these possibilities has its characteristic impact level and obstacles. Ignoring the reality of possibilities can render the most honest effort and concerns futile.

Retaining the central theme of **anthropocentrism** versus **ecocentrism**, let us examine the anatomy of **global warning** and as a start return to the fundamental questions of Buzz Nixon's paper:

- Why don't we discard **sustainable development** and replace it with **sustainable ecosphere**, assign it supreme priority and go to work on it?
- Why hasn't it been done yet?
- Why aren't others speaking out, sending messages and sounding the **global warning**?

### Choosing between concepts:

Whatever its genuine, even if misguided, practical value may be, the Brundtland Commission produced a compromise phrase, that was more or less acceptable to UN member countries. Without this compromise even such a limited value phrase would not have been possible. Bypassing its true value for a brief moment, let us reflect upon the fact that the Commission's work was a major achievement in diagnosing the global situation. It was an overdue wake-up call. **Sustainable Development** may have missed its target, but it sent a warning and thus may have made subsequent suggestions and proposals more palatable. The watershed question is whether a better formulated and more rational concept like **Sustainable Ecosphere** can possibly do better than make the **warning** louder. Whatever was missing from sustainable development, it may have helped bring about the recognition of the need for a more substantive term: **sustainable ecosphere**.

The crucial point of creating awareness and producing results is not only a function of the way the concept is formulated. Complicated social, economic and political forces also enter and contribute to the dynamics of change. Regrettably, more often than not they work as impediments and rarely in favour of achieving long term goals. Therein lies the ultimate pitfall and impediment of switching from doing the wrong thing to doing the right one. The

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follow-up at Rio demonstrated, to the most enthusiastic supporter, that clarity of concept, pureness of heart and intentions, desires and fears will not substitute for lack of resources and consensus to execute the necessary changes and produce lasting commitments. The world seems to be **too complex** to invest all it has in something that is so **simple to comprehend**, yet is nothing less than a **precondition of humanity's survival**.

### The new concept:

**Sustainable Ecosystem** is the end state reached by an immeasurably slow process, provided the necessary resources and the global will to reach it are made available. Otherwise it may just be a distant illusion, or impossible mission. It requires substantive changes to our fundamental thinking and the existing economic system. The true magnitude of converting the current relationship between **mankind and the environment** is simply mind-boggling. Two aspects may offer an explanation for the delay or inaction. One is incremental changes in the ecosystem and doubt concerning the validity of predictions. The other is the understandable reluctance of the **power centres** to commit resources at the cost of losing existing levels of individual comfort combined with the danger of losing political and economic control. Existing international conditions and the low probability of **global consensus** constitute a further mitigating factor.

To understand the situation from the position of power holders, let us ask the question: "why would an established econo-political power system want to risk losing its power by engaging in converting and submitting to a high risk ecocentric global management system"? Retaining the *status quo*, even at some unimaginable future cost to mankind, still appears to be more acceptable and convenient. The legal concept of "crimes against mankind and the ecosystem" may deserve serious international consideration. We are programmed for self preservation, but ignore that the status quo is, and always will be, a **function of the ecosphere** and, in the long term, its maintenance may have criminal implications. This can be **ignored, but not escaped**.

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Our personal interests and concerns seldom go beyond our immediate descendants. The concept of **ecocentrism** targets this very conventionalism. However, it can only succeed if we change individual mind-sets and integrate them into one collective global whole.

### Back to the Nixon "Why not's"

The true value of sustainable development is really a non-issue in view of the level of sustainability that the real world is able and willing to support. In that sense it really makes no difference what other concept, or phrase we use. Therefore, replacing **development** with **ecosphere** after **sustainable** is of little practical value without the ability to change the **anthropocentric** global view. However, in a somewhat repetitive fashion, the likelihood of converting to the **ecosphere** from an **anthropocentric** establishment is an improbability supported by the evidence from Rio de Janeiro, where the divergence of priorities and fiscal commitments presented a hostile condition to achieving global consensus for something as enormous as converting to **ecocentrism**.

Concerned individuals and groups are continuing to caution responsible agencies and beat the drums of global warning. Outside the **institutions of power**, this has little tangible result.

Inside the power structure, individual views do not enjoy the same degree of freedom or effectiveness. The rules are there to subject initiatives to econo-political imperatives. There, such genetically programmed traits as hunger for power and the exhilarating challenge to pursue it take over. In itself this could be an unfair statement. The lack of the necessary resources to turn things around may be equally responsible for the global reluctance of the powers to initiate change.

### The sincerity of concern:

There is no question about the sincerity of the individual and collective warning of global danger. It may well be that the **power structures** are also willing to be sincere about accepting the possibility of global dangers. However, they face restrictions on their freedom and willingness to act and the resources

to act with. Demanding sacrifices to prevent distant dangers is poor political gamesmanship. Endangering anthropocentric interests offers only political oblivion; hardly the ultimate dream of practicing politicians. To be effective, global action requires global consensus. Yet, the physical limits on the resources that would be required to execute the change, relegate effective action into the realm of appearances and interchangeable concepts. Therefore, their practical sincerity is tempered with the genetically-programmed fear of losing power and political survival. Perhaps a better question to ask would be: how to make **not protecting the ecosphere** poor political gamesmanship and a guaranteed ticket to oblivion?

This leaves only the possibility of delaying action, proceeding gradually, with minimum danger and maximum consensus, towards creating the impression that what is in effect not being done, is going to appear to be being done. To achieve this, **oxymorons, grandstanding** of the RIO kind and **interminable committees with incomprehensible procedures** are a political necessity. Under the circumstances we may refer to this as **occupational insincerity**.

This insincerity is of a collective nature. It can partially be excused as an inevitable consequence of the prevailing circumstances. Individual and collective concerns can heap scorn on the operators of the power structures. However, placed under the same demanding conditions and the limited freedom of expressing concerns and calling for rational action, and charged with the responsibility of providing the resources and managing the change, individual and group proponents of global changes would also be forced to alter their action plan.

## Historical Perspectives

Crises were always part of human history. It may be an inseparable addendum, (acts of God), or by-product of collective human activity. The nature and the magnitude of crises may vary, from conflicts to disasters, or to the emergence and disappearance of cultures and civilization, or of entire living species. A remarkable common trend is that discounting minor fluctuations, man-made crises always seem to increase in importance and gravity. We can state with dubious pride that humanity may be approaching a stage where it will be forced to face a series of irreparable and irreversible crises.

The human tendency to distinguish between the good and the bad and, despite the perceived dangers, always

opt for doing the bad, has been diagnosed and recorded from early times in our civilization. This time the situation may be so bad that there will be no choice between good or bad. The change and magnitude of disasters is brought on by humanity. The core of the debate is whether there is any reversibility. Examining the variables we include somewhere population and its limitless growth.

Warning about population growth and its perception of the availability of unlimited resources and facilities to dispose of waste is seldom given the absolute priority and attention it deserves. It would be more sensible to make all other variables of the **sustainable ecosphere concept** a function of the population factor.

Crises are cyclic in nature. What the past suggests is that, although humanity may recover from crises and setbacks the ecosystem may not. The prevailing life force continued to show results, improvements and, in a subjective way, progress. The emerging question is: will mankind be able to survive the collapse of the already endangered ecosystem?, and if yes in what form? There is a real possibility of being thrown back to a very early stage of the evolutionary process. Restarting from that stage will be a new ball game, way beyond our speculative powers.

## The Alternatives

As a starting point let us consider a reasonably safe assumption. If population growth, resource use and waste production cannot be brought under strict control **globally**, the hope for avoiding a global disaster with terminal consequences for mankind and life, as we know it, disappears.

We have touched upon the power structures with which the responsibility and opportunity to implement the necessary measures rests. The limited action available to those in power is also difficult to deny. To implement changes, the presently adopted values, priorities and diversity of acceptance and comprehension of the urgency must be turned upside down. A classical case of "easier said than done" if there ever was one. We may all complain about and object to the weather, but *de facto* doing something is beyond our powers. Has the situation of diverting a **global disaster** reached this state? Are we deluding ourselves by hoping that we still have a chance?

Let us examine some realities. Our global order is programmed along political and economic priorities. **Humanity** has become, and appears to remain, the

centre of the universe, and no equivalent of a Galileo has yet appeared and succeeded to replace it at the centre with the **supremacy of the ecosphere**. Undeniably, there are voices showing that it should be done and with great urgency. But these voices are asking for self-denial, collective restraint, sacrifice, tolerance, courage and comprehension of consequences beyond individual life spans. The problem is large and the candidates able to turn the ship of destiny around may be few and possibly non-existent.

Diversity is a key factor and contributor to failure with respect to global action. We conveniently divided our world into underdeveloped, developing, developed and perhaps "overdeveloped" countries. It is a strange, but realistic ranking of what we, humans want and expect from the ecosphere. The relative position of each group is highly illusory. The more overdeveloped countries want the most. Those lining up behind them want more and more; catching up is their motive, with little regard for the future, the irreparable damage to the environment and the ecosphere. So the question who should, could, or even is interested in doing something remains unanswered.

The United States is said to be the most debt-ridden country. The former Soviet Union is not even a shadow of its former self; on the brink of economic collapse and ethnic wars with its major and minor parts. Europe may be dreaming of a Union, but it is planned along the lines of economic and monetary advantage with the pretense of paying some attention to the sustainability of development. The Pacific Rim is enthralled by the perceived rise of its economic importance. Everybody is a market and everybody wants everybody else's market, because it brings more and more benefits, jobs, purchasing power, more resource exploitation and processing and the inevitable increase in wastes, leaving no room for ecological considerations. So, where and what are the alternatives?-if there are any. Can this open question go unanswered forever?

## The Realities

A **world consensus**, essential to save the ecosphere, simply does not exist. It is doubtful that it is achievable at all. However, there is some finger pointing to pass the buck to the developed and overdeveloped countries. These countries, not being able to do anything effective, contend themselves with the **illusion of the Rio-like grandstanding**. The idea that there is a large cover-up to hide inabilities and

complacencies is becoming strong. The will is lacking and even if it weren't, the means may be too meagre to be effective. The mindset is: let somebody else do it, or try to do it first. This is a **cruel reality**.

Therefore, the problem is not the **lack of recognition**, the **fear of speaking out**, a **denial** of the degree of seriousness of the situation, but the **lack of resources and cooperation** for global action. Doomsaying bears little fruit. The concept of timing is misunderstood. An economic mentality that has no qualms about enslaving the coming generations in debt, beyond their ability to redeem themselves, can hardly be expected to heed the warning about possible global dangers to the ecosphere, which may be beyond their collective comprehension and still one or two generations away. This is **another cruel reality**.

**Saving the ecosphere** cannot be done on a bit-by-bit basis. A little bit here, a little bit there won't work. Since it has to be done **globally**, on an all-or-nothing basis, the hope for success, in the presently worshipped **value system**, is destined to be as disappointing as trying to unscramble eggs. **Reformulated economic theories and modified investment practices, reorganized corporate structures**, yielding improved profits and perhaps stronger national cohesion may have well missed their usefulness by a century and a half. And this is also **part of reality**.

**Political leaders posturing as saviours** in their "invisible cloaks", dispatching **diplomats in search of truth and sincerity** and charging them with **remedial action**, may be the **ultimate cynicism** and an **ironic reality**.

The **ultimate reality** will be the consequences of the unchanged continuation of the present course:

- Global inability to assist natural disasters,
- Urban population explosions,
- Social and industrial infrastructure breakdowns,
- Progressive pollution of air, water and land resources,
- Exhausted renewable and non-renewable energy resources,
- Breakdown of health services, spread of epidemics, and
- Endless military conflicts to acquire and protect resources.

These will be the responses of an **abused global system** putting mankind inevitably on the road to **irreversible disaster**.

Are we still too far away from this to take it seriously, or too close to hope for a turnaround? The possible and likely answers can only be frightening. We are definitely past the illusion of sending **pleading warnings** without clear, undeniable, well supported demonstration of consequences. Warnings should be repeatedly issued to **Institutions of power** demanding **consensus** coupled with expressions of **willingness to accept the necessary sacrifices**.

## The Crisis Theory

Conflicts and crises are inevitable part of the human existence. Inability to keeping them within manageable and resolvable bounds is humanity's key challenge. The basic historical rule is that reaction to crises is always left to the last minute and actions are always characterised by least effort responses. In some extreme situations both the timing and provision of resources were grossly underestimated. So humanity's record of preventing and dealing with crises is a rather dismal one. Creating them, on the other hand is, unfortunately, much easier. The phrase: "we are only human" is of little comfort. The premonition that dealing with the pending ecological disaster will not be different from precedents is, regrettably, gaining subscribers.

Since assuming that the global crisis is, for practical reasons and historical precedents, inevitable, the theory of "the eleventh hour" approach to deal with the crisis seems to be the sensible way to approach the problem. It is safer to prepare a theory for the worst possible scenario and reject it, if a better alternative is realized.

The basic concept is that life on the globe will not be wholly extinct. The life-denying **death star syndrome**, for our planet, is not considered. Another aspect that must be considered, is the likely condition and quality available for the continuation of human life. What will it be like and what are the boundaries? Evolution of the human race provides some guidelines.

When a system, or any of its components, organic or inorganic, is overloaded it will fail in its original construction, composition or functioning. The

atmosphere, the aqueous component of the ecosystem, the Earth's material structures are components of the ecosphere. Naturally occurring system failures are earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, or contact with other space debris like large meteorites. Each of these leaves different degrees of change in the end state. It is important to remember that the system is dynamic, the changes are continuous ranging from the imperceptible to vast regional disasters. For the sake of simplicity, we can distinguish between global system changes which are independent of human activity and those that are directly connected to misuse and outright abuse of the ecology.

Changes caused by human activity are of a great variety. With many of them there may be a limit of correction. However, there is a critical point or level of activity beyond which permanent changes and/or damage to the ecosphere will be inevitable. There are two very important facts associated with this situation. One is to recognize the critical points or levels and prevent exceeding them, the other is to **warn** about the consequences. The effectiveness of **warning** is often weakened by lack of solid scientific knowledge and evidence. The inevitable changes resulting from ecosphere abuse are gradual, therefore, easy to deny their danger far ahead, without earning the accusation of being speculative, or fear mongering. Insufficient scientific proof makes providing resources to prevent, or to remedy them appear economically and politically highly risky.

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## The Global Warning

The original intention of this paper was to discuss the importance and limits to **warning** with regard to the sustainability of the ecosphere. It wanted to emphasize and show that the necessary **instruments of change**, political and economic, are often ignored by the **institutions of power**, whether democratically elected or self appointed. Management of **global affairs** is difficult and complex enough without adding the still ambiguously described problems with the ecosphere. The key to success is **global consensus**. Without consensus it is near impossible to handle even repetitive smaller scale problems like **acts of God** issues, or peace keeping. To be effective to any degree, **global warning** must achieve a willingness to

create a **global consensus** to recognize that the ecosphere is becoming the mother of all problems facing humanity.

The purpose of **global warning** is to prove that if our destiny is survival, we must act to change from a self imposed economic straight jacket that strangles the ecosphere, to one that places its protection and sustainable maintenance above all else. To make the point, credible data must be available regarding the dynamics of, and the anthropological impact on the ecosphere. Accommodation must be made to share the burden of responsibility for the corrective measures equitably. The diversity of interests and their power centres must be made to understand that they have to accept a **global super institution** with effective global representation and authority to act in defence of the ecosphere. This needs major economic and political restructuring. Demonstration of the need and the **universal benefits** will make the beginning easier.

Failure to heed the **global warning** and implement preventive measures will mean abdicating a choice still available to humanity and turning the controls over to the global ecosystem for response to the abuses. This could be **globally fatal** at one point for life in general and for us humans in particular. Inanimate systems are unable to include in their adjustment process such elements as compassion, forgiveness and tolerance. When the load-carrying capacity of the biosphere is reduced, the agents that abused it will have to face the penalty. The prime target will be human population. Human habitations in certain regions will be drastically reduced initially, and may completely disappear. This trend will gradually increase as the life supporting capacity of the ecosphere continues to deteriorate.

To be effective, **global warning** should do more than call for more expressions of concern, question the value of slogans of compromise and bemoan the lack of programs. It should explain the difficulties and challenges that are involved in **making the necessary changes**. It must **estimate** credibly the resources required to protect the ecosphere. It should **recommend** action to achieve a global consensus. It

should **propose** a practical time frame, and **prescribe** the roles and responsibilities for **representatives** of the entire human race. Only if we do this, can there be no excuses. The choice is available and it can be heeded, or ignored. If it is ignored, it will mean that the perpetrators will escape the ultimate punishment. The price will be paid by those who had no say in the matter of making the choice. This gives the **younger generation** an **enormous power** of motivation and influence.

## So What Now?

For anything to happen, mankind will have to replace completely the current global value system. The new one will have to reward good stewardship of the ecosystem for **motivation** and provide severe penalties for damaging it by anything, anyone and anywhere without exceptions.

To do this, the limits of tolerance of the ecosphere and its ability to recover from damage must be established with sound scientific evidence. To **know** or **not to know** will be the prerequisite for **to be** or **not to be**. No half-baked pretenses and off-key whistling in the dark will work!

Knowledge of the limits of the ecosphere's sustainability must be joined by limits on its greatest **abuser**, population growth and its ever increasing demand for more resources.

**Population growth** and changes in **human behaviour** towards need-satisfaction must be fundamentally altered, by offering rewards and imposing penalties, again without exception. Individual and collective value systems must be replaced by entirely new concepts. Recommending ways to do it could be a challenge for us.

Concerns using global warning to alert us of the dangers must reach the most interested component of humanity, the next two generations, who will have to face the Herculean challenge of stopping the way the world does business now, and replace it with something that will offer the only means to survival. Communicating the dangers effectively to the stakeholders of the future could be another challenge for us.

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