

Questions

by

C.R. (Buzz) Nixon

Buzz Nixon is Past Chairman of CACOR and the Author of the regular column Buzzwords in the Newsletter. In an opening address to The 5000 Days meeting in Guelph (see reports by the Chairman and Jane Dougan in the Newsletter) he posed the following comprehensive set of questions regarding the predicament of mankind.

While attempting to broaden my understanding of, the "global predicament" and to search for solutions to redress it, I have been confounded by many deep, complex, seemingly unanswerable questions. While the term "predicament" encompasses the combined ecospheric, economic, political, demographic, and societal mess which humanity has made and is continuing to exacerbate, the emphasis of these questions is on the human destruction of the sustainability of the ecosphere.

My experience generally has been that responses to these questions have taken the form of more questions but at higher levels of abstraction. This has forced me to think about the evolution of our species, its relationship to other species, human cultures, philosophies, religions, modes of education and governance.

The conclusion which I have reached is that if humanity is to find sustainable solutions to the "Predicament", then humanity must be prepared to examine, and if necessary profoundly change its entire values, attitudes and behaviour, and all of the societal processes and related institutions such as religions, modes of governance and education which are based on cultures developed since mankind ceased being hunter-gatherers.

I hope that the questions which follow will act as a stimulant, if not a provocation for reflection by each and every one of us:

1. Why, with the best will and intentions to achieve "a better life" have we, modern humankind, managed to create a "predicament" which is almost precisely what we have been trying to avoid? Until we know, recognize, and accept the answer to that question, we are not likely to find ways to redress the situation
2. Why, with all of the widely disseminated knowledge of the global "predicament" that we have, and have had for so long, has there been such little progress in establishing activities to reduce, then stop the deterioration, and to follow with measures to redress the global "predicament"?
3. Why is it that *homo sapiens* has been generating the conditions of the global "predicament" which, in the extreme could lead to the end of life on earth? As the

creatures with advanced mental conceptualizing capability, and (supposedly) the most intelligent beings on this planet with the best of intentions in the use of our intellect, should we not know better? But current values, attitudes and behaviour persist. It is ironical that the destruction which humanity is wreaking on the planet has been well known for many years but, to date, mankind has been unable to use its great intellect to stop, let alone reverse the deterioration. Why is it not explicitly recognized and publicized that "sustainable development" (sic) is an unachievable goal, and that a sustainable ecosphere must be the priority objective?

4. Why are the efforts and programs related to the environment not so formulated as to achieve a sustainable ecosphere rather than the chimerical "sustainable development"?
5. Why are there so many officials, politicians, academics, communicators and analysts who remain silent even though they should also be able to perceive the hollowness of the term "sustainable development"?
6. Why is there a paucity of study on the origin and cause of the global predicament? Without a sound understanding of the source of a problem, there is little likelihood of finding an effective solution.
7. How can values, attitudes and behaviour be changed if such change is indeed fundamental to redressing the predicament?
8. What are the specific values, attitudes and behaviour which must be changed?
9. Why has there been so little effort to describe in substantive and explicit form what constitutes a sustainable future?
10. Why is there little if any substantive discussion of how much and what type of land, wetland and water must be left or maintained in a natural state in order to provide adequate habitat for the natural mode of living of the 30 odd million species which are fundamental to a sustainable ecosphere?

11. Why is there little if any in-depth discussion of what the human carrying capacity of the planet would be if it had a truly sustainable ecosphere?
12. Why is there a constant and continuing concern about population growth and the forecasts of future population levels without there being anything like comparable comment as to the probability that the human population is already far beyond the level which is compatible with a sustainable ecosphere? If the population of the world already does or will exceed that level, will the reduction to a sustainable level be achieved: by individual free choice; by some sort of incentive or coercion to limit human reproduction; or by leaving the problem for the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse¹ to take their brutal but natural course?
13. Why is it that such studies as exist of the world food situation are not based on the premise of a sustainable ecosphere but on the full exploitation of the planet's agricultural capability to produce food for humanity? — the usual theoretical approach, which is not sustainable.
14. Why does there seem to be an aversion to addressing the problem of a sustainable future by proven problem-solving methods? That is to say the study of problem history, causation and origin, a definition of the desired state of affairs, condition or solution, and a strategy for achieving that desired solution?
15. Why is there so much process relating to the "predicament" and so little substance to the process?
16. Why is there the tendency for more and more micro legislation and regulation which simply cannot deal with the full scope of action necessary to achieve sustainability in the four spheres (atmosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere) which comprise the ecosphere?
17. Why is it that the full implications (production, consumption, health, safety, waste generation, greenhouse gas emission, scale of demand, collection, distribution and maintenance costs, practical alternative sources, etc.) of energy generally are not always considered in the context of a sustainable ecosphere?
18. Why is there such concern about the risk of nuclear power accidents when the probability of such accidents is low while the adverse health effects and

related high death rates of coal-fuelled power generation are known and predictable; also, while the incredible death rates from smoking, handguns (in the USA) and automobile accidents are accepted so easily?

19. Why isn't the provision of assistance to the underdeveloped world for non-CO₂ producing energy generation a central issue in the environmental programs of the developed world? Moreover, if the developed world did provide assistance for clean energy generation to the underdeveloped world, in quantities sufficient to replace fossil fuels, what form would it take and what energy generation technologies would be involved?
20. Why is the total set of evidence (admittedly circumstantial) about the greenhouse effect so easily set aside when it seems to be so overwhelming? All of the following points support the probability of climatic disruption and global warming: The theory is sound. The predictions of global warming by global circulation models track when operated with historic data. Ice-core data confirm correlation over thousands of years of CO₂ content with temperature. There have been record high temperatures for several years in the last decade. Tropical storms have been increasingly frequent and severe in recent years. And, there is preliminary data suggesting that there may have been recent thinning of the Arctic ice cap.
21. Why is it that academia and the universities, which are supposedly at the forefront of thinking, have not grasped the seriousness of the predicament facing the sustainability of the ecosphere and adjusted their teaching and research activities accordingly?
22. Why is there little if any philosophical discussion and teaching within universities about a sustainable ecosphere and humanity's relationship with the rest of the ecosphere?
23. Why are the universities still teaching the economics of growth, which certainly cannot produce a sustainable future; the exploitation of resources, which is destroying the capital of the planet; and the discounted present value of the planet's future resources, when the qualities of the ecosphere cannot be valued; and when economic theory, substantially in detail and totally in concept, is the antithesis of what is required for the planet to have a sustainable future?
24. Can we expect to redress the predicament of the planet when the future leaders who are being educated in our universities are being educated in substantially the same mode and with the same basic material which their predecessors have followed in creating the predicament of the planet?

¹ *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are the allegorical figures in the sixth chapter of the Book of Revelation (New Testament). Riding white, red, black, and pale horses, respectively, the horsemen are generally understood to symbolize power or conquest, violence or war, poverty or famine, and death..*

25. Can a problem be solved using the same techniques, argument and values which created the problem in the first place? Walter Lichem (Austrian Ambassador to Canada) commenting on the disparity between the continuing validity of the reports of the Club of Rome and related national policies posed the question: "What is the reason for this apparent gap between the intellectual analysis on the one hand and the public policy on the other? Is it that the political élites don't understand, or are there basic structural problems which hinder perception and impede political transaction of global change?"
26. Can the operation of democracies be changed so as to give priority to re-establishing a sustainable ecosphere in contrast to the current mode of responding to the immediate visceral concerns of the electorate? And if so, how can the change be brought about?
27. Why have the major world religions not directed attention to the sustainability of the ecosphere in order to emphasize not the Man-Man and Man-God orientation of most religions but the position of *homo sapiens* with respect to the other species; also to humanity's responsibility for conducting itself so as to maintain a sustainable ecosphere? "Man" has been capitalized to denote the male of the species as the predominant religions were, and still are, male based, male controlled and essentially male operated.
28. Why is it that 1500 world-renowned scientists, having prepared a synopsis of the predicament titled *Warning To Humanity*, have not provided any vision of what humanity should be seeking (beyond just doing "better"). What is the strategy that is necessary to attain that goal? If 1500 renown scientists cannot prepare and present practical proposals, who can?
29. The previous question also could be asked of the 100 eminent members of The Club Of Rome, world wide who, for some 25 years have been calling attention to the dire predicament of the planet but until recently have neither come up with a definition of a desirable future, nor suggestions for a means to achieve that objective.
30. These questions may be so imponderable and/or unanswerable because they are beset by the *Catch 22* syndrome. It is a general axiom of political science that to be implementable and therefore practical, policies or solutions must be acceptable by the body politic. To be acceptable they must conform to or be within the bounds of prevailing values, attitudes, and behaviour. If prevailing values, attitudes and behaviour are at the root of humanity's destruction of the sustainability of the ecosphere and if redressing the situation requires a profound change in these values attitudes and behaviour particularly of western industrialized societies, then, *ipso facto*, until such changes occur there are no implementable or practical solutions. If the solutions go against conventional wisdom, or are going to "hurt", or if they require the acceptance of what might appear as a more rigorous, less easy and carefree life style then such solutions will not be acceptable and will not be viewed as being practical.
31. Can the Gordian knot be untied or the "Catch 22" syndrome broken? And if so, how can it occur?
32. Can mankind achieve a sustainable ecosphere? Yes, what is needed is for humanity to recognize and accept that humans are destroying the life-sustaining ability of the planet and then decide that the reestablishment of a sustainable ecosphere must be humanity's unqualified first priority. Those decisions must then be followed by a determination to address all questions, such as those presented above, in a manner directed to achieving that priority, even though to do so is likely to require profound changes in our values, attitudes and behaviour as well as in our processes and institutions of religion, education and governance.
33. Will humankind take this action? My answer is not a solid NO, but having pondered this host of questions, I am most sceptical that the answer can be otherwise. In the last edition of the CACOR *Proceedings* the Chairman quoted Tolstoy:
- "At the approach of danger there are always two voices that speak with equal power in the human soul: one very reasonably tells a man to consider the nature of the danger and the means of escaping it; the other, still more reasonable, says that it is too depressing and painful to think of the danger since it is not in man's power to foresee everything and avert the general course of events, and it is therefore better to disregard the painful till it comes, and to think about what is pleasant. In the solitude a man generally listens to the first voice, but in society to the second."*
- I hope that in our reflection on these questions we will listen to the first voice and then in society ignore the second voice and speak according to the first. That is an example of the type of behavioural change that is required to redress the predicament of the planet.