

HEALING THE AIR

Antony Turner

We have the capacity to live in harmony with our planet, but we need a rapid, massive and global awakening at a personal level if we wish to avoid self-destruction.

BECAUSE THE AIR is largely unseen, often referred to as mere 'empty space', we don't even notice it. We believe that the atmosphere is a 'dead' and accidental mixture of inert gases. We forget that the air that we breathe and share has been built up over billions of years by bacteria, to support and sustain our living planet.

We need reminding that carbon has continuously been sucked out of the atmosphere and buried in limestone, chalk, coal, oil and gas deposits by huge natural processes in order for life to multiply and survive. Now we are reversing that process by digging and drilling huge amounts of these 'fossil fuels' from beneath the Earth's crust, then burning them in our power stations, vehicles, aircraft, and industrial processes.

The resulting increase in carbon dioxide is changing the atmosphere at "a speed and magnitude unprecedented to our knowledge, aside from large meteorite impacts", according to climate scientist Peter Barrett of the Antarctic Research Centre in New Zealand.

In the last thirty years the scientific community has made huge strides in understanding how the atmosphere works. It is now clear that carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, is exchanged between the atmosphere, the oceans and the forests in a complex dance. It is undisputed that we are belching twice as much of this unseen gas into the atmosphere as natural sinks like forests and oceans can absorb. The result is global warming, increased extreme climate 'events', more flooding, longer droughts and rising sea levels. There is even the possibility of dramatic changes like the collapse of the Gulf Stream.

But regrettably the basic understanding of the carbon cycle is unknown to most people. Although we are aware of climate change, in reality we make little connection to our own energy-profligate lives, both personally and in the workplace. Our links with the natural world have broken down.

SO WHAT IS to be done to heal the air? How can we start to live within the constraints of the only living planet we know? I believe there are four key actions which need to be taken:

- Greenhouse gas targets must be set by the scientists.
- A low-carbon culture must be introduced.
- Everything should be carbon-labelled.
- Carbon must become the currency of the twenty-first century.

Targets

The targets set at Kyoto by the political community might be a useful first step. But if these are set within a framework of political negotiations they will only scratch the surface. As Andrew Simms of the New Economics Foundation says, "You don't negotiate how far to build a bridge across a canyon." Nevertheless the UK government has shown genuine leadership by setting a 60% reduction target for CO₂ by 2050. Unfortunately the latest predictions from the UK's Hadley Centre suggest that even the UK target is not sufficient. I believe therefore that we will not succeed in this task without getting climate scientists themselves, without interference from outside vested interests and politicians, to set targets which will protect the atmosphere.

Culture change

We need a rapid culture change around the globe, sparked by a huge communication initiative which is transformed by a new way of seeing ourselves within rather than outside the environment. The biologist E. O. Wilson writes: "The more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built." If the world can be persuaded by advertising and marketing to buy Coca-Cola or Nike, surely those same resources can be used to get this message across.

Carbon labelling

A key way to make the culture change easier is for people to be aware of the carbon content in goods and services that they buy. Within months of mandatory CO₂/km labels on new cars in the UK every manager in the country was aware of the carbon-implications of their vehicle fleet. Tax bands are now based on these figures, giving incentives to drivers to opt for the most efficient vehicles. There is no reason why every rail and air travel ticket shouldn't show a CO₂ figure. Buildings, which account for 50% of our carbon emissions, should be rated just like refrigerators and freezers. Landlords neglecting to insulate their existing buildings efficiently, or to build low-carbon new buildings, would be penalised by the marketplace. Carbon labels need to be as common as barcodes.

Carbon as currency

The final plank in the transition to a genuinely low-carbon future will take place when we invent a new currency. A recent report, Carbon UK, says that "carbon will be the currency of the coming age." Although carbon trading is starting to happen with large commercial energy users, it needs to happen at a personal level too. I believe that every person on the planet should be issued with a carbon allocation. What could be fairer? If a person wishes to jet off to distant sunspots or drive a huge car, that's fine. They'll just have to pay the going rate for someone else's carbon - there will be plenty of people in the Third World who would be happy to sell their allocations at the market rate. This is similar to the concept of 'contraction and convergence', devised by Aubrey Meyer of The Global Commons Institute, but worked through banks and NGOs at a personal rather than governmental level.

ULTIMATELY WE HAVE to rethink our attitude and our relationship to this planet. We can never "hold dominion" over nature as Descartes believed. We need a new relationship based on reverence for the natural world. The transition to a low-carbon future can be creative and fun. James Lovelock, in his book Gaia - the practical science of planetary medicine, has likened industrial human behaviour to that of a pathogenic micro-organism. He points out:

We have grown in numbers to the point where our presence is perceptibly disabling the planet like a disease. As in human diseases there are four possible outcomes: destruction of the invading disease organisms; chronic infection; destruction of the host; or symbiosis - a lasting relationship of mutual benefit to the host and invader.

I believe that we have the capacity to choose symbiosis over self-destruction. But we need a rapid, massive and global awakening at a personal level if we are not to go the way of any disease successfully thwarted by its host.

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