Transforming Environmental Policy: Private Conscience and Public Choice

Summary of a seminar given by Carl Pope, Executive Director of the Sierra Club, on Wednesday, October 24, 2007, at the Institute of World Culture.

Carl Pope, Executive Director of the Sierra Club, is skiing an avalanche. In an address to the Institute of World Culture, he invited the rest of us to strap on our skis, because the avalanche is coming whether we are ready or not.

The Institute of World Culture was fortunate to host an evening with Mr. Pope, Wednesday, October 24, on the theme of *Transforming Environmental Policy: Private Conscience and Public Choice*. Mr. Pope has been active in the environmental movement since its inception in the early 1970's. After the oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel, the demise of the brown pelican, and other alarming indicators of the destructive power of modern industrial life, concerned individuals like Mr. Pope united and launched a movement to educate, explore and reform our treatment of the natural environment   Unsure at first as to what was to be done and how, the movement eventually settled, by 1975 according to Mr. Pope, into a predictable *modus operandi*. The job of 20th century environmentalism *was to constrain and clean-up after an existing 20th Century economic order*. To that end, the movement can celebrate its successes: no repeat of the oil spill in Santa Barbara Channel; the come-back of the brown pelican; improvement in urban air quality; the reduction of lead in the bodies of children in Oakland, etc.

The problem, Mr. Pope told a capacity audience on Wednesday night, is that this form of environmentalism is insufficient to the needs of tomorrow. *Constrain and clean-up* did not *reform* the economic order to exemplify more sustainable policies and practices. The way we do things now is basically the same as it was 30 years ago. That is a failing we must all now face. While veteran environmentalists have witnessed this steady state of damage control for 30 years, future environmentalists will not have that luxury of incremental progress. One thing we can be sure of, said Mr. Pope, is that the economic order of 2037 will look nothing like today's order. He gave three reasons.

First, growth in material consumption. In the past, only a minority of the planet's population had mastered "the trick of indefinitely sustained growth." Within a decade, one-half to two-thirds of the earth's human inhabitants will be attempting to live a modern life of high consumption, and thereby will contribute to an unprecedented and unsustainable level of material consumption.

Second, there are no remaining biological or ecological frontiers to exploit for this sustained growth.

Third, climate instability and unpredictability. We can no longer assume that

"climates and places have fixed relationships."   Going to New York in the fall?   Thinking of packing a sweater?   Not this year – bring a swim suit suggested Mr. Pope.

The environmental movement of the 20th century kept problems at bay as if a finger in a dyke could prevent environmental disasters. The problems of the 21st century will require a total rethinking of environmental policy. "We have to rethink the way we think about our problems, not just how we solve them – and, frankly, that is hard to do," Mr. Pope predicted. In the past, environmental policy was used to slow down bad things; now that focus must be to speed up good things. One thing is for sure, a new order is coming. "It may be much worse, or much better; I don't know how it will look," he admitted. Rejecting a wait and see what to do approach, Mr. Pope warned that it would be grossly insufficient just to let 20th century industrial practices die a slow death, for industrialized economies are like a "very dangerous thrashing beast" that can take most communities and ecological systems to a common grave.

Four guiding principles of basic environmentalism were offered as a foundation of a New Economic Order:

First: Own what you sell. Somewhere between 15 and 50 % of what we purchase is not owned by those selling it. Putting an end to this theft would be an excellent first step. Government needs to enforce the rules.

Second: Pay for what you take. For example if an industry wants to dump mercury waste in a body of water, they should pay for that opportunity and all that it entails.

Third: Insist on choosing what you purchase. Excessive regulation by government and lending institutions prevents the market from offering the consumer more sustainable, eco-friendly choices.

Fourth: The continued privatization of the "commons" should not be allowed.

The challenge today is to stimulate creativity and harness practice "in directions we don't understand, in ways we haven't explored, toward goals we very dimly see" and to do so quickly. This prospect has lead Mr. Pope to a disarming confession. "I'm 62 years old, and I no longer know what I'm doing." Thus the metaphor of skiing an avalanche describes the present challenge. Changes are about to occur, with the precipitous thunder of tons of displaced snow down a mountainside. We are all on top of the mountain. It is a time of terror and exhilaration, a time to get buried, or a time for the most extraordinary ride imaginable.

Perhaps Mr. Pope is not entirely correct about such a ride being unprecedented. We might recall that John Muir, the first President of the Sierra Club, survived

just such a ride on an avalanche. Muir wrote that "When the avalanche swedged and came to rest, I found myself on top of the crumpled pile without a bruise or scar. …This flight in what might be called a milky way of snow-stars was the most spiritual and exhilarating of all the modes of motion I have ever experienced." Muir went on to accomplish remarkable success in establishing National Parks and wilderness areas. If we survive without injury and with such exhilaration it will be due in no small part to the hard work and intelligence of the Sierra Club, with extraordinary leadership from John Muir to Carl Pope and beyond.

Joseph Miller with contributions from Kirk Gradin