Future news

a newsletter from the *futures* foundation

Vol 7 No 7 September 2002

Inside

How now, brown cloud?

How many more environmental catastrophes will it take to bring some world leaders out of their state of denial about human impacts on the planet's ecology? And can the general news media help to accelerate the process?

Asia's brown cloud, Europe's floods, Africa's famines, America's fires….. these and other environmental disasters are all being treated as separate news events. Yet anyone who has been monitoring global environmental conditions knows that all of them are typical of the phenomena that scientists predicted long ago would be a visible result of global warming.

Some scientists still argue that we need a longer period of observation to know for sure that the increasing occurrence and intensity of such events are not just part of a planetary cycle. However, more and more of them are coming to the belief that waiting for a longer period of observation would be irresponsible and dangerous. In any case, the precautionary principle suggests that we should assume these are manifestations of climate change, and act quickly to reverse the trend.

Here again, the way news media handle the environmental story can make a difference to the way governments respond. For example, *New Scientist* points out that the dismal sight of smog hanging above the Himalayas is precisely the sort of mind-concentrating image that delegates ought to have carried with them to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg this month -- "provided, that is, that they don't get the wrong end of the stick, because handled badly, the notion of the giant smoggy cloud over Asia could confuse and even hinder efforts to curb pollution.

"Air pollution in Asia is nothing new. In the past, the smogs and hazes of the region tended to be seen as a set of local phenomena tied to cities and towns, or whipped up by particularly intense forest fires. This week's report confirms the limitations of that view. Scientists have been sampling air quality above the Indian Ocean and finding evidence that in the dry season emissions of gases, soot and other particles from disparate parts of Asia spread and mix so fast that they produce vast pollution plumes that transcend city and national boundaries. This, the UN argues, instantly turns Asian air pollution into one of those big transnational problems that, like ozone depletion, can only be tackled by international cooperation and political agreements."

"Asian air pollution is simultaneously global and local in nature. Neither dimension can be safely ignored"

The real risk, says *New Scientist,* is that this will direct official attention to the global issue -- and the longer time lags attached to international conventions -- while much of the problem is clearly local in origin. It quotes the half million women and children who die in India every year from cooking fumes, reminds us that the number of cars, trucks and two-wheelers on the roads of Delhi has risen tenfold in two decades and is now thought to account for 60 per cent of that city's particulate pollution. "India does not need to wait for an international convention on the brown cloud to sort this out.

"Yet the world cannot afford to shrug its shoulders over the brown cloud. Its persistence and size make its potential threat to the climate too serious to overlook.

"Asian air pollution is simultaneously global and local in nature. Neither dimension can be safely ignored." ❑

THE MYTH OF NINE TO FIVE

A new book from Ted Scott and Phil Harker deserves attention from those of us who are interested in the sustainable workplace. It builds on Ted's experience as CEO of Stanwell Corporation in Queensland, the energy company whose slogan was "The generation that counts is the next generation".

A key idea of the book is that the basic psychological principles that people live by, which incorporate their beliefs, ideals and aspirations, belong to their whole lives and they must understand them and live in congruence with them in all of life's settings if they are to be effective. But predominantly, this book is about work, workplaces and work relationships.

"This is because the malaise in our workplaces particularly concerns us. We have seen many good people driven to despair in our workplaces. We have seen competent and effective people rendered impotent in our workplaces. We have seen people of good will driven by frustration to take vindictive and unconstructive action. This occurs at great personal and psychological cost to the individuals themselves and at huge economic cost to the enterprises in which they work.

"Surely there must be a better way, a way which is not strewn with such futility and despair! We believe there is such a way and this book is our attempt to express, in an easy and readable fashion, our understanding of the broad themes of that 'better way'."

the *futures* foundation P.O. Box 122, Fairfield, Vic. 3078 T 1 300 727 328 F 03 9459 0344 E futurists@futurists.net.au

What lies beyond capitalism?

In our last issue, we speculated about the end of capitalism and outlined some of the reasons why futurists suggest we should be exploring alternative futures. We promised to follow up with sug - gestions from Professor Sohail Inayatullah, who has been thinking about the end of capitalism for many years about possi - ble ways forward in the event of a major trans - formation.
Here he offers a number of alternative scenarios for possible futures beyond capitalism, and reviews some features of a desirable future that might emerge.

How would you illustrate our speculation about what lies beyond capitalism? This is how FF member John Lynch did it.....

New scenarios

1. Society transformed because of changes in technology: i.e. transactions are peer to peer, with the net as the site for bartering and the end of the profes- sional middle man
2. Slower transformation because of the rise of "cultural creatives" -- the new demographic identified by US researcher Paul Ray, with new sets of values -- and the "triple bottom line" trend, requiring organisations to report social and environmental performance as well as their financial performance. In other words, the moral dimensions start to become more important.

1 plus 2 lead to the cyber-green vision of the future, the image young children in OECD nations are likely to prefer. They have environmental consciousness and are growing up with computers as part of their natural surroundings.

3. The system is transformed because of the worsening rich-poor ratio, that is, the contrast of untold riches with stun- ning poverty and therefore expectations for revolutions. This is what P.R. Sarkar refers to as the shudra revolu- tion, a revolution not just of workers but including the full range of alternative movements.
4. Capitalism is destroyed because of bad luck - say, a market crash, plus external factors, freak weather, assassinations, Kashmir, China-Taiwan, Al-Quaida, etc. In other words, this scenario recognises that, essentially, faith in the system keeps it going. What might happen if that faith is mortally wounded?

3 and 4 are major change scenarios, requiring change in how we live our lives. But there is a fifth scenario.

5. No change, la vie est belle. Buy low, sell high. *-Sohail Inayatullah*

Some ways forward.....

These scenarios offer pictures of possible futures. Of course there are others - for example, here are two alternative mod- els:

1 dramatic transformation: a soft land- ing into a global governance system characterised by a social democratic type of capitalism - Sweden writ glob- ally or

2 a sudden switch to a planetary civili- sation characterised by decentralised economic systems - that is, a Proutist model.

A preferred future?

But what does Inayatullah see as a pre- ferred future? In his 1998 article for *Future News,* he set out the following key features of a desirable alternative global system.

- **Community** but in the context of glob- al consciousness, wherein community economics expands into larger units; that is the local creeps into the global and not the other way around.
- **Commodities** being used for local manufacturing, instead of for immedi- ate export to win comparative advan- tage.
- **Localism** but in the context of neo- humanism - expanding the bound - aries of self from ego, to family, to community, to nation, to race/religion, to humanism and then all living beings. This is the global-local nexus but moving on to planetary globalism.
- A global economy that is based on a **maxi/mini** system wherein there is wealth generation, that is, incentives to work hard and where there are floors, some basic needs met for all citizens.
- A vision of the future that is not only about material progress, that is the linear march of western history; not only about cyclical history, the Asian model of the rise and fall of dynas- ties, classes, clans and varnas; but rather a **spiral view** of history wherein the past is incorporated, where progress does not lead to imperialism.
- Commitment to a model of the self, which while postmodern, in the sense of understanding that our identities are pluralistic (we can have many traditions, and more flexible gender/culture roles) has a root in the **spiritual,** recognising that we are essentially spiritual beings having a materialistic experience, and not vice versa.
- An **'evolutionary'** view of the uni- verse: a spiritual story means that there is cosmic intelligence, that life does have a purpose and the uni- verse does have a moral structure; however this is evolutionary, chang- ing, and humans still construct the universe even as it constructs them. In other words, this is a view based on complexity.
- **Balance** between the individual and the collective - that is, both exist for each other and have rights and duties on each other. This is differ- ent from extreme western individual - ism and Asian/indigenous collec- tivism.
- A political system that, while democ - ratic, is much more; that is, it is mul- ticultural, understanding that different traditions have other models of dis- pute resolution. It is thus democratic but inclusive of the role of wise per- sons, elders, who give overall guid- ance. It is democracy with a role for wisdom - **deep democracy**. In short: it is the model of Prout, or the Progressive Utilization Theory, the model outlined by P.R. Sarkar.

What can futurists learn from environmental interpretation?

Deeply rooted in history, including the history of philosophy, environmental interpretation seeks to encourage responsible behaviour by teaching people to honour their natural and built environment. This, say the expert interpreters, is a better way to protect our shared heritage than by imposing rules and regulations. Much of the futures work being undertaken around the world has a similar goal: teaching people to honour the future, and encouraging responsible behaviour to protect the rights of future generations. And, like environmental interpreters, futurists set out to encourage thinking and discourse about the future without being directive.

As British environmental interpreter, Don Aldridge says, "we have to communicate with the public about conservation ideas to stimulate them to think about values, without telling them what to think."

Sounding rather like a futurist, Aldridge points out that most of our ideas are inherited from a body of thinking that dates back over 3,000 years and has been kept alive in modified forms because it still serves a useful purpose. From the time of Hesiod in the 8th century BC, the ideas of order out of chaos; God as Lord-of-creation; Man as privileged steward; nature as a machine; instrumental rationalism and empiricism all evolved together. These gave rise to economic justifications for use of land.

Then came the Ionian idea of one order, which generates the whole in all its variety. Anaximander in 600 BC saw order achieved by a struggle between opposites; Empedocles in 490 BC introduced the four elements of fire, air, earth and water; then along came ideas of the atomic unit, element, cycle, chain, balance or harmony, variety and interrelationship and unity. Already some of the fundamental ideas of the present were embodied in the ideas of the past. However the Judaeo-Christian view that God is not in nature led to belief that the study of nature and worship of nature was sinful, removing from nature the protection of its sacredness.

In the late 17th century the Cambridge Platonist religious movement resolved some theological difficulties, allowing geologists to accept a divinely created order while biology continued with the older belief in a divine designer.

The idea of sensory enjoyment -- escape from the city and return to nature -- dates from the fourth century AD and was developed by the Hellenistic Greeks. By 1850, rural depopulation and the urbanisation of the countryside began to be a serious problem -- a problem which continues today.

Romanticism has long been applied to landscape and nature as a form of idealism. In this view, *beauty* was smooth, rounded, sylvan with green lawns and golden sunsets or silver skies and it induced feelings of peace and wellbeing. Edmund Burke's *sublime,* on the other hand was rugged, aweful, with overhanging cliffs or avalanches, tempests or floods. Then came William Gilpin's compromise…. the *picturesque*…which has the effect of influencing the way we see the environment by "particularising".

"Every time you frame an object in the viewfinder of a camera you are doing what Gilpin taught us to do. Because the camera can only capture a segment of a view and because… the decision to point it one way rather than another way is taken by a person, everyone has to compose a picture, nobody with a camera can escape the picturesque!"

Aldridge also tracks the idea of wilderness, the challenge or escape paradox which stems from early roots of religious and spiritual significance. It remains so powerful today that all conservation philosophies have something to say about wilderness. It has become a metaphor for nature and scenic conservation.

Possibilism, in conservation terms, is about keeping options open for the future

Nature and health have been associated since St Bernard talked of nature as therapy for weary minds -- or perhaps even longer, with close links between war, war games and sport deriving from classical Greece and the first Olympic games.

Current attitudes to the physical environment introduce the role of science in nature conservation -- a role that has changed significantly since the early years of this century, when there was a general acceptance that scientists were disinterested workers in pursuit of objective truth.

"Today science recognises that observations can be 'theory loaded' and we have to admit that scientific studies in wildlife conservation can be affected by popular attitudes to nature conservation," says Aldridge. He quotes four strong arguments for continued efforts in conservation:

- ❏ since the mid-nineteenth century we have been told that man has profoundly disturbed the balance of nature. Conservation helps to restore an equilibrium.
- ❏ The population and resources equation derived from Malthus and Darwin is a paradigm at the very root of the question, "why conserve?"
- ❏ The idea of the 'gene reservoir' is a powerful argument for conservation today
- ❏ Possibilism, in conservation terms, is about keeping options open for the future and it relates closely to the previous idea.

According to Aldridge, all of the conservation philosophies can be grouped into just four which are current today: the economic view, the scientific view, the sensory enjoyment view and the viewpoint of physical and mental health. Check out your own beliefs, he invites, and you will see that you do not hold just one environmental ethic but a mixture of most of this oversimplified list. And it's not surprising.

"The philosophies common to the view of the human and cultural ecologist together with the biological ecologist include the general principles which affect all adaptations to the environment of all life forms: a universal need to maintain those properties essential to survival of the system. In addition, there is a common interest and concern for the dynamics of change, the survival of communities and the extent to which changes in the environment can be assimilated without destruction of the community or the species."

When it comes to communicating about all this, Aldridge reminds us that the act of transmitting a message to others requires a form of interpretation on the part of the transmitter and also on the part of the receiver. The former activity has been much studied as hermeneutics, whose philosophers explore the nature of understanding and the meaning and significance of things. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) argued that interpretation explored territory far beyond what he called 'mere understanding': "The human observer isolates things (or percepts), putting them into the cardboard boxes of the mind on to the shelves of a library classification or into some mental filing cabinets. But in reality they are not so isolated and it is the job of the interpreter to seek interrelationships and apply these to give coherence and relevance to the interpretation of the world. Without an appreciation of our cultural history we cannot understand the significance of human events, discover the meaning of the world stage, or any of its manmade phenomena."

Now there's a statement that might sound very familiar to a futurist!

Scanning for signals in the noise

(Thanks to members for their contributions.)

Drain swamp to lose mosquitoes

Noam Chomsky writes that it is hardly wise for the US to ignore the real world. Post-September 11 surveys in the Arab world reveal that the same reasons ["Why do they hate us?"] hold now as 44 years ago when Eisenhower's National Security Council outlined the basic reasons.

The Guardian(UK) 9 September 02 951

Will the reforms last?

Under pressure, a slew of companies are changing the way they do business. Will it last? Jerry Useem of Fortune Magazine argues that the conspiracy of silence may be cracking. Fund managers fear disillusionment with the financial system will lead the average investor to pull even more money out of the market. So they are getting into the arm-twisting business.

Corporate Reform Weekly 9 September 02 952

Warning on "modified animals"

The US National Academy of Sciences has struck a cautionary note in a new report on genetically modified animals, warning that they could pose environmental risks that the US Government might not be equipped to evaluate.

Wall Street Journal 21 August 2002 953

Earth summit progress blocked

Strong opposition from the US and Australian stymied a push by world leaders at the Johannesburg sustainable development summit to set a target for dramatically boosting the amount of energy generated from the wind, sun and biomass.

Australian Financial Review 3 September 2002 954

From accounting to accountability

What is the value of a company? Once this question was answered easily -- valuing companies was something that accountants knew how to do. But today it's not so simple. Traditional accounting measures are not enough.

Ecofutures May - July 2002 955

NSW land clearing now uncontrolled

Illegal land clearing in NSW is increasing by up to 20 per cent each year because the department in charge, Land & Water Conservation, lacks the means to control it, says the NSW Auditor-General. He also raised concerns about a possible conflict of interest because the head of that department is also head of State Forests: L&WC had approved 96 applications from State Forests to clear about 14,500 hectares.

Sydney Morning Herald 21 August 2002 956

The power to change the world

Leading geologists are now suggesting that global oil production could peak and fall by the end of this decade, sending prices through the roof and increasing tensions between the West and Islam. In desperation the US and others could turn to dirtier fossil fuels - coal, tar, sand and heavy oil. Much better to turn to hydrogen power, writes futurist Jeremy Rifkin. This is the "forever fuel", producing no harmful carbon dioxide when burned and giving off as byproducts only heat and pure water.

Los Angeles Times 10 September 2002 957

The golden meme

Richard Dawkin's word "meme" describes units of culture that evolve in much the same way as genes. Why has this idea been met with indifference or outright hostility among biologists and social scientists? Memes offer a way to analyse human culture with scientific rigour, say Kevin Laland and Gillian Brown.

New Scientist 3 August 2002 958

The new political compass

New Progressive are beyond left vs right; they are deep green, against corporate globalisation; they are from all races, classes and ages; and watch out, Democrats and Republicans, they are a larger group then you might think, says Paul H. Ray.

Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures Summer 2002 959

US & UK sold Iraq its weapons *[...did we?]*

Reports by the US Senate reveal that the US sold Iraq materials including anthrax, VX nerve gas, fever germs, botulism and others, right up to March 1992. The UK sold Iraq pralidoxine, an antidote to nerve gas that can be reverse engineered to produce gas. Shipments to Iraq went on even after Saddam Hussein ordered the gassing of Halabja in which at least 5000 people died. That atrocity took place in March 1988: a month later the components and materials of weapons of mass destruction were continuing to arrive in Baghdad from the US.

[Amazing. But before we throw stones, should we ask where it gets its uranium?....Ed.]

Sunday Herald, Scotland 8 September 2002 960

Human rights activists jailed in US

After 10,000 activists gathered last November at the notorious School of the Americas ("school of terror") in Columbus Georgia, 28 have been jailed following conviction of trespass. Some 70 people, including an 88-year-old Franciscan nun, have served a total of more than 40 years in prison for nonviolent resistance in a broad-based campaign to close the school, a combat training school for Latin American soldiers whose graduates are consistently involved in documented human rights atrocities.

Common Dreams 10 September 2002 961

Jo'burg or bust.....

Sustainable development has been stopped dead by the relentless push for profit. After unprecedented global economic growth, the number of people living on less than a dollar a day has barely changed. Free goods from nature on which the poorest depend are disappearing. Will the nations converging on Jo'burg have the will to reconcile economic growth with saving the planet? Sadly, we already know the answer to Fred Pearce's question.

New Scientist 17 August 2002 962

Membership growth will help us grow our service to you

Can we send membership information to a friend or colleague?

Name.....

Company.....

Address.....

.....

Tel.....Fax.....

Email.....