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TREES, WORK, JOBS, INCOME, AND A NEW APPROACH TO ECONOMICS

There is another dispute between loggers and environmentalists going on on the west coast. This time it is centered on whether or not the endangered spotted owl will be protected or abandoned in favor of jobs for people who cut down trees for making kleenex and paper napkins and cardboard boxes. The debate is shaped so as to ask whether owls are more important than wage earners. A governor passionately declares that whatever rights the owl has, they are as nothing compared to the needs of the workers to be employed, to get an income. And besides that kleenex is a lot more important than trees. Producing stuff is what economics is all about and kleenex and cardboard boxes constitute production.

Thus, because the trees are there and because there is nothing else for local industry to exploit, the trees have to be converted into money. No one evaluates whether processing trees into instant trash is a wise thing for this society to be doing. The divine presence in creation represented by owls, the other animals and the forest itself, is not compared to the desolation of a clear cut or to the trash dumps and the junk heaps where the stuff made from the trees will be a few days after they are cut. The distress of the loggers is what we must focus on as the controlling factor.

The nation's forests, the world's forests, are disappearing because of this kind of thinking and the economists, the PhDs in the universities and in the government are doing little if anything to straighten out that way of thinking. Economic analysis consists of adding up bottom lines and unemployment statistics, per capita income, without regard to what is happening to the support system, the earth. Maximum production and maximum consumption, continually growing, are unquestioned national goals. The nation's wise men and opinion leaders: columnists and commentators, government counsellors, honored university professors, newspaper editors, preachers, are nearly all satisfied with that.

So the earth has gone into deficit. The environmentalists and the ecologists and the nature lovers know it, but the wise men who advise Presidents and Secretaries of the Interior, they don't know it. That stuff in those garbage barges and those sanitary fills and those overloaded city dumps is what was just lately wealth. The wealth was turned into money as it was turned into junk. The money is still in existence, the wealth is gone. The state of mind, the system, says the faster wealth becomes trash the better, because conversion of anything for pay, from one condition to another makes the Gross National Product grow. It's the work done converting earthstuff that earns income, the transition from one state to another - from standing tree to fallen tree - to transport truck - to pulp mill - into kleenex or cardboard boxes - to the store - to the shopper - to trash basket and garbage truck - to city dump. Every step involves the exchange of money and the growth of the GNP, what the "wise" (!) men call economic health. Note that the money exchanges following on the EXXON oil spill off the coast of Alaska will make the GNP grow. The nation will be judged to be better off for the oil spill in the eyes of the accountants. Accountants and economists make value-free judgements.

What are we asking for? We are asking for a better way of evaluating what is good and bad in the way we interact with the earth. We don't believe that oil spills and other disasters should show up in economic measures as positive events. The economic impact of an event should be judged in terms of its real bottom line. How has it affected the ability of the earth to sustain life. And we don't believe that we should think ourselves better off because we have made more stuff into junk this year than we did last year. And we don't believe that loggers should be denied income when they are not cutting down forests. The real deficit is the earth deficit. The measure of the failure of the human enterprise is to be found in poisoned water, air, and soil; in the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect; in the loss of forests and the loss of wealth generally. And in the loss of beauty and loss of divine presence.

A NEW APPROACH TO ECONOMICS

I - THE FIRST LAW

Economics is the study and practise of preserving the source and sustenance of the total life system while producing and distributing the things necessary to human well-being. "Preserve the source" is the first law of economics. (Wendell Berry.) "Maintain capital" is another way of saying it.

II - CLARIFICATIONS

The human species belongs to the earth community of life and is entitled to take what is necessary for human well-being while being obliged at the same time to contribute human capabilities to the well-being of the earth, to making the earth complete. The human is part of the earth and the earth process and the part is not greater than the whole. The human journey is an aspect of the earth journey. There can be no human prosperity in a poisoned and degraded earth.

Human work is meant for the accomplishment of those things that ought to be done. That is, human work is to be aimed at human well-being within the requirement that the well-being of the earth is a primary consideration. This is critical. Bad work, that is work that ought not to be done, is what brings about ecological damage.

Technology has made human work so effective that there is much more^{er} human effort available than is needed for basic human well-being. As a result human effort has been, in a major way, turned to the production of the trivial and the unnecessary, and the harmful; to the pursuit of money; to doing work that ought not to be done.

III - A SECOND KIND OF WORK

Therefore a second kind of work must be invented: work which preserves the source, repairs ecosystems and restores the earth to health and beauty in places where human work has damaged it. . This kind of work should be funded much as highways are funded today. The automobile is about to lose its preeminence on the American scene. This kind of public works should be substituted for road building right away. Surely, this kind of work could be made available to unemployed loggers.

CFRSL QUESTIONS N.C.'S \$8.6 BILLION ROAD PROGRAM

CFRSL HAS RENTED CATES AUDITORIUM ON THE MEREDITH COLLEGE CAMPUS FOR THE EVENING OF MAY 25, 1989. THE PROGRAM WILL DEAL WITH THE PROPOSITION THAT IT IS FOOLISHNESS FOR NORTH CAROLINA TO PLAN ITS FUTURE AROUND THE AUTOMOBILE. DETAILS LATER.

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