

# QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

Information and Action Addressing Public Policy  
for an Ecologically Sustainable World

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## **Steps on the Ladder to an Earth Restored: Quaker Faith on the Job\***

**David H. Ciscel**

**M**y step-ladder has instructions attached to its sides. One side says, in part, “Failure to read and follow the instructions on this ladder may result in injury or death.” A sticker on the other side has 21 different warnings about using the ladder. Like most people, I have learned the rules not by reading them, but through minor accidents that inform me practically that the rules are there for a reason.

Building Earth restored is going to take considerable commitment to using the sustainability ladder correctly, both reading the instructions for the natural world, as well as learning from the many mistakes that we have already made in our climb to the heights of economic growth. We now live in a world that consumes resources faster than they can be regenerated by nature, and we are fast using up many other resources that cannot be regenerated at all. Clearly, the direction of the world cannot be sustained ecologically. Although it is the modern economy that is causing this destruction, as Quakers, we should recognize that the economy has an up side as well. While a billion or more people suffer in poverty every day, billions more have been lifted out of poverty precisely because we use all sorts of resources—energy, water, minerals—very productively, and, at the same time, destructively from an ecological point of view.

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**\*Editorial Note:** When QEB published David Ciscel’s previous article, “It’s the Economy, Friend,” (*QEB 7:4, July-August, 2007*), it sparked a lively discussion within the editorial team. We quickly realized that the issues raised among us required an ongoing dialogue for more adequate exploration. We asked David Ciscel to take the lead in a “circle of discernment” process that, in collaboration with the QEB team, would assemble a dialogue on the concept of natural capital and the deep ecology of the human-earth relationship. Modern economics and deep ecology are world views in significant tension.

Meanwhile QEB published Ed Dreby’s article, “We Need a Ladder: Avoiding Depression While Downsizing” (*QEB 8:4, July-August, 2008*) which addresses the unresolved contradiction at the center of the capitalist economy—unlimited growth on a finite planet (see page 4 for a new initiative addressing this growth dilemma).

With this issue of QEB, David Ciscel has added to the dialogue and our “circle of discernment” is underway. While some of this dialogue will unfold in future issues of QEB, it will eventually come to fruition in the Circles of Discernment Program of Quaker Institute for the Future and be published as a QIF pamphlet. While the QEB editorial team and David Ciscel are focused on developing this dialogue toward publication, we also welcome cogent responses from QEB readers. Contributions may be directed to <keithhelmuth@gmail.com>

In the July 2008 QEB, Ed Dreby proposed building a twelve-step ladder to climb down from the unsustainable economic growth situation in which we find ourselves. In it he suggested that we re-think the way we name resources, the way we use resources, and the ways we consume resources. The steps of his sustainability ladder included rethinking capital and productivity, providing work, income and fair taxation for everyone, using markets and commons to distribute goods and services, and building a pattern of consumption based on re-use and repair. We actually will begin assembling and using that ladder in the next few years, but as the warnings on real ladders note, it will be perilous and dangerous.

### **Water as a Biotic System**

A good example of that peril is how we use water. Right now we are using it far too generously. We have been treating it as a free resource because it was available for the taking. Now, however, people with the financial muscle have been staking out private claims on a resource that some people argue should not be seen as a commodity at all but simply as a natural right of all living beings. The problem is that the economy as it is today, has a huge appetite for water: farmers rely on massive irrigation for their crops, industry uses vast amounts of water in production processes, and urban dwellers consume water in quantities that rival farmers and corporations.

As water becomes scarce it is becoming clearer that it is anything but free and that it is no longer simply a part of the natural ecosystem; it has become, whether we like it or not, a semi-renewable form of natural capital, one which can not be used sustainably unless it is made to follow the rules of real capital. Paradoxically, building new economic structures that will limit the destructive use of natural systems introduces a contradiction. Suddenly part of the world that has traditionally been managed by physical and biological systems is falling more and more under the management of the economic system. As rain falls from the sky, flows in our rivers, collects in aquifers and lakes and, finally, settles in our great oceans, it is part of the biotic process; but as the economy makes demands on these flows of water, the natural system becomes severely imbalanced.

What can we do? It is impossible to go back in time. We must deal with the world as it is today. It is a world where all forms of water are used to excess relative to naturally occurring regeneration systems, so it has become imperative to limit wa-

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The vision of **Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW)** includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington DC for peace, justice, and an Earth restored.

**QEB's** purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the Earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to Earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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ter usage. We actually need to establish a bureaucracy of "water capital" complete with agencies and community organizations that decide who gets how much water when, and, more controversially, the use of water must be priced. And there is the rub. Perhaps Quakers might agree that getting wealthy corporations to pay handsomely for the water they use is a good idea, but what about small farmers in the third world? Wealth, power and prices result in allocations that are not necessarily (or easily) based on equity. More often economic investment goods go to those with wealth and power. We don't want that to happen with water—a good that is critical to sustaining life for all living creatures.

And water is just one example. In case after case the time when the natural world can occur naturally is gone. Earth often regenerates when we step out of the way, but there is no indication that we, humans as a group, have any inclination to do that. So the end result of seeking Earth restored is most likely Earth managed to minimize the impact of economic activity on activities dependent on water, now renamed water capital. The same is true of other biotic processes. If we start from where we are, the outcomes will, by the processes employed, result in sub-optimal outcomes. That is, Earth restored will not be natural Earth, but it could be Earth where the many species of life survive and prosper. Just as our daily bread comes from the bread factory, not our kitchens; so our water, our forests, our wild habitats, and our clean air will come from the green factory, not because it just exists—like it did sometime in the distant past.

### ***The Relevance of Quaker Witness***

Quakerism has something to say about this process that may result in Earth that bears only a faint resemblance to the Earth of biotic systems. How do you translate spirit-led understanding of Earth into practical day-to-day decision making that cares for Earth? Quakerism seems ready to address that question. To paraphrase Kenneth Boulding, "We are now in the middle of a long process of transition in the image which people have of themselves within the total environment." That is, the transformation is slow. Building the steps of a ladder to Earth restored takes time, and it takes time because human awareness of a fundamental change in the environment of living creatures is very slow to take hold. Thus, even in the current dire emergency, the only way forward is step by step.

Unity coming from the inward light is not only a theological issue for Quakers; it informs the way we make decisions. First, we all recognize that everyone has that of God within them. But do we act like that is case when we talk about the ecology of the planet? Winning the argument should be less important than finding the common vision. It is this faith in the future, this willingness to wait, and this belief in the inherent goodness of creation, which leads Quakers to engage the world for change, but in engaging, not to expect that outcomes will be easy or soon.

For Quakers, designing a water capital system is less important than the spirit that is brought to that design process. Why do people feel the way they do about their use of water? Everyone is likely to resist a realistic pricing of water. Households will think, "if this decision is made regarding water, I will have less money, and my way of life will be harmed." Corporations will think, "if water is priced, I will be less able to make money and my way of life will be harmed." Now if that reaction is dismissed as one which reflects nothing but the greed of the water user, then there is little chance of finding a unity that reflects the needs of all biotic systems. As Quakers, it is important to recognize the validity (or good faith) of these decisions by people. Finding a way to re-balance people's current rational, but self-serving, decisions into ecologically sustainable decisions may be a bigger challenge than actually building the ladder to sustainability.

## Using the Sustainability Ladder

Are we ready to assemble and use Ed Dreby's ladder to a sustainable future?

- *Rethinking capital and productivity*—This is probably the most difficult task of moving the economy from where it is to an economy that is ecologically sustainable. Efforts to build a regimen of natural capital have already been fraught with failures and difficulties. One proposed method of creating natural capital is called the tradable (in the marketplace) pollution right. The idea has been to issue an optimal number or renewable level of pollution rights. But, in general, too many permits are issued, and they have often been given away for free. In addition, companies can flee the geographic area where pollution permits are issued.

A second scheme has been to place energy taxes on oil and coal. This idea is favored by many since the tax provides a direct incentive to consumers of carbon-based energy to reduce use. But carbon taxes are often low and face huge political opposition, and in the end, the tax revenues are rarely used to restore Earth. Consequently, the solution of bringing vast components of the ecosystem into the economy, pricing them, and using the revenues to heal Earth may be a solution that will be hard to implement from a socio-political point of view.

Gaining unity or consensus on paying more for all carbon-energy-produced goods and services is going to be slow and difficult. Pollution rights and energy taxes will be proposed during the Obama government, but the challenge will be to convince all citizens about the necessity of these changes. In addition, alternative energy sources, energy-efficient technological innovations, and new uses of labor (a continuing movement from goods-producing labor to service-producing labor) are all required to transform our economy from a carbon-based productivity system to a system where economic productivity is created in diverse ways.

- *Providing work, income and fair taxation for everyone*—An attempt to create a cross national system of economic equity is already causing significant problems for building a sustainable economy. Developing regions of the world protest any limitation on carbon emissions, believing that dirty industry and high-mass consumption is the only way to develop. In the developed world, first the fears and now the reality of global recession have led European nations to weaken prior efforts and instead to emulate our own slow movement toward sustainable policies.

National policies that insure access to basic food, housing, health and education for its population seem to parallel societies that put their faith in a growth model to reach sustainability in economic development. As the climate changes due to current excessive carbon emissions, bringing equity of work opportunities, income distribution, and fair taxation to regions of the world where governments are already incompetent or corrupt is highly unlikely. The best we can lobby for is to limit the movement of polluting forms of production from the somewhat regulated developed world to the largely unregulated developing world.

- *Using markets and commons to distribute goods and services*—A large portion of goods and services produced and consumed in

a modern economy are sold through so-called free (and semi-competitive) markets. But competitive markets, based on the aggressive self-interest of both producers and consumers, are one of the main sources of ecological decay. While competition usually results in more and newer goods being delivered through the market, competitive markets also have a rapacious impact on the natural resources of Earth.

There is a successful and useful alternative to the delivery of goods and services already in place. Not-for-profit and cooperative enterprises emphasize cooperation, caring, and inclusive dealing between producers and consumers. In this type of cooperative environment, negotiation for common, beneficial outcomes is the norm rather than the exception. Since no one has to win the market battle, all stakeholders can be listened to. The not-for-profit sector in medicine, credit unions, farming, and social services, sets the baseline standard for negotiation of creating a production system that includes sustainability in its business functions.

- *Building a pattern of consumption based on re-use and repair*—Modern consumption is completely based on fashion cycles and technological obsolescence. Learning to live with machines and other goods that can be re-built or re-used will require substantial re-thinking of parts of consumption. But already, a significant portion of consumption is for services (60 percent in 2003). Nondurable goods make up 28 percent of consumption and durable goods make up the balance (12 percent).

Durable goods—like automobiles—are often repairable. Offering incentives to keep your car for longer periods, for example, basing license fees inversely with age could encourage repair and re-use (assuming the car was efficient in the first place). A lot of household furniture is already repaired and re-used. Regarding clothing, personal care and food, additional increments of repair and re-use are probably not possible. Electronics, toys (adult and children), and medical goods are the least repaired and re-used consumables.

In each of these areas considerable re-education will be required to encourage the end of current wasteful or ease-of-use consumption. Increased dumping fees may assist in some of these areas. But, probably, the greatest benefit could be derived from a reduction of consumption by encouraging people to save for the future rather than consume goods or services in the present.

Building a ladder to Earth restored will be difficult. Ed Dreby's ladder pictures the process as climbing down from unlimited growth to ecological economics and social sustainability. We might also think of assembling a ladder with steps that climb to a new level of understanding about what must be done. Either way the ladder is clearly in front of us. Already many nations have begun to build the basics of sustainability into their economies. Quaker process may be a key to long-run success, though certainly not to quick solutions. Sidney Webb, a 19th century British reformer and democratic socialist, noted that "important organic changes can only be democratic, and thus acceptable to a majority of the people, and prepared for in the minds of all." As Quakers we might add that creating Earth restored requires unity of spirit.

## AN INVITATION TO WITNESS

### FRIENDS TESTIMONIES AND ECONOMICS

A Project of the Earthcare Working Group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting  
and Quaker Earthcare Witness

### ***Confronting the Growth Dilemma***

The United States, and with it the global economy, is caught in a dilemma that will only become more problematic if we continue to ignore it.

- **Overshoot:** The use of energy and material resources by industrialized societies already exceeds what the Earth can sustain.
- **Resource depletion:** The availability of many non-renewable resources will begin to diminish within the foreseeable future, as supplies are depleted and the costs of extraction increase. The faster we use them, the sooner this will begin to happen.
- **Over-harvesting:** Harvesting renewable resources more rapidly than they can renew themselves reduces their productivity and threatens their regenerative capacity.

*But:*

- **As currently structured, the economy must grow...** to provide jobs and returns to investors. Spending for consumption and/or investment must increase steadily to avoid recession.
- **Government policies stimulate spending** ... to maintain growth and, in times of recession, to restore growth.
- **Growth is increasing the wealth of the wealthy...** which can neither make the distribution of wealth more equitable, nor reduce humanity's environmental impacts.

*Hence the dilemma:*

- **Reducing consumption has become essential...** to salvage humanity's future prospects.

*Yet*

- **Reducing consumption creates crisis** ... as long as our economic policies and structures remain unchanged.

**Markets can be reoriented** so they serve both to reduce the consumption of raw materials and energy, and to maintain production and employment, provide incentives for innovation and efficiency, and meet people's basic needs.

**Communities can prosper** while the volume of the physical resources we convert to wastes is systematically reduced. Our nation needs our most capable and creative economists to devise ways to do this.

**Until we communicate with our leaders about the growth dilemma,  
they will be powerless to deal with it.**

**If you resonate with these ideas, please join the Growth Dilemma Network  
to share them with others and with our leadership in Washington DC.**

**Contact Ed Dreby, 609/261-8190, or [eddreby@verizon.net](mailto:eddreby@verizon.net)**

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