

**Response to “Population and Environment in Australia, 2003”, by Dr. Colin Butler.**

Ted Trainer

I think the report is a useful backgrounder and will facilitate the coming discussion. However I was disappointed that this Report and the other three listed make no reference to the position that I and others have argued over the past several decades (Trainer, 1985, 1995, 2003a, and The Simpler Way website, address below) viz, that the present taken for granted “living standards” of the rich countries are so grossly unsustainable that the major global problems cannot be solved without dramatic reductions in levels of production and consumption and therefore without radical change in lifestyles, systems and values. This “extreme” position is almost totally ignored by media, government and academia.

Following is a brief indication of some of the main lines of argument supporting this position.

1. If all 9 billion people soon to be living on earth were to consume resources at the present per capita rate in rich countries, world annual resource production rates would have to be about 8 times as great as they are now. All estimated potentially recoverable resources of fossil fuels (assuming 2t tones of coal) would be exhausted in about 18 years.
2. If all 9 billion were to have the present US timber use per person, the forest area harvested would have to be 3 to 4 times all the forest area on the planet.
3. If 9 billion were to have a North American diet 4.5 billion ha of cropland would be required, but there are only 1.4 billion ha of cropland in use, and this is likely to decline.
4. Several geologists have recently begun to claim that global petroleum supply will peak within a decade, and be down to half the present level by about 2030. In view of our heavy dependence on liquid fuels this prospect is alarming.
5. “Footprint analysis” indicates that the amount of productive land required to provide one person in Australia with food, water, energy and settlement area is about 7-8 ha. The US figure is closer to 12 ha. If 8 billion people were to live as Australians do, approximately 70 billion ha of productive land would be required. However the total amount available on the planet is only in the region of 8 billion ha.

6. Atmospheric scientists have estimated that if the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is to be kept below twice the pre-industrial level annual emissions must be in the region of 9 billion tonnes. (Enting, 1994.) For a world population of 9 billion this means a per capita limit of 1 tonne p.a. Yet the present Australian per capita rate of emission from fuel burning alone is 16 tonnes, and when land clearing is added it is 27 tonnes.

The point which such figures makes glaringly obvious is that we are not just a little beyond sustainable levels of resource demand and ecological impact – we are far beyond sustainable levels. Rich world ways, systems and “living standards” are grossly unsustainable, and can never be extended to all the world’s people.

It must now be stressed that the foregoing figures only refer to the present situation. To this we must now add the implications of the fundamental commitment underlying our society, viz the obsession with limitless growth in “living standards” and economic output.

Few economists or politicians would be satisfied with 3% rate of economic growth. If we assume a) a 4% p.a. economic growth, b) a population of 9 billion, c) all the world’s people rising to the “living standards” we in the rich world would have in 2070 given 4% growth, then the total volume of world economic output would be 120 times as great as it is now. Even if we assume only 3% growth in rich countries and the Third World rising only to the present “living standards” of the rich countries, the multiple is 20.

Such enormous multiples rule out any realistic possibility that technical advance can enable us to continue the pursuit of growth and affluence while greater energy efficiency, recycling effort, pollution control etc eliminates the resource and ecological impacts. Obviously the “Factor Four” reduction Amory Lovins claims is possible would fall far short of what was required.

The crucial assumption made by those who assume that radical change will not be required is that renewable energy sources can be substituted for fossil fuels. For a detailed argument that this assumption is mistaken see Trainer, 2003b.

There are two huge faults built into the foundations of consumer-capitalist society. The above comments refer to the first, to do with sustainability. The second is to do with global economic injustice. The present high “living standards” of the rich countries could not be enjoyed if those countries were not getting most of the resources produced in the world, and, more importantly, if the productive capacity of the Third World were not primarily geared to producing for the benefit of rich world corporations and supermarket shoppers. For instance millions of hectares of the best Third World land grow crops to export to rich countries, at little benefit to those who work in the plantations.

The basic mechanism generating these flows is the market system. Markets allocate scarce resources to richer people, and ensure that capital is invested in what will return most profit to the few who control most capital.

Globalisation involves a determination to increase the freedom for market forces, meaning that these injustices are being intensified. Satisfactory Third World development cannot occur in a global economy driven by these principles. In addition the above basic “limits to growth” considerations show that there are insufficient resources for the Third World to rise to rich world “living standards”. Satisfactory Third World development is not conceivable unless the rich countries move to consuming far less of the world’s resource wealth, and thus to far lower per capita rates of consumption.

These considerations of sustainability and global economic justice show that our predicament is extreme and cannot be solved without enormous and radical change. Numerous people have discussed what would seem to be the inescapable implications for the form that a sustainable and just society must take. The basic principles are:

1. Far simpler material living standards,
2. High levels of self-sufficiency at household, national and especially local levels, with relatively little travel, transport or trade,
3. Basically cooperative and participatory local systems,
4. A quite different economic system, one not driven by market forces and profit and without any growth,
5. Most problematic, a radically different culture, in which competitive and acquisitive individualism is replaced by frugal, self-sufficient collectivism.

I believe that the chances of achieving such a transition are remote, but that is not central here. The focal concern should be, is this extreme limits analysis of our situation valid, and if it is, is there any alternative to “The Simpler Way” indicated by the above 5 principles?

Over the past 20 years many small groups throughout the world have begun to build settlements and systems more or less of the kind required, many of them explicitly as examples intended to persuade the mainstream that there is an alternative that is sustainable, just and attractive. In my view the fate of the planet depends on how effective this movement becomes in the next two decades.

It is of the utmost importance to get this perspective onto the agenda of public discussion. This sets special difficulties for scientists, who are understandably reluctant to be associated with claims that are extreme and which flatly contradict the dominant ideology. However endorsement of the limits and Simpler Way theses is not required; what is required is that these be pointed to as among the possibilities that should be considered. If this general position turns out to be valid then those who have failed to draw attention to it will bear a significant responsibility for what I believe will be a very problematic future.

Enting, I, Wigley, T., and Haimann, M, (1994), Technical Paper 31; Future Emissions and Concentrations of Carbon Dioxide, CSIRO Division of Atmospheric Research, Melbourne.

Trainer, F. E. (T.), (1985), Abandon Affluence, London, Zed Books.

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Trainer, T. (F. E.), (2003b), "Renewable Energy; The limits?", <http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/D72.RENEWABLE.ENERGY.html>

The address for The Simpler Way website is <http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/>