



Acting at the Roots

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One lesson I take from climate change is the admonition to search out and act at the root causes of complex problems.

Here's an example:

In the political maneuvering leading up to the release of the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, the Bush administration was lobbying for the report to include an endorsement of the concept of building giant reflective mirrors up in space, to lessen the amount of solar radiation reaching the planet.

Giant floating mirrors do seem like just the sort of engineering challenge that some of the largest defense and aerospace corporations, who supported Bush's two campaigns for President, could bid for and profit from. And, if such a project could compensate for the accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere by shading the planet, we could keep on digging fossil carbon from the Earth's crust and using it to power our society. By virtue of our engineering skill and technology we could take a limit of the Earth, push it off a ways, and not have to deal with it.

You might feel some skepticism that we have the skill and understanding to pull off such a project and do it just right. Certainly there's plenty to

worry about in meddling with solar radiation, the basic force that enlivens the planet. But even putting those doubts aside, there's another important issue.

Our excessive CO₂ pollution isn't only warming the planet, it is also acidifying the oceans, with potentially huge consequences for the base of the ocean food chain, and thus for fisheries, and for all the atmospheric processes that the ocean regulates.

A giant sun-shield up in space wouldn't do anything to lessen the impact of CO₂ on ocean chemistry. Setting - and enforcing - limits on the amount of CO₂ coming out of industries, homes, and tail-pipes, on the other hand, would help ameliorate both the warming of the planet and the acidification of the oceans.

Acting closer to the heart of the problem recognizes the interconnection of problems and increases the odds that the effort applied solves multiple problems simultaneously.

Excessive CO₂ production may be closer to the heart of things, but it's not THE heart, of course. There are deeper reasons, the reasons that cause us to produce so much greenhouse gas pollution in the first place.

If moving one step closer to the heart of things - moving from the symptom of rising temperature to its cause, CO₂ pollution – produces the ability to solve multiple problems with a single solution, then what might be the power of reaching even deeper – into consumerism, into our sense that the Earth is ours to dominate, into the assumptions of the of the industrial growth society?

Go deep enough, find ways to act that are deep enough, and we might find ourselves solving not just warming and ocean acidification, but also mercury pollution and toxics build-up and topsoil loss. We might find choices that could begin to heal both the wounds of the Earth and the wounds we impose on each other - wounds like poverty, oppression, violence, and despair.

Getting to such depths, acknowledging what we find there, and figuring out what to do about what we find won't be easy. But I believe that this is the direction that climate change and all the other tangled challenges of this moment in time are pointing us towards.

There are already pioneers, showing us the way, offering living examples of what is possible when the threads of social justice, worldview,

and ecology are gathered up together, and addressed as a whole.

A few of them I'm lucky enough to know personally, like my friends Nonette Royo and Chip Fay in Indonesia, and Amalia Souza in Brazil who all work on village based resource management, knowing that indigenous rights, transparent self-government, and economic solutions are not separate from ecological practices. All fit together and reinforce each other.

And in the US there are projects aimed at simultaneously addressing the ecological and social symptoms that are created by a system that grinds away not only at nature but also at whole communities of people. One example is the Oakland Apollo Alliance, which is creating jobs for low income people and people of color in the emerging fields of clean energy and sustainability, making sure that more people are able to participate in and benefit from the work of healing the Earth.

Creative, inspired projects like these help us begin to imagine what it might look like to meet the challenge of climate change by acting at its roots.

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