

The Environmental Dimensions of Poverty

E. Calvin Beisner

Panel Presentation at the Conference on
Poverty and the Environment: Global Lessons—Local Solutions
sponsored by the
Atlas Economic Research Foundation

Orlando, Florida
February 5-8, 1998

When, in 1995, I attended the Oxford Conference on Christian Faith and Economics at Agra, India—city of the beautiful Taj Mahal—I, like many other participants in the conference, was struck by many things that I observed there: hard-working, friendly, often generous people, each striving to improve life for himself and his family; thousands of charming little children working right alongside their elders in the shops, cottage industries, factories, and streets; beautiful, handwoven rugs, tapestries, and clothes; exquisite handmade pottery, some of it produced with the same mosaic techniques that mark the Taj Mahal itself. All of these signs I saw, and many others, of a society brimming with enterprise. They are hopeful signs.

But in the very same place I saw other signs, the signs of poverty. Most of the hard-working, generous people I saw in the shops and factories, pedaling the rickshaws, or eagerly selling their handmade wares were clearly poor, devastatingly poor. (In 1994, India's gross national product per capita was only about a tenth of Latin America's average; its under 5 mortality rate was more than twice Latin America's; and its average life expectancy at birth was 12 percent lower than Latin America's.) With the Indians' poverty came the visible signs of poverty so familiar to anyone who spends time among the poor. Their clothing usually fit poorly, was heavily worn, often repeatedly mended, more often needing mending. Despite their honest efforts, they usually were not very clean. The tools of their trade were old and inefficient. It was clear that many, even most of them, lived on the streets, the better off among them in little, makeshift huts of discarded scrap metal or wood. Almost all looked prematurely aged, their teeth and hands joined by their wrinkled faces in quiet testimony to a hard life. As I gazed on the little children scabbling desperately for a living, I experienced what so many, many Westerners experience: that longing to take one home—no, to take *lots* of them home with me, to give them a better life—a sincere, benevolent intention, no doubt, and just what *some* of those children, the orphans, needed, though in fact most whose parents were living, if given the opportunity to trade their poverty with their beloved family for wealth among strangers, would certainly choose the former—and rightly so, for what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?

One of the signs of the poverty of these people, one that almost every Western environmentalist

would completely misunderstand, was the lamentable state of their environment. To call it polluted, for someone accustomed to life in the West, would be the grossest understatement. Indeed, among people gathered for that conference, including Christian missionaries from all over the world, one of the most common observations was that this was the filthiest place we had ever witnessed. What most environmentalists, who blindly accept Paul Ehrlich's formula that negative environmental impact varies directly in proportion to population, affluence, and technology ($I = PAT$), would not understand is that the wretched environment of Agra, like that of almost all India, is directly rooted in *lack* of advanced technologies and *lack* of wealth, the *presence* of both of which environmentalists blame for environmental degradation. Indians do not burn dried dung and scrap wood as their chief sources of heat and cooking fuel because they *like* those better than natural gas and electricity, but because their society is too poor to provide the infrastructure without which natural gas and electricity cannot be made available, and the people are too poor to pay for them—or the furnaces and stoves that would use them—even if they were available. They don't *like* breathing air choked with the smoke of burning dung, and they would gladly trade that for the smog of moderately advanced industrialized cities if they could afford it—let alone for the clean air of most of the high-income cities of Western Europe, North America, Australia, and Japan, where smog levels have been falling for most of the last three decades.

But that is just the problem. They can't afford the cleaner environment, because they can't afford the technologies that enable people to have a clean environment. And so they, along with hundreds of millions of other poor people in poor countries the world over, suffer the environmental costs of poverty: indoor air pollution from the coarsest biomass fuels, causing respiratory diseases that take millions of lives annually; untreated or minimally treated sewage contaminating surface and subsurface drinking water sources, again taking millions of lives annually; low-efficiency car and truck engines burning high-lead and high-sulphur fuel, adding to air pollution. As their economies grow, through continued hard work, learning, and capital investment, these sources of the sorts of pollution that cost the most in human health and life will diminish. But it will take time, and it won't be easy.

Now, how do Western environmentalist leaders respond to these tragedies?

- By insisting, with American Vice President Al Gore, that fighting global warming—even the reality of which, let alone the extent and impact, is open to serious debate among climatologists—should be the central organizing principle of human civilization. Although they *know* that energy use drives economic growth, which replaces poverty with affluence, they insist that fossil fuel use be strictly limited.
- By insisting that chlorofluorocarbons, the cheapest and least corrosive of refrigerants, be banned to protect the stratospheric ozone layer from depletion that remains largely theoretical, that cannot be heavily influenced by the human sources of the ozone-destroying chlorine monoxide that are dwarfed by nature's sources, even though they *know* that the ban will delay the time when poor people in poor countries can afford the refrigeration they so desperately need to minimize food spoilage and the malnutrition and food poisoning associated with it.
- And by putting greater emphasis on saving theoretically endangered species before hundreds of millions of people endangered by malnutrition and disease—despite the fact that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, in a worldwide field survey looking for evidence of rapid species extinctions, could find none.

The irony is that Western environmentalist leaders are cutting off the branch on which they sit. Environmentalism is distinctly a preoccupation of the wealthy. Environmental protection increases precisely to the extent that a society becomes wealthy enough to afford it. To the extent that they succeed in slowing economic growth anywhere in the world—in rich and poor nations alike—they delay the growth of environmental protection. And while they're at it, they generate a very understandable resentment among the poor of this world, who see these environmentalist leaders as standing in the way of their keeping their children from dying or suffering serious, lifelong respiratory ailments by growing their economies. As they alienate the poor, environmentalists create

a mistrust that will delay the time when the poor, ascending out of their poverty—as they surely will—become willing to allocate significant parts of their newfound wealth to environmental protection.

Real friends of the environment recognize that growing economies are the environment’s best friends. As Indur M. Goklany points out:

The level of affluence at which a pollutant level peaks (or environmental transition occurs) varies. A World Bank analysis concluded that urban [airborne particulate matter] and [sulfur dioxide] concentrations peaked at per capita incomes of \$3,280 and \$3,670, respectively. Fecal coliform [bacteria] in river water increased with affluence until income reached \$1,375 per capita.¹

After these peaks, pollutant levels fall off rapidly as wealth continues to increase. This means that real friends of the environment are also real friends of the poor—unlike those who mistakenly believe that economic growth threatens the environment—for they will promote the economic growth that will not only improve the health, life expectancy, and material standard of living of the poor but also lead to the cleaner, safer, more sustainable environment they seek.

E. Calvin Beisner is national spokesman of the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation (www.CornwallAlliance.org) and a former associate professor of interdisciplinary studies at Covenant College (1992–2000) and of historical theology and social ethics at Knox Theological Seminary (2000–2008). He is author of *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (1997) and ten other books.

¹Indur M. Goklany, “Richer Is Cleaner: Long-Term Trends in Global Air Quality,” in *The True State of the Planet*, edited by Ronald Bailey (New York: Free Press, 1995), 339-77, at 342.