

Features: How Environmentalism Disdains the Poor

By E. Calvin Beisner

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The late Julian Simon and other wise thinkers have long understood that economic development is necessary to enable people to afford a safe environment. That insight fits in with my own observations when, several years ago, I attended the Oxford Conference on Christian Faith and Economics at Agra, India—city of the beautiful Taj Mahal. Like many other participants, I was struck by many things: 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, and many others, I saw as signs of a society brimming with enterprise. Hopeful signs.

But in the very same place I saw other signs, the signs of poverty.

Most of the generous people working diligently 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, and less than one-eightieth that of the United States; its under-five mortality rate was more than twice Latin America's and almost ten times the United States'; and its average life expectancy at birth was 12 percent lower than Latin America's and 20 percent lower than our country's.

With the Indians' poverty came the visible signs so familiar to anyone who spends time among the poor. Their clothing usually was ill fitting, heavily worn, often repeatedly mended, and more often in need of mending. Despite their honest efforts, the poor Indians 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 Westerners experience: that longing to take one home—no, to take lots of them home with me, to give them a better life. It is just what some of those children, the orphans, needed. As for those whose parents were living, most, if given the opportunity to trade their poverty with their beloved families for wealth among strangers, would certainly choose their families—and rightly so, for what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?

An Impoverished Environment

One sign of the poverty of these people, one that almost every Western environmentalist would completely misunderstand, is 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.

Most environmentalists blindly accept Paul Ehrlich's formula that negative environmental impact varies directly in proportion to population, affluence, and technology ($I = PAT$). But in fact, the wretched environment of Agra, like that of almost all India, is directly rooted in the *lack* of advanced technologies and wealth.

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. They do so because their society is too poor to provide the infrastructure without which natural gas and electricity cannot be made available, and the people would be 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 filled 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; and 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, those sources 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 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 fuels be strictly limited.
- By insisting that chlorofluorocarbons, the cheapest and least corrosive of refrigerants, be banned to protect the stratospheric ozone layer from a depletion that remains largely theoretical and that cannot be heavily influenced by the human sources of the ozone-destroying chlorine monoxide,

which are dwarfed by nature's sources. They do so 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.

Wealthier Is Healthier

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 they succeed in slowing economic growth anywhere in the world—in rich and poor nations alike—they delay the progress 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 blocking efforts to keep their children from dying or suffering serious, lifelong respiratory ailments. As they alienate the poor, environmentalists also 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 economist 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."

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 living standards of the poor but also lead to the cleaner, safer, more sustainable environment they seek.

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