

The Big, Bad Picture

As governments gather in Johannesburg for the second "Earth Summit" later this year, an event will be taking place across the Atlantic which provides compelling evidence of their failure to live up to the principles or promises of the Rio 'Earth Summit' back in 1992.

For five days, a coincidence of timing brings together thousands of people at parallel gatherings, each designed to have a direct impact on the future of the planet - but in diametrically opposed ways. In South Africa of course, the WSSD or Earth Summit meets 26 August - 6 September. Back in Rio, the world's biggest festival of oil men and women is held 1 - 5 September, as three thousand delegates are expected for the 17th World Petroleum Congress.

The UN Climate Convention was, of course, launched at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Ten years on, however, environmentalists may be in despair while the oil industry is in confident mood. The Petroleum Congress publicity states, apparently without any sense of irony: *"For the first time, one of the most important events in the oil and gas industry, the WPC, meets in Brazil, a continental-size country whose market offers countless opportunities to national and international investors. With Rio de Janeiro, a city of inordinate beauty, for scenario [sic], three thousand delegates from 90 countries will meet to discuss sector topics such as technological advances and the use of oil for the benefit of humanity."*

If the promises and principles of Rio had been fulfilled, by now the fossil fuel industry should be starting negotiations with governments on its phase out. Instead it is buoyantly optimistic. The oil partying will be led by Exxon, the world's largest company and, for some years now chief author of US climate policy.

The WSSD machine will no doubt ensure some self-serving analyses of what Rio achieved, along with dutiful hand-wringing about how difficult it all is. But you need look no further than Rio's oil fest to see who the real winners and losers have been since Earth Summit number one.

With the energetic help of Australia and Canada - both major fossil fuel users and leading mining countries - the United States has led the way in sabotaging the promise of Rio. George W. Bush walked away from the Kyoto Protocol to the Climate Convention in 2001. Behind and all around him, were the lobbyists and executives of the fossil fuel industry.

The Climate Convention and the Kyoto Protocol do not even begin to scratch the surface of what is needed to stabilise the climate for the true "benefit of humanity". The emissions reductions cut they require from industrial countries are not a tenth of those needed to prevent heating of the planet to rates and levels unknown in evolutionary history.

Encircling the tropical seas, corals reefs are canaries-in-the-coal-mine on a global scale. Since Rio, these sensitive ecosystems have plunged into rapid decline. Reefs that took millions of years to grow are dying in weeks, months or a few years. Pollution and high temperatures have forced the algae that give coral its colour to leave the polyps that make up the reef. If the water cools, the reefs can recover in the next cool season but if all the algae leave, it crumbles and dies. In April 2002, for the second time in four years, an epidemic of coral bleaching hit the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. The event was reported spreading through the coral islands of the South Pacific. Thomas Goreau, president of the Global Coral Reef Alliance in Chappaqua, New York, told *New Scientist* magazine "It will take a long time before we have full confirmation of the magnitude of the disaster But when it is all in, I predict we will have confirmation that almost all corals across the entire South Pacific have died in the last few months." Reef monitoring is coordinated through the global coral reef monitoring network (see coral reefs at www.noaa.gov), and on 8 May a diver posted a report. Barbara A. Best and other divers found that "in Beqa Lagoon, ...the water was like bath water, and stayed at 86 F all the way down to about 50 feet." "Hardly any live corals at all left, but a few did show signs of stress."

Overall, things have not got better since Rio. On every major environmental count they have got worse. And the commitment of politicians and the attention of the media have pretty much evaporated. Business is not held accountable.

This year marks the 18th anniversary of the world's worst ever chemicals accident – the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India. At Rio it was eight years old – now, after 18 years, residents of Bhopal are still suffering. This gross and inhuman abuse continues because Dow Chemical refuses to pick up the corporate tab after its merger with Union Carbide.

Virtually nothing has been done to clean up the site and water used by 20,000 people for everyday needs is still contaminated. With the merger, Dow not only bought the company's assets but also assumed liabilities such as Bhopal's legacy of contamination. As of May 2002 survivors from Bhopal were in the U.S. to demand that the Dow Chemical company CEO Michael Parker take responsibility for the accident and work to prevent future disasters at all Dow facilities.

Justice has eluded the people of Bhopal for over 17 years. Union Carbide negotiated a settlement with the Indian Government in 1989 for \$470 million US, no more than \$370 to \$533 per victim, a paltry sum that is too small to pay for most medical bills. In 1987, a Bhopal District Court charged Union Carbide officials, including then CEO Warren Anderson, with culpable homicide, grievous assault and other serious offences. In 1992, a warrant was issued for Anderson's arrest. Dow, since its merger with Union Carbide, has refused to assume these liabilities in India. This stands in stark contrast to Dow's acceptance of Union Carbide's liabilities in Texas, where they recently settled an asbestos-related lawsuit.

The environment has been largely abandoned by government leaders; the earth is notably absent from much of the preparatory discussion for the Earth Summit, replaced by mostly disingenuous hand waving about "poverty" and "development", while governments real actions serve to make the rich richer and deplete resources that the poor depend on most.

Since Rio, the world has left the poorest behind, while the rich over-consume.
Of total energy resources 58 percent is consumed by people in industrialised countries and less than 4 percent by the poorest 20 percent of people in developing countries. Of meat and fish 45 percent goes to the industrialised nations, 5 percent to the poorest 20 percent. For paper the figures are 84 percent and 1 percent; for vehicles 87 percent and 1 percent, for telephone lines 74 percent and 1.5 percent.

For the poor to gain access to adequate resources to develop, the UN estimates that the rich need to decrease the wastefulness of their consumption tenfold.

Few leaders are yet committed to even attending Johannesburg and fewer still have anything to shout about. From Britain's Tony Blair who has broken promises on tropical forest wood, to the Danish Environment Minister Hans Christian Schmidt who has slashed his country's environmental programmes, or the leaders of Russia where officials support the continued pollution from nuclear power, or Indonesia whose government has not stopped illegal logging which contributes significantly to a deforestation rate which doubled in the 1990s and has doubled again since 1998. Scientists have predicted that Tesso Nilo rainforest on Sumatra will probably be cleared within four years - it has the richest plant flora in the world of any lowland rainforest.

Since Rio, tropical forest destruction has increased. More, according to the World Resources Institute, was lost in the 1990s than the 1980s. Working with the furniture company IKEA, the World Resources Institute (WRI) has mounted an unprecedented satellite analysis of the remaining natural forests. Eighty percent has been lost. "As we examined what we thought were still vast, untouched stretches of intact forests in the world, we came to the conclusion that they are fast becoming a myth," said Jonathan Lash of WRI. "Much of the green canopy that is left is, in reality, already criss-crossed by roads, mining and logging concessions."

Since Rio, governments have reneged on commitments, and together presided over global environmental decline. In 1996, a quarter of the world's species was recorded in danger of total extinction. In the same year, global emissions of CO₂ reached a new high. The Basel Convention waste trade ban of 1995 has yet to enter into force. Oceanic sea-mounts are being plundered of their fish stocks by new super-trawlers: the last vestiges of virgin sea resources. Meanwhile Norway and Japan want to resume commercial whaling.

Since Rio, the Global Climate Coalition, an organisation created by Business to prevent action on climate change, has had friends installed in the

Whitehouse. America plans to increase the use of coal, gas and oil. In 1995/6 alone, \$20.8 million was donated to US politicians by the oil and gas industry – 77 percent to Republicans. Enron and Exxon have dominated the energy policy of the world's largest carbon dioxide polluter. Already every glacier in the world is melting, North Pole ice has been turning to slush, half the coral reefs are dying, some from over-heated water, and the planet goes on getting warmer. The hottest year ever recorded was 1998.

A fifth of the world's population is threatened by dryland desertification. Despite the naive rhetoric of economists who foresaw a weightless economy and peaceful prosperity provided by an IT revolution, wars are now increasingly fought over basics such as water, and – because only seven percent of the world's energy supply is renewable - oil.

UNEP, the United Nations Environment Programme, estimates that on present trends “two out of every three persons on earth will live in water-stressed conditions by the year 2025.”

Since Rio, UNEP, has determined that the earth's nitrogen cycle is threatened by excessive use of fertiliser, sewage and burning fossil fuels. UNEP calls it a “global ... uncontrolled experiment.” Too much nitrogen poisons water, kills fish and chokes waterways with plant growth. One group calls it “junk food for plants.” And that of course is not all. Many of the same water supplies are heavily polluted with pesticides. Global acute pesticide poisonings run at 3.5 - 5 million a year, killing an estimated 20,000, mostly among the poor.

Look at the backyards of major “developed” cities and you quickly find the consequence of allowing industry and commerce to produce unlimited quantities of toxic products that are then made into “waste” – from antibiotics to paint to pesticides to heavy metals. They do not disappear: Thousands are toxic and persistent and accumulate in bodies, affecting foetal development, behaviour, and health. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s attempts to stop this flood of everyday toxins entering the seas or rivers centred on end-of-pipe solutions. This short-cut, short-term approach has created a legacy of toxic sludge and ash.

Sludge has been described as “a concoction of whatever was flushed down the drain: motor oil, dioxin, asbestos, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), heavy metals, bacteria, viruses, industrial solvents, any combination of the 70,000 chemicals used in U.S. industries, and so on. And the better the water at the end of the treatment cycle, the nastier the sludge will be.

“In the wealthiest country in the world [the USA], people's health is threatened by the industrial end product of state-of-the-art sewage treatment systems. In the Global South, where 65 percent of the population have no sanitation facilities at all, people get sick from exposure to excreta that carries disease.”

American sludge problems started with the Clean Water Act of 1972, at the time of UN Stockholm Conference. Between 1972 and 1987, US municipalities allocated \$60 billion on “treatment plants” creating eight million

dry tons of sludge annually. New York and New Jersey produce 11 million wet tons of sludge that were formerly dumped at sea. Over 2.5 million tons of sludge are now spread on American farmland each year and similar policies apply in Europe. Human, animal health, groundwater and ecological problems are multiplying - demonstrating the obvious fact that unless toxic persistent substances are designed out in the first place, there will be trouble.

By now it should be clear that superficial changes are not real solutions. Yet effective solutions are available for all major environmental problems - they are just not required by law, and will not be provided by the market alone.

Since Rio for example, Greenpeace and some businesses have produced a complete range of "Not In Kind" "greenfreeze" technologies to replace the CFCs that damage the ozone layer. But they cannot displace all damaging alternatives from the market - for that we need regulation, and most governments, are unfortunately backing the chemical industry "CFC substitute" of HFCs, themselves potent greenhouse gases.

Similarly, organic farming is growing world-wide but is threatened by pollution with genetically engineered genes or chemicals. GM (genetically modified) fish threaten ecosystems world-wide (it would take only one genetically modified salmon with reproductive capacity to escape from a pond to cause global irreversible damage!). And almost 100 years after (1914) Henry Ford's wife Clara owned an electric sedan car, electric models are coming onto the market but they will remain a niche business without legal moves to ban fossil petrol and diesel. Greenpeace calls on OECD governments to meet a 20 percent renewables target in ten years and to eliminate government subsidies to the coal, oil and nuclear sectors, which are estimated to US \$250-300 billion a year.

Likewise, since Rio, the Forest Stewardship and Marine Stewardship councils have started to source and protect well-managed fish and timber but they can do nothing to prevent over-fishing or deforestation, and are economically at a disadvantage in the short term without government regulation of the rest of the sector. What is required is a simple, new "green-only" policy, ruling out old, dirty and destructive options.

Ten years on from Rio, it looks bad for the Earth. Politicians like to think of themselves as coming from "the school of hard knocks." In truth they have been avoiding hard decisions, going for easy choices. Since Rio they have favoured voluntary approaches and letting industry set the pace, and often the direction. Only two years after Rio, they have created the World Trade Organisation, which has largely undermined and even fought against the outcomes of the first Earth Summit. Strangely, the signatories of the Rio agreements and the members of the WTO are, by in large, the same governments. It has been left to protestors, consumer groups and a few innovative business people to develop genuine solutions and oppose gross abuses of the environment. Voluntary groups have carried the baton since governments dropped it at Rio. Now it's time for political leaders to get off their backsides.

