Jobs vs. the Environment

written by Brian King | October 3, 2013

Is there a fundamental conflict between a healthy environment and a healthy economy?

There has been a lot of concern lately about damage that we humans are inflicting on our small, beautiful Planet Earth. Waste CO_2 from our way of life has been dissolving in the oceans, increasing the acidity of the water and making it very hard to, among other problems, raise Willipa Bay Oysters. Apparently, the delicious baby oysters can't make an adequate shell for themselves in the acidic seawater. And so I'm left to wonder if I will live to see the end of a special part of the Pacific Northwest that my family and I love.

Carbon Dioxide in the upper atmosphere acts like glass in a greenhouse. It allows sunlight to come in, but doesn't let as much heat escape back out to space, so the earth warms up. That's why it's referred to as a greenhouse gas. Since the 19^{th} century, when the industrial revolution really got going, the CO_2 content of our atmosphere has climbed by about a third. There has been a corresponding increase in average world-wide surface temperatures, which has melted a lot of ice that scientists say would be much better if left frozen. Apparently, there is a danger, if the increase in CO_2 continues, that the enormous glacier covering Greenland could disintegrate. That catastrophic ice melt would result in a rise in sea level of 20 feet or more, which would swamp many of the world's major cities, like New York and Miami. According to the Smithsonian Institution, "Since we have been keeping weather records, nineteen of the twenty hottest years *ever* have happened since 1980."

Besides rising sea levels, there's a lot to worry about from increasing levels of CO_2. The increased temperatures will lead to horrific draughts and decreased harvests where millions, and perhaps billions, will starve to death. Tropical diseases will move beyond the equator, causing people to catch malaria, maybe as far north as San Francisco. Ironically, dilution of seawater from ice melt will probably disrupt the Gulf stream enough to result in horribly cold and long winters for a while in Europe, possibly a mini-ice age as far south as Northern Italy.

All in all, it would be in the best interests of humankind if we were to come up with a plan to actually decrease atmospheric CO_2 concentrations. Many climate scientists agree that a level of 350 parts per million (ppm) is the maximum safe level. We're at a little over 380 ppm right now, which is the highest it's been in the last 10,000 years. Bill McKibben, the founder and leader of the environmental group 350.org, thinks we can get the CO_2 down to 350, but it's going to take some real effort. We need to stop using coal to produce power, and we need to quit refining the filthy oil from Canadian Tar Sands. We need to vastly increase public transit and insulate our buildings, and then we need to help people in other parts of the world, especially China and India, do likewise. Quite a tall order, but worth it, if you consider the grim alternative.

McKibben doesn't just talk a good game. He acts on what he believes. Under Bill's leadership, 350.org has staged a series of national demonstrations against something called the Keystone XL pipeline, which, if built, will vastly increase the amount of dirty, CO_2-rich tar sand oil being refined and burned. The February 2013 rally against the pipeline drew 40,000 people to our national mall in Washington DC. I hope these gatherings continue, because I think that public gatherings like these are the best way to begin to shift public sentiment in favor of producing less CO_2. Abraham Lincoln once said, and I completely agree with him, that "public sentiment means everything" in these matters. Go Bill!

But let's take a look at the movement to fight climate change from another angle. Since the consequences of allowing atmospheric CO_2 to continue to climb are so dire, why isn't the movement bigger? Why not 400,000? Heck, why not 4 million at the national mall to rally against the destruction of our beautiful climate?

I happened to catch the Melissa Harris Perry show on MSNBC the day after the big demo. Perry seemed delighted with the accomplishment of 350.org from the day before. While she was in complete agreement with the goal of reducing CO_2 to a safe level, she was compelled to offer a warning to McKibben and his group. Perry reported on a recent national Fox News poll taken to determine how much opposition there was to going ahead with the Keystone XL pipeline. The results should serve as a warning to the 40,000 who rallied in DC. According to the poll, opposition to Keystone XL among Americans hovers around 25%, and support for building the pipeline is at about 70%. Now, we all know how polls can be skewed by the questions asked, but still! As a matter of fact, Fox managed to tie the question of building the pipeline to holding U.S. gasoline prices down. It might have been a little different, if the poll just asked for a straightforward yes or no on the pipeline.

But why are we losing so badly in the battle for the hearts and minds of the American People? Why can't we get 400,000 at the mall? Don't people realize what's at stake here?

As a matter of fact, I don't think most people want to realize what is really happening, and therein lays the dilemma of Jobs versus the Environment.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, there is an issue of comparable magnitude to Keystone. Peabody Coal wants to build a coal export terminal in Bellingham, Washington, something that would vastly expand the amount of coal being exported from the American Mountain West to China. As I understand it, we're talking 9 trains a day, each 1.5 miles long and loaded to the gills with CO_2-rich anthracite, to be burned in China, with a lot of the pollution coming back here to the West Coast of the United States.

As one might expect, a considerable amount of opposition has emerged to these "death trains." The Sierra Club has led a good fight against the coal shipments, including organizing thousands to attend federal hearings in Seattle on whether the new terminals should be built. To its great credit, my union, the UFCW, was on the side of the angels at the Seattle hearing, where they handed out, free of charge, hundreds of lovely red "No Coal Trains" t-shirts. We'll see, later this year, if President Obama was listening or not.

What interested me greatly was the counter campaign that was waged in favor of building the terminal and running the trains. Apparently, a number of unions (not mine!) joined with Peabody Coal to try to convince the public that coal trains are a good idea. Their main argument was, you probably guessed it, JOBS! The TV and print campaign that the pro-coal forces put on was incredibly slick. Every TV ad that I saw featured working class folks like you and me, calling for the terminal to be built and promising 20,000 new jobs if their side prevailed. Who can say "no" to 20,000 jobs in this economy? Probably not unemployed construction workers in Bellingham, WA!

Jim Cramer, the host of the CNBC show "Mad Money," was recently on "Meet the Press" as a member of the morning's "powerhouse" panel. At one point in the discussion around lingering unemployment, Cramer weighed in forcefully to say that President Obama should approve the Keystone pipeline immediately. Cramer informed viewers that oil pipelines have been the largest generators of jobs in the U.S. for the last 3 years, and construction of Keystone would mean 60,000 jobs this year!

How can this “Jobs versus the Environment” conundrum be solved? In a capitalist jobs market, where it’s not possible to turn to the government for help, a decent job means everything. A life of dignity and respect, a healthy family, a nice place to live, all are possible with a good job. Without a living wage job, you join the growing ranks of life’s losers. This is why working people often shy away from the environmental movement. Just about anything that affords everyday people a better shot at a good job makes them say, “Let’s do it!” Doing things to protect the earth may be the right thing to do, but that always seems to mean fewer jobs.

And remember; vague talk about “green jobs,” to come at some undetermined point in the future, pales in comparison to 60,000 high-pay jobs this year, if we build Keystone.

So what can we do about it? To answer this question we need to go back into our history a little. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s final state of the union address called for a right to a job for every American. This talk is often referred to as his “Second Bill of Rights” speech. It contains a call for *the right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the nation*. After 12 years as the American President, he had come to the conclusion that the U.S. government should guarantee a job to all who are able and willing to work. If private industry can hire everybody, fine. If not, the federal government should step in as a back up. And if Roosevelt thought we could have Jobs for All in 1944, I say we can have Jobs for All today.

With a decent job no longer a worry, working people will be free to join us in the environmental movement, and help us stop global warming. Without a government job guarantee, everyday people will remain under the threat of job loss, and every time they hear about a new super storm or drought or rise in sea level, they’ll say, “I wish I could help, but I need to work, you know?”

Jobs for All will mean creation of government programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA.) The WPA offered millions of jobs to the unemployed in America at the height of the Great Depression. And these jobs were, for the most part, green jobs, created long before the need to protect the environment was understood like it is today. Jobs in a new WPA would probably be almost entirely green. Replanting forests, insulating homes and buildings, taking care of national parks, daycares, libraries, live theater groups, etc, etc, etc.

There are many differences between the idea of “Jobs for All” and calls for just “jobs” or “green jobs.” When we don’t say “for all,” working people wonder if they will be included. If everyday people don’t trust a government jobs program to include them, they will not join a movement to pressure Congress for the program. If we want to have a mass movement in support of our calls for more jobs, we have to say “for all” or “everybody.” This is why current proposals for more jobs don’t get too far.

Another concept of considerable importance to the environmental movement is something referred to as “Just Transition.” This idea usually refers to the provision in a union contract to provide equivalent jobs to workers who are laid off as the result of closing down a business like a dirty coal burning power plant. If just transition can be worked out, it seems like a fine idea to me. But we should keep in mind that the whole working class, including the unemployed, needs to be covered by just transition. That would be Living Wage Jobs for All.

So, when we achieve “Jobs for All,” we will have ended forever the problem of “jobs versus the environment.” Then we can welcome working people into the environmental movement. One thing I’d like to see is placing a tax on burning fossil fuels, a carbon tax. James Hansen makes a proposal for such a tax in his book, *Storms of Our Grandchildren.* An intriguing part of Hansen’s idea is that he would have all the money collected from the tax refunded, in equal shares, to everybody in America. Gas would cost a lot more for cars, as would heating of buildings, but people could use the

money they receive for transit and insulation. Everybody could relax because of the government guarantee of a decent job, and the CO_2 in the atmosphere would start to go down, instead of up. Global warming would slow way down. It would be very cool!

Brian King is a retired respiratory therapist who's been working with 350.org on global warming and with DSA on "Jobs for All."