

Virginia Viewpoint

Earth Day Revisited

By William C. Dennis, Ph.D.

Summary

Increasingly, parents are questioning whether it is appropriate for public schools to propagandize children with environmental doomsday assessments that cannot be supported by fact or knowledge.

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While friends of liberty can be glad this Earth Day nonsense is over for another year, they can hardly be pleased with the state of environmental education in our schools.

My children recently participated in Earth Day assignments at school. According to the curriculum, the environment is a mess; humans constitute environmental dangers; global warming is upon us; we face deteriorating water and air quality; our familiar way of life is threatened by resource depletion, urban sprawl, and growing mountains of trash; we are awash in human-generated carcinogens, and so on and so forth. While friends of liberty can be glad this Earth Day nonsense is over for another year, they can hardly be pleased with the state of environmental education in our schools. Perhaps it is time for parents to sit down with their kids to present an alternative view of the state of the planet. Here are some of the points I try to make in discussions with my children.

- **By most measures of environmental quality, things are getting better.** We are living longer and healthier lives. Child mortality rates are down. Standards of living continue to improve, even for the poor. Educational and cultural opportunities abound. American enterprise remains creative and energetic. Social mobility is high. Per capita disposable income continues to increase. Available per capita living space continues to rise. Our water and air continue to become cleaner. Age-corrected cancer rates are falling.
- **Global warming, if it exists, is a manageable condition.** The most recent computer models of possible human-induced global warming reduce the predicted amount of warming to much lower levels than earlier models. But computer models are only sophisticated guesses, and scientists are divided over the quality of the science behind them. Predicted changes are well within the range of known temperature fluctuations that have been recorded during human history.
- **We are not facing shortages of water and energy, but price controls and other regulations have created artificial restrictions in supply.** The universe is a bundle of energy, and water is the most common substance on earth. We are not running out of either commodity, but usable forms of water and energy are not always available in desired quantities at particular places. Politicians then step in with price controls, rationing, regulations, subsidies, and even criminal penalties to limit use or to require the sharing of limited supplies of these goods. This is just another version of socialist state

planning. Dozens of studies show that if prices are allowed to float freely and politicians keep their hands off various regulatory mechanisms, higher prices allow new supplies to be brought to market, produce more efficient use of commodities, create new technologies, and draw goods from one market to another. The one defect of this market process is that it does not allow politicians to pretend to be doing anything useful. Variations on this theme account for perceived shortages in other natural resources as well.

- **Urban sprawl is a sign of prosperity and healthy growth.** As population and wealth grow, Americans are going to use their newfound prosperity to purchase a healthier and higher quality life, which will include larger homes with the modern amenities associated with suburban living. However, zoning restrictions, urban planning, land use regulations, and high taxes force new developments farther out from the center of cities and increase the separation of neighborhoods from workplaces and shopping districts. These rules add to congestion, increase energy use, and encourage the very environmental changes they were meant to prohibit or control.
- **Liberty is the best environment for human beings.** This is an environment that consists of the rule of law; well-defined and secure property rights; secure contracts; a market-based economy; and limited, democratic government. Over the ages this has been a rare and endangered environment and is still under threat throughout the world by intrusive central governments and socialists of all persuasions. An environment of liberty produces peace and prosperity; longer and better lives; and eventually, after lots of hard work, substantial wealth, much of which can be used to produce high-quality environmental amenities such as parks, nature preserves, clean air and water, and programs of species preservation. We should not let this environment be threatened by the political agenda of those environmental groups that do not support the institutions of liberty.

Parents will want to expand on these themes and guide their children to reading they can do on their own. We must remind our kids, and occasionally ourselves, that assertions made about environmental degradation are often not supported by facts or science. With practice and over time, our children will learn that it is silly to duck every time an “expert” in search of a federal research grant howls the sky is falling.

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(William C. Dennis was a special assistant to the assistant secretary for policy, budget, and administration in the United States Department of the Interior during the first Reagan Administration, and is a member of the Board of Scholars of the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, an education and research organization headquartered in Potomac Falls, Virginia. **Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliations are cited.**)

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John Taylor
Virginia Institute for Public Policy
20461 Tappahannock Place
Potomac Falls, Virginia
20165-4791

Phone: (703) 421-8635
Fax: (703) 421-8631

www.VirginiaInstitute.org
JTaylor@VirginiaInstitute.org

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