The Green Dream

▸ A global quest brought this journalist face-to-face with ıundreds of people from all walks of life, talking with hem about humanity's environmental future. What he ound was a common concern and the foundations for ıope.

ɪy *Mark Hertsgaard*

TALK ABOUT A problem that tests one's capacity for hope! I spent much of the 1990s traveling around the world, investigating one of the great questions of our time: Will humanity act quickly ınd decisively enough to avoid environmental self-destruction? I returned home sobered by all I had seen ınd wrote a book (*Earth Odyssey*), which tried to provide ınswers. In the years since, I've continued to cover environmental issues, and I confess that there have been moments when reports from around the world have made me question anew my species' long-term prospects.

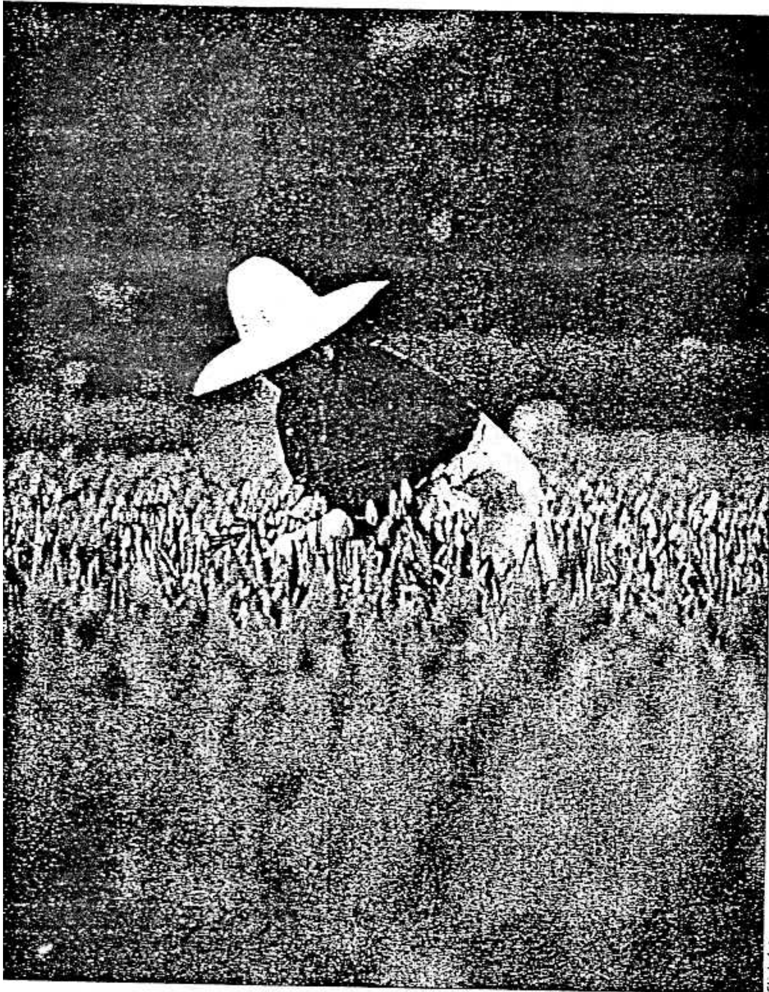
But the most important lesson I learned during my global travels was the difference between optimism and hope, and that lesson continues to sustain me. Optimism is the belief that things will turn out well, but sad to say, the objective facts give little reason to expect that humanity will avoid environmental suicide. Hope, on the other hand, is an active, determined conviction that is rooted in the spirit, chosen by the heart, and guided by the mind. Hope has triumphed numerous times in recent human history—think of the falls of apartheid and the Soviet Empire—and it is indispensable to humanity's chances of creating an environmentally sustainable future.

Hope, after all, is the foundation of action, and in my travels I uncovered two principal reasons for hope. First, most people want to do right by the environment and, if given the chance, they will—as long as they are not penalized too much economically for it. Second, far from being enemies, economic and environmental health can reinforce one another. That means humans could get rich—always a powerful incentive for our species—by cleaning up our ravaged environment. But will we?

My quest to investigate humanity's environmental future led me to set off around the world in 1991, and I didn't return home for good until 1997. In 2001, I left on a second global journey to explore why America fascinates and infuriates the world—and I learned that its environmental behavior was no small part of the reason. In my travels, I made extended and sometimes repeated stops in twenty-five countries, including such environmentally devastated nations as Russia and China; I also spent considerable amounts of time in Africa, Europe, Japan and Brazil. I spoke with hundreds of individuals along the way—politicians such as Al Gore and Vaclav Havel, activists like Jacques Cousteau and Kenyan human rights leader Wangari Matthai, businessmen like Ted Turner—but my most illuminating exchanges were invariably with ordinary people: working men and women on the streets of Istanbul, London and Bangkok; peasants scratching out a living on Brazil's central highlands and Botswana's Okavanga delta; young students in Tokyo, Havana, and Thessaloniki, yearning for a brighter future; starving villagers in war-torn Sudan.

Scientists had long studied whether elephants in the wild or dolphins in the deep were heading for extinction; I wanted to shift the gaze and turn the binoculars on my fellow humans. Just as scientists compare a given animal's behavior with the dynamics of its habitat to determine whether it is endangered or not, I wanted to analyze humans' collective behavior in relationship to Earth's ecosystems in order to gauge the environmental prospects of Homo sapiens. Library research was essential to this task, but there was no substitute for getting out and talking with the people who were actually living the story.

This grassroots reporting yielded one of the most encouraging results of my investigation. In hundreds of conversations with individuals from all walks of life, I found that not only had the vast majority of people heard about the gathering ecological crisis, they cared and were eager to talk about it (which is more than could be said about other issues of global import, such as the vicious slaughters then taking place in Bosnia and Rwanda). People tended to be better informed about their own



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area's environmental ills than about such global questions as biodiversity and climate change. Often they did not grasp the scientific details of either, but the overall importance of environmental hazards was accepted without question, as was the need to do something about them. That such awareness existed in virtually every country I visited (the exception being China, where official censorship pertained) and at all levels of society was all the more remarkable considering the limited information available to many people.

I remember a woman in Uganda who ran a small grocery store near the Botanical Gardens in Entebbe. Tall, big-boned, she looked about 35 and wore a light blue bandana that knotted behind her neck. Although this woman lived in a country where the leading newspaper was four pages long and devoted largely to government pronouncements, she was remarkably well informed. She crisply explained to me how desertification was threatening her village, and she was even familiar with the more distant hazard of ozone depletion, which she referred to as "the hole in the sky." She did not know what caused ozone depletion, and she had not heard about the greenhouse effect at all (in this she was no different from some urban Europeans and Americans I had met), but she seemed genuinely interested in my descriptions of these problems and hopeful that remedial action would be taken.

Nevertheless, I also encountered despair about humanity's environmental prospects; most people I met doubted that sufficient remedial action would be taken in time. When strangers learned I was writing a book about whether human civilization would survive the many environmental pressures crowding in upon it at the dawn of the 21st century, their response usually was to ask, "Well, will we?" And often, before I could reply, they would ruefully add words to the effect of, "It doesn't look good, does it?"

No, it doesn't, and there's no sense denying it. To be sure, some progress has been made since I began my travels in 1991. Population growth is slowing in many parts of the Third World; production of the chemicals that destroy the ozone layer has declined (though the ozone hole itself will keep expanding for years to come); energy efficiency is increasingly recognized as being both environmentally and economically clever. But compared to the magnitude of the global environmental threat, the progress has been too incremental, too grudging and slow. Most key trends are still moving in the wrong direction, and many are picking up speed.

The best example is arguably the most worrisome: climate change. The world's leading climate scientists, gathered under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, have called for 60 to 80 percent reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to prevent the world's climate system from spinning out of control. Such reductions go far beyond the world's official response, the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which urges mere 5.2 percent reductions. And despite its inadequacy, the Kyoto Protocol has still not come into force, because the United States and Russia have refused to ratify it on the

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dubious grounds that reducing emissions will hurt economic growth.

For most environmental hazards, the gap between what science demands and what our political structures deliver remains vast, and it is vigilantly patrolled by powerful interests that profit from the existing order. In the United States, the 2000 election brought to power George W. Bush, a former oil man who staffed his government with executives from extractive industries. They simply ignored science they didn't like in order to push policies that benefited corporate colleagues. Bush compiled the most anti-environmental record of any modern American president. Yet he paid little political price, largely because the public was distracted by his so-called war on terrorism. Many of Bush's anti-terrorist policies, most notably in Iraq, promised only to make the problem worse; as I reported in the November 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair*, Bush was doing worse than nothing to prevent a terrorist attack on U.S. nuclear weapons facilities—a nuclear September 11th—that could kill not three thousand but three hundred thousand people and leave huge areas uninhabitable for decades.

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The larger point is that environmental threats such as climate change, water scarcity, and loss of species pose dangers to security and prosperity no less ominous than those posed by terrorism, only less sudden. If terrorism continues to push environmental concerns to the back of the public agenda, our civilization's breakdown may still come, just with a whimper rather than a bang.

The crowning complication that darkens the environmental picture is how rising consumption, especially in the wealthy North but increasingly in the impoverished South as well, threatens to push Earth's carrying capacity past the breaking point. Nowhere exemplifies the problem better than China. The market reforms China instituted in the early 1980s ignited one of the most fantastic economic booms in modern history. Average real incomes doubled by 1997, as hundreds of millions of Chinese were lifted out of absolute poverty into mere ordinary poverty. Since then, living standards have continued to improve, and who would wish otherwise?

The environmental effects, however, have been catastrophic. China has the world's worst air pollution—nine of the ten cities with the most polluted air are in China—and water pollution is equally severe. According to World Bank figures, nearly one of every three deaths in China is attributable to the toxic air and water. And China's gigantic population—one of every four humans is Chinese—ensures that the effects extend to the world at large. China is the second-leading emitter of greenhouse gases, and it is projected to overtake the United States by 2020.

Yet virtually every Chinese I met was willing to tolerate these appalling environmental conditions in return for more jobs, higher incomes, greater comfort. What else is China supposed to do, one senior government official asked me—go back to no heat in the winter? Impossible.

And China is only part of the problem. Bear in mind that most people on Earth are desperately poor; 45 percent of them live on $2 a day or less. As the bottom two-thirds of humanity strives to improve their lot in the years to come, demanding such basics as adequate heat and food, not to mention cars and computers, our species' environmental footprint is certain to grow. The great challenge facing civilization in the 21st century is to accommodate this mass ascent from poverty without wrecking the natural systems that make life on this planet possible in the first place.

SOUNDS daunting, no? But remember, people worldwide are willing to act to protect the environment, so long as we don't force them to choose between a life of perpetual scarcity or a path that will destroy our planet.

And we already have in hand most of the technologies needed to chart a new course. We know how to use oil, wood, water, coal, and other resources much

more efficiently than we do now. Increased efficiency—doing more with less—will enable us to use fewer resources and thus produce less pollution per capita, buying us the time to bring solar power, hydrogen fuel cells, and other futuristic technologies on line. If we're smart, humans could make restoring the environment the biggest economic enterprise of our time, a huge source of jobs, profits, and the alleviation of poverty.

The idea is to environmentally renovate human civilization from top to bottom, in rich and poor countries alike. People would remake everything from our farms to our factories, our schools, houses, offices, and everything inside them. The economic activity such renovating would generate is enormous. Better yet, it would be labor-intensive, providing jobs and addressing the poverty that is the irreducible other half of the environmental challenge.

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Governments would not have to spend more money so much as spend it differently. For example, every year the United States government buys from Detroit some 56,000 new vehicles for official use. Washington could help bring green cars to market if it told Detroit that from now on, the cars it buys must be hybrid-electrics or hydrogen-fueled. Detroit might scream and holler, but if Washington stood firm, Detroit would soon be climbing the technological learning curve and offering those cars on the open market. We know such government pump-priming works; it's how the computer industry and Internet went from being government projects in the 1960s to the key engine of the 1990s productivity boom.

Reform is needed overseas as well. China would use 50 percent less coal (and thus produce 50 percent less pollution) if it simply installed energy efficiency technologies already available in the marketplace: better lighting, more insulation, smarter motors. The United States and other wealthy industrial nations should help China buy these technologies, not only because it would reduce climate change but because it would create jobs and profits for workers and companies back home.

All this sounds good on paper, but in the real world reform is often blocked by beneficiaries of the status quo, be they executives at Exxon-Mobil or bureaucrats in China's coal industry. For change to happen, politics must be committed. If even half of the $500 billion to $900 billion in environmentally destructive subsidies now offered by the world's governments were redirected, the transition to a green future would be off to a roaring start. Likewise, if the world's governments made sure market prices reflected the real social costs of air pollution and other environmental hazards (increased health care costs alone amount to billions of dollars worldwide), the immense power of the market would lead businesses and consumers alike to act in more environmentally positive ways.

I have dubbed my proposal the Global Green Deal, but the name matters less than the concept: putting people and businesses to work in environmentally healing rather than destructive ways. I'm happy to report there has been real progress since I first outlined this idea in my book, Earth Odyssey. "The Apollo Project" is a ten-year, $300 billion plan to create manufacturing, construction, and other well-paying jobs by promoting green cars, high-speed rail, and other forms of technological innovation and energy efficiency in the United States. In the lead-up to the 2004 presidential campaign, ten of America's biggest labor unions endorsed the Apollo Project, and major Democratic candidates backed similar plans.

A green jobs program is no silver bullet. It might, however, buy humanity time to make the more deep-seated changes—in our often excessive appetites, in our curious belief that humans are the center of the Universe, in our sheer numbers—that will be needed to repair our relationship with the environment. And if the United States takes the lead, other nations will follow. As Beldrich Moldan, the former environment minister of the Czech Republic, told me, "As a European, you may like the

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United States or not like the United States. But you know it's the future."

SO I REMAIN hopeful that humanity will change its ways in time to avoid catastrophe. I can't say I'm optimistic, but that returns me to the difference between optimism and hope.

It was Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and human rights hero, who first made me recognize this distinction. I interviewed Havel in Prague in September 1991, two years after he became the president of Czechoslovakia. If anyone ever had an excuse for giving up the fight because the outlook seemed hopeless, it was Havel at the start of the 1980s. He was serving a four-year prison term then because he refused to accept the totalitarian regime's restrictions on his, or anyone's, freedom to do, say, and think what they wanted. He chose to go to jail rather than compromise at a time when such sacrifice seemed quixotic at best. No one expected the Soviet system to end anytime soon; its hold over the lives of its citizens seemed as absolute as the passivity of most of the citizens. So what good was it for Havel to endure prison? Who could expect his action to make a practical difference?

Vaclav Havel

But hope ended up trumping optimism. By decade's end, the Velvet Revolution had overthrown the regime and catapulted Havel into the president's castle—not only because of his own leadership but because tens of thousands of ordinary Czechs and Slovaks had thrown off their fears and passivity and poured into the streets to demand change.

What is Havel's relevance to the environmental challenge?

He always insisted he was no hero; he was simply driven by an unshirkable sense of personal responsibility. As discussed earlier in this book, his compatriot, the novelist Milan Kundera, once refused to sign a petition that Havel was circulating on behalf of political prisoners in the late 1960s; Kundera questioned whether such symbolic acts of opposition had much practical effect against a totalitarian government. Havel insisted that calculations about what was practical must never stand in the way of doing what was right, not least because such calculations often led a person not to act at all. "When a person tries to act in accordance with his conscience," Havel explained, "it won't necessarily lead anywhere, but it might. There's one thing, however, that will never lead anywhere, and that is speculating [about whether] such behavior will lead somewhere."

Substitute Nelson Mandela's or Martin Luther King's name for Havel's, and the same point applies: fighters for a better world must do what is right, must act, and let the consequences take care of themselves. Be strategic, of course. But don't let apparently long odds paralyze you. When supposed experts disparage a given point of view or strategy as unrealistic, remember that the same was said about Mandela's and King's and Havel's fights for justice. History is cunning. The fact is, humans aren't wise enough to know what lies ahead—what is "realistic"—not least because their own actions will help decide that mystery.

"Change can come fast once the times are right," John Passacantando, now the executive director of Greenpeace USA, told me. "In 1957, Lyndon Johnson was voting against the Civil Rights Act as the Senate Majority Leader, but by 1965 he was signing that Act as President—not because he had changed, but because the world around him had changed. Now our world is changing. So I do have hope. And with hope, you can have magic."

Mark Hertsgaard is a journalist, author, and broadcaster whose work has been published in fifteen languages. His most recent books are The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World *and* Earth Odyssey: Around the World In Search of Our Environmental Future. *For more information, see www.markhertsgaard.com.*

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