

THE DRIVER OF CHANGE :
PAUL ALLEN

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JOINING UP THE DOTS



If we think holistically about our planetary problems, we are presented with an equal number of solutions.

IT IS NOW well over thirty years since a bunch of young idealists colonised a derelict slate quarry in Wales to establish the Centre for Alternative Technology. At that time what we meant by 'being green' was a lot less defined, and certainly a lot less tested. The original pioneers were inspired by the notion of building a living community to test ideas for self-sufficient living, to discover which ones worked and which ones didn't. Back in the early 1970s, the key motive was to develop ways of surviving the collapse of society. It was the height of the Cold War, and many people thought a full-out nuclear exchange was likely, if not inevitable. If not nuclear war, then some biological or ecological disaster fuelled a feeling of imminent collapse, so we felt it necessary to 'take to the hills' and develop self-reliant technologies.

Three decades later, such a collapse has still not happened. However, after the long sleep of the 1980s and 1990s, the fears of these original pioneers are now re-emerging. We now depend for our continued existence on increasingly remote suppliers working through ever more distant systems that have no obligations to us, and indeed are not expected to have any; and all this totally reliant on easy access to

cheap, abundant fossil fuels. With escalating global demand for diminishing fossil-fuel reserves, we are once again forced to question which aspects of our lives we should trust to transnational corporations and which aspects are better sourced more locally.

SO WHAT HAVE we learned in forty years? Well, we must recognise that we 'greens' have successfully identified and publicised a great many ecological challenges. So much so, that I feel our task in coming decades is to re-focus our resources, and indeed the world's resources, on solving the urgent, critical challenges and not be distracted by the peripheral ones. By 'urgent challenges', I mean those which are irreversible, or could run away out of control, or are an absolute moral imperative. My choice would be:

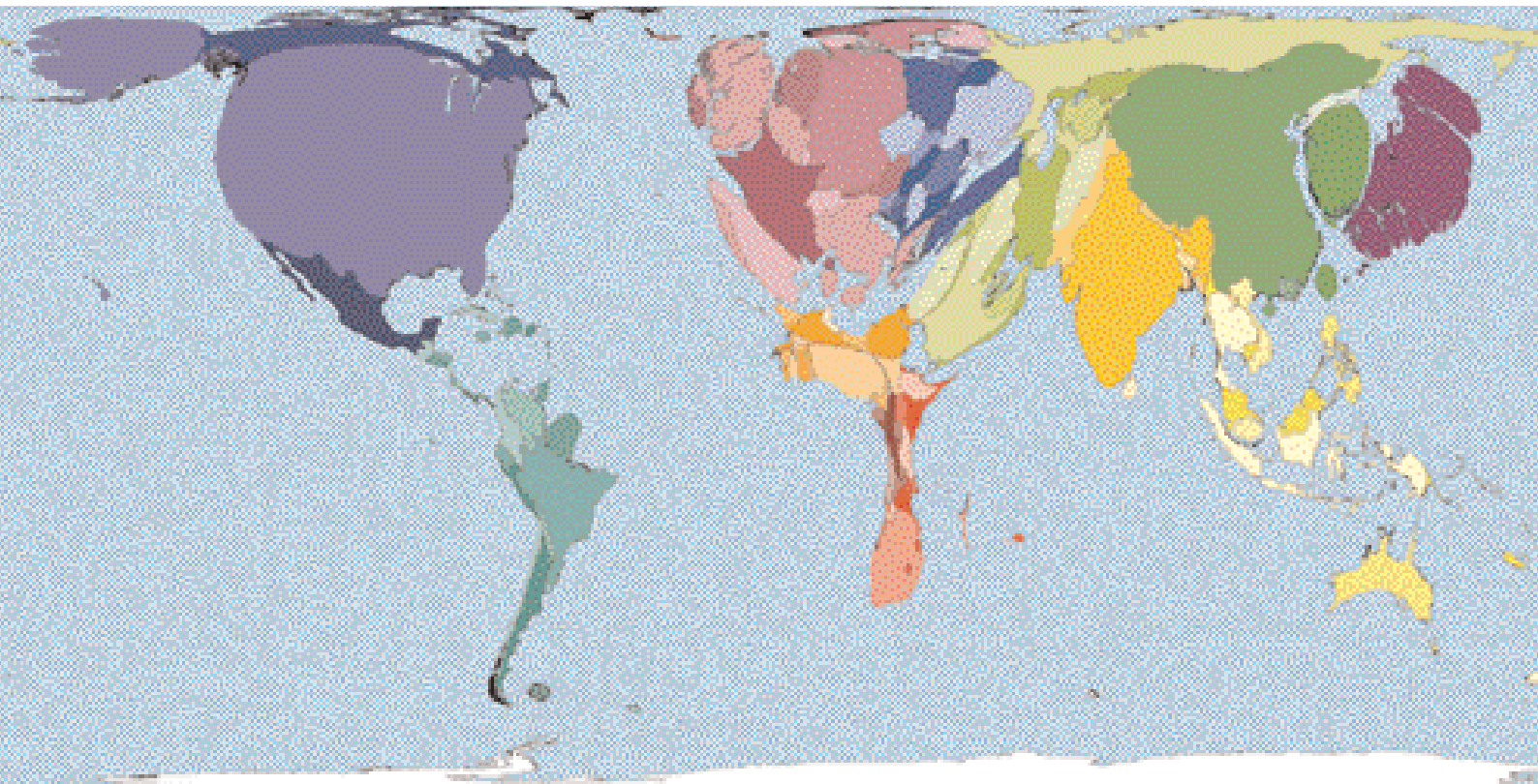
- Energy
- Biodiversity and habitat
- Global equity

This trinity poses a formidable challenge to the security and wellbeing of everyone on Earth. Runaway climate change would dwarf Hurricane Katrina and continue for tens of thousands of years. Also, our oil- and gas-powered economies are now being halted by

the immovable facts of geology – despite accelerating demand, global rates of production may be approaching their peak. In addition, biodiversity is vital as it gives stability to the biosphere, and species extinctions are, of course, irreversible. And despite record increases in global economic activity, the world's rich are still getting richer and the poor are still getting poorer.

Although these three challenges are becoming increasingly familiar, their experts still work in relative isolation and their solutions are rarely considered holistically. The key to success will be to recognise that these problems and therefore their solutions are fundamentally and inextricably linked. There are solutions to peak oil that accelerate climate change, and there are solutions to global equity that exacerbate peak oil. Solving one challenge at the expense of another will not do. We must solve them together. Indeed, once we join the dots and look for the bigger picture, we find plenty of common ground. Facing up to our oil addiction and re-thinking our diet, buildings, energy, water, work, clothing, heating, holidays and healthcare can mitigate climate change, help preserve habitat and release resources the majority world urgently needs.

But even if we in the UK can get our



This map is a cartogram, which re-sizes each country according to some other variable – in this case, fuel use. So countries with high fuel use will appear much larger than those with low fuel use © 2006 SASI GROUP (UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD) AND MARK NEWMAN (UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN) <WWW.WORLDMAPPER.ORG>

carbon emissions under control, humanity can only avoid catastrophic conflict, climate chaos or devastation of habitat if we can encourage everyone else to follow suit. A ‘global solution’ must embrace all our needs. The major contender, contraction and convergence, suggests that we in the overdeveloped West must contract our level of emissions to converge at some ‘fair share’ with those of the majority world, thus working towards equity between North and South.

Our current use of fossil fuels has grown well above that which is required to deliver our wellbeing; we are, in fact, energy-obese. A ‘power-down plus renewables’ strategy will not only reduce and forestall the problems: it will also make us much better-placed to cope with them. For example, the potential powerdown that could be achieved through a rethink in the way we grow and distribute our food is massive. We export many thousands of tonnes of lamb to the EU whilst importing a very similar amount of lamb from the EU. Similar paradoxes exist for almost everything we buy. Local food solutions are not only more energy-efficient: they are considerably more reliable.

Once we have contracted our energy consumption to converge with our

fair share, delivering it with renewable sources not only becomes achievable but it rapidly becomes cheaper as oil prices hit the roof, and potentially more dependable as fossil-fuel imports become intermittent. Solving these three challenges holds the potential to allow us to create the kind of world that we actually want to live in. It doesn’t have to be a huge disaster. We now have a chance to change everything, because everything must be changed. But we must use the time and the oil we have left to the very best effect now and not bury our heads in the sands of denial.

PERHAPS THE NEXT KEY lesson for the coming forty years is that the environmental movement cannot simply project an array of scary disasters and expect that society will ‘hear the message’ and make the changes required. We must actively engage global society in a solutions-driven programme. But in doing this we must all ‘walk our talk’. The choices we make in the UK will set trends that will be followed by many others. For example, if Britain makes nuclear power a core component of its response to climate change and energy security, many other rapidly developing economies will want to follow

suit. It will then be very hard for us to make a case for why we are allowed civil nuclear power when it is forbidden to others.

Another important lesson is to recognise that the current ‘development’ strategy of encouraging the majority world to pull itself out of poverty through globalised trade could well be a blind alley. The sheer scale of such an enterprise may prove more than the planet’s climate can bear, and there probably isn’t enough cheap oil left to do it for long enough. Far better, if we enable the majority world to become self-reliant.

I feel that we must also recognise that alternative lifestyles and alternative personal aspirations are just as important as alternative technologies. As well as reducing our impacts, they engage people by fulfilling needs that are currently going unsatisfied. Our energy-intensive, consumerist lifestyles are not actually making us any happier. Since the 1970s the UK’s GDP (gross domestic product) has doubled, but our perceived ‘satisfaction with life’ has hardly changed.

The most important thing is to keep up the pressure; although the global challenges are very large, powerful and daunting, things are changing – and they’re changing fast! ●