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Commentary

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FRANK QUINN*

Commentary

For those of us who began our careers in the 1960s, it was enough to practice "water resources" or "river basin" management. In the 1970s and 1980s, we learned to extend our vision to indirect and unintended consequences in the larger field of "environmental" management. Now in the 1990s, "environment" is no longer good enough. Canada's Green Plan, for example, tells us to think, plan and act in terms of "ecosystems." But to do that is to place more emphasis on managing ourselves than elements of our environment. That is a fundamental change not just for the engineer, forester, farmer, and miner whose *raison d'être* is to transform nature into useful products, but for all of us who are consumers of those products. The vast majority of people who consume goods, pay taxes, and elect governments have not even begun to realize what that means, even as they endorse the deceptively simple concept of management by ecosystem.

We are indebted to Professor Francis for presenting an abbreviated course on the different schools of thought on dealing with ecosystems and for bringing us up to date on efforts to define and ensure ecosystem objectives in the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. As one of the gurus of the scientific community in a region where the ecosystem approach has achieved some considerable status, he presents an optimistic view of further gains to be made, including an Ecosystem Charter for the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence. As one who is only barely conversant with the literature cited by Francis, but nevertheless impatient to see some results, my view is, by contrast, pessimistic. My concerns, not with the concept but with the way it is unfolding, are several, but it may suffice to raise three here.

Is There Life beyond the Great Lakes?

The ecosystem approach has official status in the international Great Lakes region, but it is not much in evidence elsewhere along the Canadian/United States boundary, and not at all along the United States/Mexico boundary. It is not surprising that this region has become a hotbed of ecoactivism—important commercial and sport fisheries are under assault by an industrial economy, not to mention the drinking water of almost 40 million people. Beginning with the first IJC pollution reference

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on the lower Great Lakes in 1964, the governments have mounted probably the most massive scientific investigation ever undertaken into water quality. But now, almost three decades later, the gurus and groupies of the Great Lakes research community continue to concentrate their best efforts here. Preoccupation with the Lakes leaves other regions vulnerable; and the multi-jurisdictional nature and rehabilitation needs of the Great Lakes could keep the governments pinned down for a long time to come.

Rather than wait out decisive results here, each country should at least consider opening a second front in its own territory wherever the population is smaller and more receptive to living within its means, the economy is simpler, and the prospect for anticipating and preventing problems rather than cleaning up after them is more apparent. In Canada, this prescription fits many of our northern regions where native land and water uses are more compatible with ecosystem thinking than the prevailing regime of corporate exploitation.

Can Ecosystem Management Keep the IJC Afloat?

The good news is that the International Joint Commission succeeded in the 1978 and 1987 revisions of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement in having the Parties commit themselves "to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem." The bad news is that Canada and the United States in fact weakened the authority of the Commission in these same two revisions of the original 1972 Agreement. As Professor Francis notes, they have taken back direct program responsibilities, despite advice from many observers to confer more responsibility upon the Commission. That does not leave the IJC without influence, of course; it still plays an important role as facilitator for working groups inside and outside government and as an advocate for measure which will further the intent of ecosystem planning.

Generally speaking, the Commission does not enjoy the same confidence of the Parties which it once did. It has no current references to investigate outside of the Great Lakes, as the governments prefer to deal with each other directly (e.g., Niagra toxics) or to let subnational levels of government take more initiative in transboundary arrangements. If the IJC is to recover from recent neglect at the hands of its governmental sponsors, it must first convince those governments that it's "living experiment" with ecosystem management will ultimately be successful. That is a tall order, considering that the easier tasks are done and the tougher ones are ahead, made tougher by the almost certain reluctance of these same governments to back up the RAP process with sufficient funding and enforcement. The current membership on the Commission has shown little leadership on this matter, either in public appearance or in the corridors of government.

Fly Now, Pay Later?

The assumption is still being made at all levels of decisionmaking that continued economic growth is a desirable and sustainable goal for government policy. From ecological principles, however, it is difficult to justify continued growth; it is stability and equilibrium that must be achieved for the long term survival of our species within a global ecosystem.

If that prospect is too far in the future for our governments to worry about, they might at least begin to relate economic and environmental or ecosystem needs, perhaps along the lines of the Brundtland Commission. Yet, Canada and the United States ignored completely the implications of economic activity for our continental ecosystem in negotiating the Free Trade Agreement that came into effect in 1989. One of the effects of this Agreement is likely to be the earlier and larger scale construction of megaprojects in Canada's northern hinterlands to export energy resources, despite abundant evidence of disruptions caused by existing hydro and oil sands developments. The same mistake is likely to be compounded in the upcoming North American free trade discussions which will include Mexico.

In the end, pretending we gain in one sphere without affecting the other cannot overcome nature's bottom line.