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Commentary

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Commentary

I serve as Commentator to these opening papers in the context of my role as a Professor of Environmental Conservation, and therefore as one whose role has focused on the resolution of environmental problems and not necessarily on the problems of amity between and among nations. Given that the ecological paradigm neither recognizes nor respects borders, the ecological paradigm and ecological reality are not the same as the paradigm nor the reality of the nation-state, nor that of national sovereignty. Nor are they, in fact, the same as the prevailing economic paradigm.

I think it is only fair in this commentary for me to convey to you my fundamental belief that the environmental problem is not fundamentally a question or problem of science and technology, although questions of science and technology do play a role; that environmental problems are not fundamentally questions of economics, although economics does play a role; that environmental problems are not fundamentally problems of politics or diplomacy or international relations, although they too have their part to play. What are they then?

Environmental problems, natural resource problems, are fundamentally questions of values and ethics, of how we see and how we fail to see, and the assumptions we make. They are, therefore, philosophical questions, questions of moral choice. It is in that context in which I comment on the two opening papers.

There is more to take note of on the question of context. When we view institutions such as the Canada/United States International Joint Commission (IJC), with which I am more familiar, or the Mexico/United States International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), with which I am less familiar, we must ask ourselves a question which we too infrequently ask: was the purpose of these two institutions, as they were conceptualized and organized by the three national governments in question, to resolve, or even to manage, transboundary environmental problems and protect the integrity of transboundary ecosystems, or to protect, maintain and promote amicable transnational relations, or, at least, to put out diplomatic fires and cut unnecessary diplomatic losses? These two goals are not the same; in fact, they are fundamentally never the same, even though they are at times synchronous. We do not charge our diplo-

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mats, and our civil servants answerable to our diplomats, with ecosystemic or environmental protection. We charge them with protecting international governmental and, in effect, economic relationships, with cutting costs associated with malfunctioning relationships, and, perhaps most importantly, with promoting the national interest at all cost. This cost may well include cost to the environment, to the ecosystem. And such national interest relates to protecting the way of life of those people living within the national borders who have a voice in the process. Service to an ecological paradigm and service to a political economy are two different things, rendered even more separate by the reality of the difference between western industrial society's governing economic principles, whether of the left or right, and what ecologists are forever telling us are the principles of ecology (i.e., all things are interdependently connected to all other things, there is no such thing as a "free lunch," et cetera).

So, let us then ask, and try to answer, an often expressed question, and one which has again been expressed in these two opening papers: Is the Canada/United States IJC successful? Is the Mexico/United States IBWC successful? The answer must be yes and it must be no, depending upon the paradigm against which it is measured. And, since both institutions are a product of and are designed to serve the prevailing socioeconomic paradigm, and the resultant political framework, they really ought only to be judged against that paradigm. In that case, yes, they have been, and continue to be, successful, at least moderately so, in maintaining stability, the end goal of bureaucracy, and in protecting the national interest and national sovereignty, the end goal of diplomacy.

Dare we, therefore, measure them against an ecological paradigm, against adherence to ecological principles? Undoubtly such would be a rather unfair measure. But if we do so anyway, while acknowledging a tilt in the IJC, at least in the Great Lakes, toward a recognition of ecological realities, of oneness, of wholism irrespective of borders, we must nevertheless recognize the ecologically unhealthy, the ecologically unstable, the ecologically deteriorated state, the fundamentally unsustainable state of the international border environments along both the Canada/United States and Mexico/United States border, a status not exclusive, of course, but merely reflective of circumstances within these three nations, circumstances which reveal drastically the personal value systems of the several hundred million human beings who reside in these three nation-states. Thus, accomplishments on the ecological front, we need remind ourselves, are minuscule when measured against the enormity of the challenge. We place too much faith in, and we grant too much credence to so-called successes, successes which may be formidable in the affairs of nation-states and in the eyes of international diplomacy, but which are too often little or as nothing in the ecological realm.

So much, then, for defining context. Let me be a bit more specific. I for one have experienced a degree of pleasure in watching the evolution in thinking of a gentleman whom many of us have enormous respect and admiration and, I will say, affection for, Keith Caldwell. His voice is so important in the international environmental policy dialogue, and I have watched with interest his social science thinking transcend the limitations of social science and begin to move toward humanities thinking. (I'm tempted to say more humane thinking, but I don't want the social scientists reading this to feel that I think of them as in any way inhumane.) I would not say that Keith is as strong on the ethics and values side of things in this paper as he has been in some, but nevertheless his own appreciation for and respect of the role of ethics and values as providing ultimate answers to these challenges with which we are faced is, to this commentator, very much on target.

In his paper, Professor Caldwell helps us to understand what the IJC was meant to be and, in fact, is, while making note that many in society have unrealistic expectations of what it is or can be. Its real mandate is narrow and tightly regulated—it cannot be something it isn't. And it can realistically be judged only on that narrow and limited mandate. It cannot be a true environmental advocate, nor an ombudsman, without inviting a clipping of its wings.

Professor Caldwell remarks that environmental problems and their victims, both locally and continentally, are caught in a middle ground, a kind of "no man's land" between the refusal of government to surrender authority to more local and regional entities, on the one hand, and its inherent lack of interest in deeper involvement because of other agendas of a more national and international nature. There is no likely remedy in the present structure of government, particularly given its high degree of centralization, and environmental victims among humanity, as well as the environment itself, will continue to fall through the slots in most instances. And we must bear in mind that these issues are not being successfully addressed in their occurrence as domestic matters, so we should not expect too much on the international scene, at least not if we limit ourselves to conventional approaches.

In pointing out how the two regions in question differ, one might wonder if the Great Lakes Canada/United States bilateral issues may have a counterpart in United States/Mexico relations, either in the terrestrial or atmospheric environment, or perhaps in a broader approach to that bilateral relationship, especially in light of the much greater tendency toward issue linkage in that relationship compared to the more northerly one.

Professor Caldwell's description of the historical inability of our societies, and particularly the United States and Canadian societies, to

apply means to problem resolution within the context of comprehensively considered ends, is a most valuable contribution. We do, indeed, have a poor track record in these areas, a track record not at all compensated by our success in dealing with certain limited problems. Our unwillingness to seriously contemplate reduction at the source is one of many areas of hard evidence. Failure to address nonpoint source pollution, air, or water, is another.

Professor Caldwell's admonishment not to view his critique in a discounting way as mere "abstract philosophical speculation" harkens to my own point raised earlier: we are saddled with our values, for better or for worse, and these values lie at the foundation not only of what we are about but at the foundation of what we will be able to do or not do, in transboundary environmental problem solving or in anything else. The question of sovereignty is a case in point. We direct our diplomats and civil servants to protect our sovereignty. We pay them to do so. We signal them that our sovereignty may be broadly interpreted as our way of life, the way we live each day. They disobey at their peril. There is much evidence, as alluded to earlier, that notions of national sovereignty and the nation-state are not in sync with ecology, and, in fact, cannot be. The nation-state, its organization and governance, does not adhere to the principles of ecology. That being the case, one will have to give, voluntarily or involuntarily. The ecosystem being the more basic, it is likely the nation-state will be the first to give. But, in the meantime, sovereignty rules the day. It has to be that way, for that is what we direct, by our actions, every day of our lives. When ecosystemic resilience tightens, as it now may be doing, sovereignty will then play second fiddle. But perhaps not before. As Keith Caldwell tells us, sovereignty is often an alibi for inaction. Yes, and a darn good one, perhaps sadly for our and other species.

It is, of course, quite conceivable that Keith's preconditions for change are already in motion, and radical reconfiguration of political institutions may be not only in the offing but, in a subtle way, already taking place. We cannot really know, any more than we can know how much resilience remains in the ecosystem. And as long as we see normality, even in the face of some evidence to the contrary, we will do nothing but wait. That, too, is direction which we give to our diplomats and civil servants.

In closing my comments on this paper, I would like to say that the ability to envision is an important one, and an all too poorly developed one in our society. Keith is to be congratulated on this section of the paper—I only wish he had taken it further.

I claim less knowledge and experience with the Mexico/United States border, so my comments on Alberto Szekely's paper will be less extensive. I think we can be thankful to Professor Szekely for including in his fine effort attention to environmental matters broader than just imme-

diate transborder circumstances—I am among those who believe they cannot be separated.

Professor Szekely in his introduction raises the question of adequacy of present institutions to deal with future environmental and natural resource challenges. I think it can be reasonably argued that, if the goal is diplomatic and thereby the management of bilateral relations and avoidance of unnecessary cost in these areas, then the present institutions are more or less adequate. If, on the other hand, the goal is to truly address environmental questions, then present institutions are not only inadequate but they are quite possibly harmful if measured against any ecological goals, for they at the least yield a false sense of security and are thus an obstacle to ecologically addressing the questions.

Professor Szekely refers to the free trade agreement currently being negotiated between the United States and Mexico (and more recently Canada) and suggests a link with the environment. Some years ago I drew the linkage in my writings between the Canada/United States free trade agreement and the production of more of the precursors of acid rain in both countries. I concluded that free trade yields, among other things, more consumption of goods and services. And more consumption of goods and services yields, on net, more pollution and more acid rain. Thus, free trade yields more acid rain. Not an especially popular notion in all circles, but one which, I believe, is supported by the evidence. I suggest the Mexico/United States free trade agreement will have similar results, when all is said and done. And such will not be limited to the "maquiladoras" of the north; the Valley of Mexico and other Mexican regions will likely see their share, and all together will contribute to transborder, continental, hemispheric and global loadings of pollutants, and to all of the problems incumbent therein.

As long as we are linking together in this discourse three different nations, two of which are normally considered part of the "first world" industrial nations, and the third, Mexico, as either "third world" and a third world leader, or a nation in transition between first and third world, it should be stated, and stated clearly, that residents of the United States and Canada, as consumers par excellence and without equal, and as contributors of far more than their share of global natural resource and energy demand, have a heavier responsibility than do the people of Mexico to reduce their impact on the global ecosystem. Alberto alludes to this in his recognition that the United States alone contributes 21 percent to the greenhouse effect (no wonder the United States is recalcitrant when it comes to doing anything about it!), and that 35 percent of all CFCs in the world are produced in the United States and Canada, while only one percent is produced in Mexico and an additional two percent in all the rest of Latin America combined! (The cynic might add at this point: No wonder

Mexico can afford to show leadership on this question—she is not dependent on CFC production. But we must remember that Mexico, as an industrializing nation, is risking a significant chunk of its economic future, not to mention markets for its oil, should this leadership succeed in its intent.) So, the United States and Canada (and Canada in some ways even more than the United States, given that nation's higher per capita consumption of energy) are in a class of their own, a class in which an honest examination of conscience will yield considerable discomfort. Mexico is in a very different category.

We are indebted to Alberto for reminding us there are much bigger matters than some of those transboundary issues that perturb us. He reminded us of such most diplomatically, indeed more diplomatically than we likely deserve.