

The Habitax

We Americans have always assumed, in our vast and bountiful land, that mineral and biological and atmospheric and hydrological resources were unlimited, and that we could deplete and despoil them at no cost to the brave, ingenious, glorious, paramount phenomenon that is - *us*! Our culture has always seemed to mine the environment rather than operate in harmony with it. In the U.S. we have lost 95% of our ancient forests to the Paul Bunyan mentality and in Ohio we have destroyed nearly 95% of our wetlands. Now our air is becoming unbreathable, our water undrinkable, and the oceans have begun to sicken. The planet seems to be losing its amphibians, our bird populations are in trouble, and lichen species are dwindling in many areas. The hubristic phenomenon of *us* has so flexed itself that it has pushed dangerously close to the precincts of oblivion those seas of natural cycles, ecological systems, and genetic dances that have swaddled us cozy from that eternal blackness and dryness that begins only a few miles from the surface of our mother's astonishing body. We are finding, to the chagrin of an economic system spoiled by the apparent free ride suggested to us by our heedless and destructive behavior, that perhaps there may be a reckoning after all. Some economists and scientists are beginning to recommend that we count these "hidden" costs of production into our economies. For instance, some federal government assessors of the Gross National Product (GNP) are hearkening to the ideas of the International Center for Ecological Economics and will release the government's first "Green GNP" in April, 1994. This assessment will take into account the true long-term worth to the GNP of, say, a 10-million-pound annual harvest of oysters out of Chesapeake if that resource is being taxed beyond its productive capacity, which, if it were less polluted and not over-harvested, would be able to produce a long-term annual harvest of 200 million pounds of oysters. Another, almost visionary, attempt to put the role of natural productive systems into proper perspective *vis a vis* our economies is the work being done by the great ecologist Howard Odum, whose decades-long study of the energy economies of natural systems has led to the formulation of his EMERGY model. This model actually tries to quantify the energetic and productive values of natural systems (for instance, the ability of wetlands to clean and store water, provide habitat for genetic material, etc.) and structure them into the economies of human industry and production by assigning actual market values to them. Odum makes many provocative points, among which is the fact that many natural systems and resources are currently without market value when they are at their greatest productive value, either by virtue of their quality or their quantity, and assume greater productive value as they are depleted or damaged and are less useful to our human industry (e.g. clean water is very valuable but free; polluted - or saline - water is less useful but much more expensive because it must be cleaned); this would be, perhaps, similar to saying that old, worn-out shoes or cars are worth much more than new ones. The point is that when we destroy, damage, or consume necessary *natural capital resources*, we are paying an extremely heavy long-term cost so far as our human economies are concerned - costs to which we have hitherto been heedless.

Without a doubt one of the most dangerous and expensive behaviors of human economies has been the destruction of natural habitat, if for no other reason than the genetic, ecological, and evolutionary "capital" which is destroyed along with them. And, of course, our culture, our industrial and technological economy, and our political and legal systems have conspired to devalue the costs of such destruction; they are virtually discounted from market values and forces. As the functions and values of these rarefied natural areas begin to dawn on even the most self-interested of us, we begin to look for ways to conserve these increasingly more valuable (on the "free market") but increasingly less productive and less useful natural assets with minimum disturbance to our economies - especially during times when those economies are distressed. It has become clear that one crazy feature of current development patterns is the propensity of developers to ignore already denatured areas that could be redeveloped, and instead move out into natural areas (whether they be wetlands or mesophytic forests or prairie) to build shopping malls, factories, and up-scale housing. This is done to escape the crime, distrust, and pollution which are arguably themselves the result of socially and environmentally irresponsible development. Many industries say they are being chase out into the countryside because of potential superfund clean-up responsibilities that may lurk beneath the blacktop or in the storerooms of abandoned factory sites. The response of Ohio's Voinovich administration is something called "brownfield"

development, which amounts to little more than a bribe on the part of the government to induce re-use of these areas by lowering environmental standards, responsibilities, and costs in these urban areas. The goal of urban redevelopment is very worthy; the strategy for achieving it should stink in the ear and eye, let alone the nose, of urban residents, many of whom are already abused by the indifference of past developers and industrialists.

The developers are correct in asserting that it is currently cheaper to destroy new habitat than to re-use already denatured land. What they are not pointing out is that there are obviously *two* solutions to this situation, and the one that will do the public the most good is *not* the one of making redevelopment on ruined land cheaper - it is the other one: namely, to *make development of natural or restorable areas more expensive*.

How could this be done?

One way would be to impose a substantial tax on developments sited on valuable - or potentially valuable - habitat. This tax - a **habitat**, if you will - would be justified on the basis of the loss of the habitat's functions and values to the public good, and would structure the value of that loss into the market. To effectively do so it would have to be big enough to deter development in these areas, which means it would have to be greater than the costs currently associated with redevelopment of denatured areas, so that these areas would then appear to be *relatively* financially unencumbered.

Areas of actual or potential natural habitat should be surveyed and assessed according to a number of salient features, possibly including the value of their extant ecological continuity, diversity, and context; biology (including rare or notable genetic material, such as populations of non-rare species at the edges of their ranges); restoration potential; etc. It is important that restorable areas be considered as well as extant habitats; a restorable farmed wetland, for instance, would have great value for a local population of salamanders in a nearby woods whose numbers could increase given sufficient breeding habitat.

Any revenue generated must be used to administer the tax, as well as monitor and enforce its administration. Even more importantly for the environment, the generated revenue should be used to conduct state-wide surveys where need, to identify valuable habitat, both extant and restorable, to acquire these areas, and to restore and manage them. Once protected, they should be restricted from generating further substantial income to the state so that it doesn't abuse the power of the habitat. Critical to the success of the habitat would be that no revenue generated by it could be used for any purpose other than to foster the public weal through the protection and restoration of natural habitat, including deficit reduction, education, or the simple lining of the pockets of another government bureaucracy. There should probably be an independent board to oversee the latter allure.

One point at which the habitat could be administered would be when target land was sold, but this would be complicated ("I'm buying this land as a wildlife sanctuary"). Another would be when application was made for some development or improvement that would lessen the ecological or genetic value of the property. This would be direct and comprehensive, but complicated and expensive to administer. A simpler, but less direct, point of application would be when zoning changed from, say, agricultural to commercial or residential. There would also be a problem of grandfathering here; many very valuable areas are doubtless already in jeopardy because of their zoning, and should be considered for their present value to the public good. Perhaps a combination of these latter points could be used.

Without a doubt this idea of a habitat will be greeted with howls and threats from developers, who naturally oppose any interference with their pursuit of happiness. But many of us have come to realize that, as things currently stand, the pursuit of happiness by private interests is beginning to interfere with the right to life and liberty of the public. A four-year-old playing with matches may throw a tantrum when mother takes them away, but that won't deter a responsible parent from saving herself - and her child - from disaster.