

## The Habitax

One of the problems that conservationists keep running into is urban, commercial, and industrial sprawl. Developers, engineers, urban planners, zoning boards, county commissioners, and planning agencies, in conjunction with politicians of local or national stripe, seem to have a penchant for siting new projects in fields, forests, and wetlands rather than in areas that have already been denatured beyond recall. It is sickening to see woods and marshes being destroyed for another Walmart when empty Zayre's buildings lie practically next door. Such scenes plead the case made by the great Francis Ford Coppola minimalist film *Koyanasqatsi*, which sings with vibrant images that drive home the meaning of its Native American title, roughly translated as *crazy life* or *life out of balance*. Why would Walmart do such a thing, whose stupidity and senselessness is plain for everyone (except, apparently, Walmart) to see?

Life would in many ways be so much sweeter if the dictums of such common sense and manifest logic could prevail. Unfortunately, the price demanded by the fruits of a culture that automatically delivers maximum comfort, security, and pleasure is the sacrifice of mere and homely common sense. Unfortunately, the paradigm that has stolen upon us, like Dylan Thomas's "thief as meek as the dew" renders such choices neither stupid nor senseless so far as Walmart is concerned. So long as any single "detail" such as potential superfund liability, or limited expansion potential, or inadequate access, or social problems such as racial tension or outright "crime" can come to bear in a major way in Walmart's corporate decision-making process, it would make no sense for the company to make any other decision than to build its new outlets in a place where such problems were minimized or obviated. After all, Walmart is not in the business of protecting the environment or providing jobs or helping people or serving the community. Such aims are the purview of entities which care, which have souls. It is tragic, if common, folly to suppose that businesses fall into that category. No doubt many of the people who make their livelihood within these corporate enterprises care and have souls, but the corporation itself cannot afford to operate according to the dictates of morality or ethics because it is competing in a field whose common denominator constantly tends to devolve to complete unscrupulousness. The only true reality for capitalist corporations is the need to make as much money as possible. The honest ones readily admit this fact. There is no intrinsic impulse within for-profit corporations that would constrain them from lying, cheating, stealing, and even killing if doing so would ensure them a single additional nickel of profit. Ask Karen Silkwood the next time you see her. *Caveat emptor*, baby. In the old days they sold tapeworm eggs as diet pills; now they want to dispose of low-level radioactive waste as fertilizer for field crops. DuPont insists that its buried plutonium, if it ever *does* leak, will not reach South Carolina waterways for at least a thousand years; two years later the first outflow reaches the Savannah River. Ford Motors (*Quality is Job 1*) saved \$14/car by using a design feature that they knew would kill people! We need not here enumerate *ad nauseum* a litany of known instances where corporations have been dragged kicking and screaming to socially or environmentally responsible behavior by courts and legislatures at great cost to the public, or the tremendous resources expended by for-profit interests in the creation and maintenance of a culture and lifestyle which are in many ways anathema to human dignity, social justice, and environmental survival.

When are we going to stop depending on the morality of soulless corporations to do the right thing? Shall we wait until they admit they must be stopped before they kill again? It would be one thing if there was a hint that the moneymakers were operating in our best and long-term interest, but as time goes by it becomes clearer and clearer that that is simply not the case. How many guileless homeowners will vainly haunt the Florida telephone directories in search of satisfaction for their flooded basements from builders who have disappeared into the night before we all catch on?

So the point is this: anyone in her or his right mind can see why some developer - whether commercial, industrial, or residential - would have to be out of his mind to mess with problematic areas that already have a legacy of human activity, for human activity complicates things: the longer and heavier the human hand has lain upon an area the more social, economic, and environmental problems are bound to have accumulated. Why mess with such problems if swamps, woods, or even farmlands are available and cheap? After all, aren't our

national land-use sensibilities informed by the mentality the likes of Paul Bunyan, who faced so much bearded wilderness that he could - and should - fell whole mountains of forest at a single swoop? Isn't the land limitless? Can't we mine the environment for free? Isn't the 1879 mining law still in effect?

Or is it finally sinking through our skulls that the true environmental costs of ecological and evolutionary degradation have not been levied upon the developers? How do we assess the damage to evolutionary potential or ecological stability engendered by siting a new project on functional or restorable habitat? What is the price that should be paid for the extirpation of a local population of some plant or animal species? What are the true costs of mining ecosystems for ephemeral lucre? And sure some developer will benefit from building a road or putting in some more ticky-tack condos, but what will be the larger impact of his actions down the road on everything else?