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Media Review by Peter Carter

Which Way at the Crossroads?

September saw the publishing of two series of articles in popular media on the state of the Earth. In Britain, *The Independent* has 23 articles under the heading 'Your Planet—How You Can Save It' (see below for websites). The reader is presented with a blend of bad news and good options. One article, 'The Storm Approaches', asks 'Does climate change really threaten the human race with imminent catastrophe?' The answer? 'Almost certainly. And if you don't believe it, just consider all the hard evidence that currently surrounds us.'

Some would say that this kind of news is overwhelming. I would say that not taking into account all the options for solutions is what is really overwhelming.

Also in September, *The Scientific American* published out a special issue called 'Crossroads for Planet Earth.' Putting out a clarion call for intelligent caring for the future of the human species, the cover challenges readers with the big question. 'The human race is at a unique turning point. Will we choose to create the best of all possible futures?'

This is nothing new for *Scientific American* which put out entire issues in 1974, 1980 and again in 1989 to show how environmental protection and economic sustainability are both achievable. Inside this September's *Scientific American* are positive, constructive ways ahead on population, global diseases, extinction of species, energy solutions, water, and an end to poverty.

But turn the page and we find a glaring example of the real problem. In bold letters the whole inside page is devoted to two sentences: 'It took us 125 years to use the first trillion barrels of oil. We'll use the next trillion in 30.' Chevron bought this page. And if Chevron's prediction of consumer habits is correct, we can kiss any future goodbye.

Now here's another big question. We have been made to love our luxuries more than life itself. Will the scientists win out over the big money advertising that so far has won our hearts and minds? A survey just out from the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University finds that most Americans say they want tough laws protecting air, land and water—but only about 1 in 5 say environmental issues have been a major influence on how they vote. Asked why they didn't vote their green beliefs, responders said that there was progress being made on eco-issues, and that things weren't as bad as

they used to be, other matters are more urgent, and they believed dealing with environmental issues might increase taxes or hurt the economy. So much for global climate change and the future of the human race.

What's happening here is that most people would like tough environmental laws, as long as they're not affected. They're afraid they'll lose their jobs and the economy will be hurt. Exactly the propaganda the Bush administration and front groups for polluting industries have been putting out (see *The Independent's* 'Clouding the Atmosphere'). Scare tactics work in politics. It seems the next round of elections in G-8 nations might just be our last chance, politically, to save the future.

In the 'Crossroads for Planet Earth' special, one of the articles points out that evidence suggests the US might already have entered an 'uneconomic growth phase' in which the choice of economic growth outpaces the resilience of the natural environment. We can quickly destroy but not re-create ecosystems. The solution, of course, is to choose how we grow the economy. Growth of wind turbines over coal burning power plants, organic agriculture over industrial agribusiness, high speed public transport and smart cars over SUVs in every garage ... the options go on and on.

Right now, as the article says, we have 'stupid growth,' growth that undermines living wages and trashes the planet. The current generation is working harder for less in every way. We can only have a healthy economy for any duration with a healthy environment. The Clinton-Gore administration went a long to proving that.

Dusting Off Agenda 21

So is there an answer or is the future all gloom and doom? Is there, as *Scientific American* says, a plan for a bright future beyond 2050? Yes, there is and that depends on us—now. There is a detailed blueprint for the future. It's called Agenda 21. It's 15 years old now, 40 chapters long, and still gathering dust. As the blueprint for sustainable development, it offers up environmental technologies, environmental protection legislation, legislation for liability of harm from pollution or environmental damage, full-cost long-term economic accounting, internalization of environmental costs, the polluter pays and precautionary principles, legislated right-to-know (environmental information), universal health care and

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education, protection of biodiversity, and sustainable rural agriculture, to name just a few solutions. And by signing onto Agenda 21, all states agreed in strong terms that they 'shall integrate' economic, social equity and environmental factors in all decision-making.

The genius of sustainable development under Agenda 21 is in realizing that equity, economy and ecology can only be developed all together. As Agenda 21 says, the plan cannot work without support at the community and individual levels. At the least that means insisting that all political candidates are Agenda 21 literate.

Being an international agreement, Agenda 21 was a compromise on some issues. And for that reason, the green lobby in North America was quick to reject it. The religious

right saw world government conspiracy in every chapter of Agenda 21 and put the fear of their God into their church-going voters. The religious ticket worked for Bush. As US president, George Bush snubbed the South African Rio+10 Earth Summit by not being amongst the one hundred attending heads of state.

That is how Agenda 21, as an 'orphaned' world agreement, rapidly fell off the media radar. Agenda 21 remains do-able. In fact, it's the only show in this global village. We've just wasted 15 years hoping that by ignoring biospheric global disasters in the making, they would go away. Now humanity really is at time's crossroads. ☹

See news.independent.co.uk/world/environment/article313755.ece for *The Independent* articles. See www.sciam.com/issue.cfm for the Scientific American special (get a free trial issue!). Short version of Agenda 21, see www.iisd.org/rio+5/agenda/agenda21.htm.

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