

Trends That Will Affect Your Future . . .

# A CHINESE PUZZLE

| Stephan A. Schwartz |

*The SchwartzReport tracks emerging trends that will affect the world, particularly the United States. For EXPLORE it focuses on matters of health in the broadest sense of that term, including medical issues, changes in the biosphere, technology, and policy considerations, all of which will shape our culture and our lives.*

If you are literate or watch television, you know something about the Chinese miracle. How China is growing to be one of the great economies and powers on the planet. How it will soon be one of the most prosperous and populous nations in the world. If there are any worries, they are usually described in military terms or in the context of economic competition.

What doesn't often get discussed is that this prosperity, like our own, at least using the economic models we adhere to, comes at a cost. It is destroying the earth.

Like the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, who appear one by one in the Bible, a fourth defining trend of the 21st Century is emerging. Joining global warming, pandemics, and religious strife, we must add the cancer of unconscious growth. Growth that does not factor in the complex living interrelationships that collectively run the earth.

The general assumption is that civilizations fail because of outside forces that impact upon them. It is a standard view of history. The destruction of the Mesoamerican civilizations because of the invasion of European conquistadors is one example. The death of European Jewish culture because of the Holocaust inflicted by the Nazis is another. And, without

question, such external historical forces are one explanation. But not the only one.

A UCLA geographer, Jared Diamond, whose bestseller *Guns, Germs, and Steel* has been followed with the equally provocative *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* offers not so much an alternative as an additional explanation,<sup>1</sup> one that receives almost no attention in our nation's or any nation's public conversation, a situation that continues at our world's peril.

Diamond argues that, as often as violence destroys, equally is destruction wrought by prosaic decisions like how water is used, how forests are managed, how natural resources are developed. And that, when the interactive living processes that manage the earth's temperature, the flow and purity of air, and cleaning processes that keep us from becoming fatally toxic are disrupted beyond a tipping point, civilization itself stands at risk.

He illustrates this by describing the fall of several cultures, the clearest examples of which are the withering of the Norse colonies of Greenland and the fall of the culture of Eastern Island. On Greenland for 450 years, with a population that at its peak numbered about 5,000, the eastern and western colonies of the island lived the transplanted life of a northern European village. It was affluent enough to trade with Europe for luxuries and to build both parish churches and a beautiful Roman Catholic cathedral. Right up until the end, in the early 1400s, such social, religious, and legal conventions as marriage, inheritance, and contract sale flourished. And then it all vanished. Why? Partly plague and partly mismanagement of the environment.

This demise was unnecessary and resulted from the deliberate decision to continue a way of life that was demonstrably

failing. The colonists spurned eating the seafood that lay so easily to hand. Instead, they insisted on maintaining the livestock-based lifestyle they knew, even though they could see that cutting down the forests and turning land into grazing pastures was breaking down the ecosystem. They made this suicidal decision because owning animals—particularly cows—was high status, as was having a diet based on meat. And, in the end, the high status known was preferable to the lower status unknown, even unto social suicide.

On Easter Island, in the Pacific, there once was a thriving culture of 30,000 people. They lived in a paradise shaded beneath several dozen species of trees and had the leisure to create the giant enigmatic stone heads that still dot the island. What happened? One by one, they cut down their trees and destroyed the island's ecosystem. "I have often asked myself, 'What did the Easter Islander who cut down the last palm tree say while he was doing it?'" writes Diamond.

I mention these sad tales of ecological madness because there is no reason to believe that either the Norse or the Easter Islanders were less intelligent or less rational than we ourselves. Yet they consciously in a long slow *Pas de Deux* with death made what must, at the time, have seemed like short-term rational choices.

The historian Barbara Tuchman, in her classic *March of Folly*, described other manifestations of this dance of destruction less ecologically oriented.<sup>2</sup> One of her favorites is the rational irrationality that led to Europe deciding to end a period of unparalleled peace and prosperity by entering into World War I, a war no one wanted, which would kill millions, and literally change the gene pool of Europe. Clearly, there is something in the human psyche

that embraces self-destruction if other short-range goals seem more compelling. Why does this matter?

It matters because it is becoming clear we may be in a similar period. The environment cannot withstand additional high-technology cultures, each with rampant unconscious consumption at the United States' level. Yet it is happening with ever gathering momentum. That is the Chinese Puzzle. China and India, China particularly, will soon have economies as powerful as the United States' and no more conscious in terms of long-term thinking concerning the environment than America has been. Consider: The International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO) reports that nearly 50% of the tropical hardwood logs taken—mostly illegally—from the world's rainforests go to China.<sup>3</sup> How devastating is this? Close to 15% of the tropical hardwood used in China to make plywood comes from the forests of Papua, New Guinea.<sup>4</sup> This timber finds its way into thousands of little backstreet sweatshops where it is turned into flooring, plywood, wooden furniture, and shipping crates. It emerges not only reformed but cleansed of illegality, no longer part of earth's ancient legacy forests and now a manufactured product that can be readily sold on the world market. The United Kingdom is China's largest partner in this charade, and the United States is not far behind.

And it is not as if the Chinese were not aware of what havoc this cutting causes to the ecosystem. After lethal mudslides and flooding killed tens of thousands in China, after forests were denuded, and the trees which anchor the soil were gone, China put in place stringent laws regulating such practices as clear cutting. But that doesn't mean that they or the world market gave up its hunger for wood. The short-term trumped the established long-term interests of all of us.

Concurrent with the growing depredations of the rainforest, the Government

Accountability Office, Congress' investigative arm, reports that, over the past four years, the United States has systematically and drastically reduced its protection of waterways and wetlands. The effects of which were appalling evident in New Orleans.

The report is a case study in the subtlety of bureaucratic maneuver and unintended consequence. It describes how the US Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) first took control of the waterways and wetlands. Then, in 2001 the Supreme Court ruled that the Corps had exceeded its authority, and they were compelled to draw back. This might seem a reverse, but, the GAO reports, for the Bush Administration, it was an opportunity.

The GAO report describes how the Corps and the EPA were directed to use the ruling as rationale to justify scaling back its oversight over waterways and wetlands much further than required by the court decision. The result has been the loss of wetlands all along the Gulf Coast. Since we have known for years that wetlands absorb the energy of hurricanes, and slow them, as well as playing a critical role in the health of coastlands and river deltas, it is not hard to see once again the short-term muscling past the long-term.

The Corps also used the court decision to withdraw from overseeing enforcement of The Clean Water Act, which controls the discharge of dredged or fill material into the "waters of the United States." The report says that, in 2003, the Corps and the EPA, in a joint announcement, redefined what "waters of the United States" meant and restricted it to only navigable waterways. This meant that vast stretches of wetlands were suddenly vulnerable to development or degradation.

The GAO report says that Corps officials told its investigators they no longer sought jurisdiction over many stretches of water or wetlands largely because "they believe headquarters does not want them to

use this provision." How great is the dimension of this abandonment? Texas, alone, estimates that approximately 79% of its 80,000 miles of rivers and streams no longer would be subject to federal regulations.

In response to the GAO reports, the Secretary of the Army, under whose command the Corps falls, and the EPA both said they basically accept the findings.

All of these developments represent what proponents would argue are rational decisions. And yet taken together, and seen in the light of those Norse colonists and Easter Islanders, it is a trend that cannot but give one pause.

## REFERENCES

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