Is USA Thinking Seriously About Environment?

Here I am in the US after almost two years, hoping that US is indeed serious about the environment. It is a period of recession and I hoped to see some realization among the citizens about the huge challenge of ecological destruction looming large.

I am ashamed of generating enormous waste every time I eat my meal out, while I travel. However, in the given “American system” I hardly see significant opportunity to try and be friendlier to the environment and natural resources. If I really have to, I might as well decide not to eat at all – or eat only fresh fruits! That is the only way to avoid generating any waste if I really wished. Variety of goods that is a single commodity under multitude of brands is still overflowing the stores; the life of purchased good is still diminishing every other day. In 2006 it was 99% to dump-yard in 6 months based on Annie Leonard’s estimate (www.storyofstuff.com). While I have no measure or research to back my observation, this is probably getting worse – and not just in the US but around the world.

In spite of serious job losses and recession, I have not experienced any change in the “waste generation” habits. People still continue to use heavily packaged foods and goods. There was no obvious attempt at reducing the packaging to minimize waste. There is only a superficial attempt at saving the natural resources and water. There does not seem to be any significant shift in the way people move from one place to another - that is – using cars. ‘Clunkers for cash’ is a program which subsidies the consumer to purchase new energy efficient car and can yield as much US$ 4000 as a subsidy from the government. This in fact is further adding to the carbon footprint because the energy required to
produce a new car is far more than the saving that can result through exchanging the old car by a new ‘energy efficient’ car. The planes are still running quite full and airlines continue to lose money. I always wonder how these airlines survive at all. Very rarely, whether in good times or bad I have seen much of American airlines making money. How is this loss supported is a mystery to me at the least.

I was very hopeful that I will see some change in the way US operated, the way US consumed (Or did not consume) and the way it produced and sold goods. I have virtually seen nothing. Everywhere it looks like business as usual causing continued exploitation of natural resources if not locally then in China and other countries which export goods to the US. The government is still pushing the citizens to buy – telling them to be a good consumer so that they can oil the wheels of natural resource depletion and continue to spur GDP growth.

Obesity continues to be the largest challenge! Around 67% of Americans are obese and increasingly city lifestyles are making the pattern feed itself all over the world. Interestingly, there are entrepreneurs emerging to challenge this problem through technology and in turn making solutions further more carbon inefficient. People continue to buy new ‘cool gadgets’ every few months, without worrying about their not so old gadgets and how these are destroyed or junked.

One of the good ways of managing waste is minimizing the flow to the landfill and if there is any, it is well segregated. Interestingly, the aluminum, glass, paper is segregated and all other trash, which includes organic wet waste and other waste like thermocol, plastic etc. is trashed together. While segregating what is being segregated is certainly a good thing, separating dry and wet waste must be mandatory, otherwise the landfills will continue to spew out methane – 21 times worse than the CO2. It would be interesting to look at the amount of per capita waste that different countries generate and it will be more than obvious that waste generation in the US is many times the magnitude of the east.

It is being considered that ALL incandescent lights be replaced. If replaced by CFLs, we hit a problem of mercury in the environment if these are not trashed properly. I assume that there will be policies in how to trash CFLs. Energy generation and use
– an indirect source of increasing carbon footprint, does not seem to have gone down. At least there are no apparent indications that it indeed has. What does this all indicate? Either the US (and for that matter many countries including India) have no real understanding of the situation or are completely unwilling to explore alternate models of satisfying lifestyle.

The national systems of accounting all over the world have not changed much. Countries are still talking about the GNP growth and not adhering to differentiating between income and capital! Daly (Herman Daly in ‘beyond growth’ - 1996) has provided excellent framework to understand and deal with the situation from an economics perspective. The goal must be to see satisfied human beings that just rich human beings living in poor and seriously denuded earth.

It is very clear that large variety of goods are intermediate goods with low utility and are certainly not a necessity of life. This means very large part of resources is extracted almost directly for the dump-yard. There is very little utility of a large number of stuff that we buy in the buy-throw-buy cycle. The education that we are willing to extend to our children hardly induces them to avoid wasteful ways life.

It is imperative that all this must change and change for the better - better for the affluent and better for the poor. How can this happen? I believe we need to go top down and bottoms up; to communicate to the entire population a different and better way of living. We need to communicate the way nature and ecological services work and what is needed to help nature continue its work and delivery of ecological services. We need to identify the “real needs” of people and real needs of all of the biodiversity around us. Mutual respect to nature, ecology and fascinating ways in which nature delivers these ecological services is an absolute must to move forward.

**What should the developing countries do?** The rich west has enjoyed much of the prosperity at the expense of serious depletion in natural resources. It continues to do that through import of “goods” and further depletion of the natural resources of the exporting countries. Export led growth for the populous developing countries - is like shooting your own foot! Instead of judiciously managing the existing local resources for the benefit of her own citizens – the developing south is hoping to prosper
by depleting her resources further and fattening the already fat West Developing south must focus her priorities on managing her population growth – to get to the plateau population levels and at the same time seriously look at different development indices apart from GDP growth. There are already a bunch of indices available to measure progress (H. Daly and K.N. Townsend – ‘Valuing the earth’, 1993) – much beyond measurement of GDP growth.

As a wonderful tool of management, create an incentive structure in a right way and the right things will start happening. Reward every adult significantly for continuing to have one child. This could provide incentive to people to follow a robust and right lifestyle. Ample thought has gone into various ways, in which current economic thinking can and should change; what is needed is strong policy shifts to make this happen!

Netherlands and Scandinavian countries are demonstrating the way in which you can live a meaningful life without mindless consumption. While even they have to do better than what they are doing; they are multiple times better than the US.

Restoring the resources by consuming only as much as “needed” and restoration through protective and interventional measures seems to be the way forward for the rich. For the poor – solutions lie in shifting attitudes (as to what is fashionable and what is a status symbol) and seriously managing population. Population as we are aware has an immediate multiplier effect on the resource use, even while it hides the aggregate number by using a larger devisor!

Fortunately, thought leaders in and around the US, who would like to see this change happen and they are doing their bit, even while enormously more needs yet to be done. Without worrying only about the individual footprint, if we start bothering about the cumulative footprint of nations – we will certainly take right decisions and actions to move forward.

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