

Ecological Imperialism

A Sustainable Development Network Briefing Paper

Ecological imperialism - or ecoimperialism - is the imposition of a set of ecological values held by one individual or group, onto another individual or group, without their consent.

"[Prosperity] has formidable enemies, including most first-world governments, leading academics and scientists, wealthy foundations, thousands of NGOs, influential journalists, passionate activists, and countless other powerful interests. These forces constitute a new kind of colonialism, which we might call eco-imperialism. It is more insidious, pervasive and potentially more devastating than traditional imperialism."¹

Causes of ecoimperialism

- The elaboration of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), which are ostensibly intended to help everyone, but actually hurt rich and poor alike
- Overseas development funding, which is used as a carrot to entice poor countries to sign MEAs, but often leads to corruption and undermines democracy
- The opposition to new technologies that might help the poor escape from poverty, such as genetically enhanced crop varieties, and old technologies, such as the pesticide DDT, which is used to prevent malaria
- Romanticization of poor rural lifestyles, which leads to opposition to the consumption of energy and natural resources.

Ecoimperialist claims

- *The earth is running out of resources.* Human prosperity and wealth causes an unsustainable usage of resources and egregious environmental problems, so human consumption patterns and activities should be drastically changed. The poor should not use the same technologies nor should they consume the same amount of resources as people in wealthy countries. Likewise, people in wealthy countries should be forced to reduce consumption of energy and natural resources.
- *"Appropriate" technologies,* such as wind energy and wind-up radios, are the solution to poor people's needs.
- The morally dubious notion that *ecological values should be imposed on people living in poor countries,* whether the poor like it or not, is justified by the claim that, since rich countries have despoiled the environment, poor countries must not make the same mistakes.
- *Future generations* are more important than people alive today. The possibility that people in the future might prefer to be rich than to have the privilege of sharing their land with a colony of anopheles mosquitoes, preserved through the kindness of their rich overlords, is simply ignored by this breed of arrogant, ignorant elitists.

Examples of eco-imperialism

The United Nations' Stockholm (POPs) Convention: The POPs Convention, if ratified, will place onerous restrictions on, and will eventually eliminate, the use and production of 12 chemicals (called persistent organic pollutants - "POPs") which are considered to be damaging to human health and the environment. The Convention was driven by a network of NGOs and governments who called these chemicals "the dirty dozen". Since rich countries have largely eliminated POPs, they would not feel the effects of such a ban.

- However, the world's poorest countries still depend on some of these chemicals. DDT is one of the 12 POPs, and is used as an effective and cheap method for malaria control in many countries where malaria reigns. Restrictions on its usage could be counted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, not to mention the economic stagnation that results from the increased burden of malaria.
- Some countries (Belize, Mozambique, and Bolivia) have stopped using DDT in their malaria control programs because they fear losing the support of wealthy nations through aid - and they have suffered a consequent loss of human life.

¹ http://www.irenkenya.org/articles/miracle_of_poverty_louw.htm

- The POPs treaty will do little to improve human health in the developing world. "Far more children die from a lack of sanitation before they get a chance to be affected [by these chemicals]."²

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES): CITES was signed in 1973 and came into force two years later. CITES attempts to prevent the loss of endangered species by imposing restrictions on international trade in the species and their products (such as ivory and rhino horn).

- However, CITES does nothing to address habitat loss and degradation, domestic consumption, or other threats to wildlife or their habitat and in some cases, CITES may make habitat conservation more difficult.
- The effect of trade bans has done little to help the species they are meant to protect - and in fact may undermine wildlife conservation because it reduces the value of those species to people who share land with them.
- "Kenyans remain spectators and victims of the modern form of eco-imperialism – they are barred from using their natural resource to satisfy outsiders who yet again patronize the whole industry."³
- "Kenya has applied the precautionary principle on wildlife for long enough, plunging both individuals and the country into poverty. What is urgently needed is the strengthening of the institutions of justice to ensure rule of law and devolving wildlife property rights to private ownership. Sport hunting will cease to be a threat. Instead of hunting being a risk, it will safeguard wildlife and make the locals wealthy."⁴
- CITES "fails to create mechanisms to control the supply of wildlife products or any direct means to influence consumer demand... [It] operates primarily as a restrictive mechanism, rather than an enabling one. Implicit in its existing structure is an assumption that all trade is somehow bad for conservation unless proven otherwise. Measures taken under CITES therefore tend to emphasize limitations on trade rather than ways to facilitate trade that may ultimately enhance the status of wild species."

Fundamentally, **ecoimperialism undermines the capacity of people to escape poverty, rather than enabling them to develop.**

- Ecoimperialism imposes a set of beliefs on people in poor countries, through environmental regulations, restrictions on trade, and through the fundamental belief that the global elite should make decisions for everyone else.
- People in poor countries need *more development, more technology, more resource consumption, and more energy consumption* - and they should reject ecoimperialism outright, just as they rejected imperialism. People everywhere should be empowered to make choices for their own lives - and not be prevented from so doing by people and governments in wealthy countries.
- "People in developing countries should no longer be polite about, or be influenced by, neo-imperial agendas. Decent people, aware of the suffering inflicted by real poverty, should agree on at least one simple principle: that the most urgent priority is to achieve maximal growth and development. The unknowable needs of future generations and the attainment of a low-risk environment must, by any caring calculus, be secondary."⁵

The Sustainable Development Network (SDN) is a global network of organizations, whose mission is to encourage policies which allow individuals to pursue their goals without bureaucratic intervention. The SDN focuses on the institutional framework within which people act, to ensure that policies encourage individuals to make the best use of resources and to protect the environment, while improving both their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others.

Contact: Kendra Okonski, Sustainable Development Network, kendra@sdnetwork.net

² http://www.policynetwork.net/weekly_comment/richard_tren_july02.htm.

³ http://www.irenkenya.org/articles/shikwati_may2902.htm

⁴ http://www.irenkenya.org/articles/hunting_feb02.htm

⁵ http://www.irenkenya.org/articles/miracle_of_poverty_louw.htm