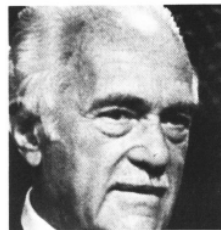


# An ethical land plan to beat the 'vandals'



● Aurelio Peccei

**R**ESOURCE depletion was the cornerstone of the ecologist's case against economic growth in the 1970s.

Industrial stagnation in the 1980s has removed some of the attraction of the conservationist's campaign, but still the evidence mounts that there is something fundamentally wrong with Man's attitude towards his habitat.

The deserts are eating away at farmland, and whatever one's view about the value of Malthusian extrapolations of population data, it is an undeniable fact that Nature is being abused.

Now, the eco-doomsters who rang the alarm bells a decade ago have realised that corrective action has to be steered within the framework of a new land ethic.

Appeals for such an ethic were made at the Second World Congress on Land Policy staged at Harvard University last June.

The Lincoln Institute, which sponsored the conference, picked up the challenge by suggesting a meeting in Geneva to identify the experts who might define such an ethic (see insert, p. 24).

**T**HE MOST passionate appeal for a new land ethic came, fittingly enough, from Aurelio Peccei, the "father" of the Club of Rome whose report *The Limits of Growth* caused tremendous controversy when it was published in 1972.

Man's scientific and technological knowledge had outrun his ethical system, declared Mr. Peccei. "This mismatch between our tremendous knowledge and power, and our incapacity for using them only for good purposes, is probably at the root of the present day crisis."

He declared: "We have failed to change, to evolve ourselves - to change values and behaviour and institutions and policies, to be on a par with the new realities that we have created.

"We still have a frame of mind that comes from the past that's no more; culturally, we have remained behind the real world that we have created.

"Hence, our land policies probably will continue to degrade the planet in which we have to live in ever greater number."

**He now realised - with so many people out of work - that there was no scientific Eldorado around the corner. Yet the future will be almost totally a human product.**

Mr. Peccei warned: "Within limits, today we can choose the future we want because we will be building it."

And that was why land policies had to be seen in a global context, preserving finite resources to guarantee the well-

being of future generations.

"We must outline the principles and study the feasibility of defining guidelines for land policies on a global span," said Mr. Peccei.

The objective of such a study was to preserve the carrying capacity of Earth. The study would be difficult, he warned, but "if we chicken, we will pay for it."

By Fred Harrison



● Ann Strong

**E**XPERTS on land policies from 45 countries attended the Congress, but they were not able to define the content of an ethical land policy.

Indeed, the dominant view was that there was no single land policy that could be universalised to meet the rich diversity of problems to be found in different cultures and geographical regions.

One definition of an ethical land policy was produced by Miss Ann Strong, chairman of the City and Regional Planning Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

An ethical view, she said, was holistic and long-term, which saw Man as one part of an eco-system whose components had a natural fit or balance shaped by interactions between earth, air, fire, water and living matter.

"The obvious implication of such an ethic is that man does not act to

maximize his own immediate return from the land for, if he does, other parts of his eco-system will suffer," declared Miss Strong.

Unfortunately, Miss Strong was unwilling to embark on a systematic definition of an ethical land policy. Had she produced such a theoretical formulation, it is possible that she might have been able to explain why her quest for examples of successful programmes had been to no avail.

Although she contacted many experts for descriptions of policies that had managed food or fibre production in such a way as to maintain the land's fertility, the frequent answer was that the experts did not know of a single successful programme.

This led Miss Strong to the conclusion that it was necessary "not to design such policies but to design a programme which will result in their implementation".

**Such an approach, however, which she said would entail commitment, control, compliance and coercion, creates an administrative system without a policy: the cart before the proverbial horse. By beginning from the wrong end - constructing a framework for implementation - the policy options are seriously narrowed.**

Miss Strong's framework pre-supposes a system of bureaucratic controls and detailed intervention in the way in which people use land, which effectively rules out the possibility that the free market can be made to perform the necessary tasks.

Yet the political administration of land use has had a devastating impact on soil fertility. Miss Strong cited the case of Federal farm export policies that had encouraged American farmers to bring marginal lands into production.

The scale of the distortion in the market system can be gauged from the fact that the U.S. farm subsidy programme, which is intended to reduce surplus production, is now estimated to cost taxpayers \$21 billion in 1983.

But with that kind of incentive, the chances are that farmers will produce more by intensive use of land and fertilisers.

**P**ESSIMISTIC predictions by ecologists captured the headlines in the last decade, but a more tempered assessment produces a different outlook.

Among the guarded optimists is Marion Clawson, of Resources for the Future, an independent research organisation based in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Clawson is the foremost authority on natural resources in the U.S. public domain. He takes the view that the world's food and fibre resource base is adequate for Man's needs, provided that a more equitable system for distributing those resources is created.

This emphasis on the distributional problem must be dealt with within an economic as well as moral framework.

This was clearly appreciated by Aldo Leopold, who produced what has now become a classic statement of a land ethic. In his definition, he bluntly declared:

"... quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient.

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise..."

But he then went on to admonish conservationists who allowed themselves to be carried away by their passions:

"The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process. Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous, because they are devoid of critical understanding either of the land, or of economic land-use."<sup>1</sup>

**UTOPIANS** whose sensibilities have been offended have tended to opt for an authoritarian solution to ecological problems. They have taken it for granted that the free market – having failed in the 19th century – cannot be made to work harmoniously to achieve Man's moral ideals.

And so they have endorsed the view of Garrett Hardin, that "reliance upon the individual in such matters [pollution control] is doomed to failure."<sup>2</sup>

Yet it is possible to reform the existing socio-economic system in order to accomplish two objectives:

- Preserve and even enhance the freedom of action of the individual; and
- Inject moral content into the membrane of industrial society to ensure the achievement of conservationist goals as well as the desire to improve the material condition of Mankind.

Such a system was articulated by an American economic philosopher, Henry George, in his classic *Progress and Poverty*.<sup>3</sup>

George is famous for the Single Tax – the proposal that social expenditure could be financed out of economic rent, the value of unimproved land which ought to be taxed into the public coffers.

The fiscal policy was merely the tool for realising the aims of George's theory of property.

**Broadly speaking, natural resources are God-given and therefore belong to the public domain. Man achieves his full potential, however, when he is set free to pursue his own aims, without let or hindrance – always providing that he respects the other person's right to do likewise.**

Now, the full capture of the economic rent of land amounts to an ethics-based land policy which works most effectively within a free market system.

**Land use.** The wanton waste of land would immediately be eliminated. Hoarding and the waste of resources is associated with the present system of land tenure, where the cost of possessing land is low or zero.

One example: millions of acres of urban land are allowed to stand idle while prime agricultural land is developed. This would not happen if the owners were obliged to pay the full economic value of that land to the community, on the assumption that they were putting it to full use.

Thus, compact cities – involving lower energy costs and higher living standards – would be associated with less intensive cultivation of farmland.

**Income distribution.** Social services would be financed out of the value of natural resources. This value is created not by the individual landowner, but by the presence of a community and the provision of infrastructural amenities

**B**ETWEEN now and the year 2,000, world's population is expected to increase by 1.5 billion.

How are these people to be provided with food, fibre and shelter? This was the question that concentrated discussion at a meeting in Geneva on November 2.

The meeting was called by Dr. Aurelio Peccei, President of The Club of Rome who is now emphasising the need to construct new land policies to meet the challenge.

The meeting did not produce any answers, but interest was focussed on a Resource Management Game that is being designed by Dennis Meadows, co-author of *The Limits to Growth*.



● Arlo Woolery

Arlo Woolery, Executive Director of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, told *Land and Liberty* that he proposed that the Resource Management Game should use, as its basic assumption, a fixed supply of land "to determine what type of resource allocation we would have to make to provide even the bare minimum of food, fibre and shelter for this many extra people."

Woolery will meet Meadows in Vienna this year to discuss the development of their model, which they hope will generate some answers.

such as roads.

Result: income received by individuals would be seen to be *earned* by them, and unearned income would be shared out equally between all members of society through the exchequer.

In a very real sense, then, while individuals are free to *possess* land, everyone – without exception – shares in the benefits of the value of land.

**Individual freedom.** The free market works to set the price of natural resources; within that framework, the individual is free to determine his own destiny. Competition would be tempered by a clear appreciation of the ethical basis of society, and the regulatory system would be a minimal one.

**S**CEPTICS will demand a more detailed elaboration of this model of an ethical land policy before being convinced that the free market model is, indeed, the best one.

It is sufficient, for present purposes, to point out this route towards a holistic ethic. It is a model which does not rely upon, but certainly embraces, the faith in Mankind enunciated by Aurelio Peccei:

"We believe there is a dormant potential in all human beings of understanding, of imagination, of creativity, of compassion, of tolerance and moral energies which have been neglected."

These characteristics of Mankind have to be developed, for as Mr. Peccei warned, "whatever enlightened land policies we may devise, we will discover that their implementation does not depend on the small elites who will devise and determine the policies and strategies in the future for land use.

"There must be the participation of wide masses of people, and if they don't understand, if they are passive and don't see that the development of land in a proper way belongs to them, is in their interest and to which they can make a contribution, then the policies... will not be applied effectively."

So far, ecologists have been long on problems and short on solutions.

My impression is that they are anxious to document the scale of the environmental despoliation, but are equally keen to honour existing property rights.

"Political realities" are accepted as a constraint on the reforms that might be proposed, which is why so many of them either resort to a mindless attack on capitalism (which turns them into utopians) or avoid detailed proposals for a thorough-going change in the economic processes that are at the heart of the problem.

We can only hope that a no-holds-barred debate has been enjoined as the first step towards an honest appraisal of what needs to be done to rescue Mother Earth from the vandals.

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2. Garrett Hardin, 'Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, Dec. 13, 1968.
3. Henry George, *Progress & Poverty* (1879); centenary edn., New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1979.