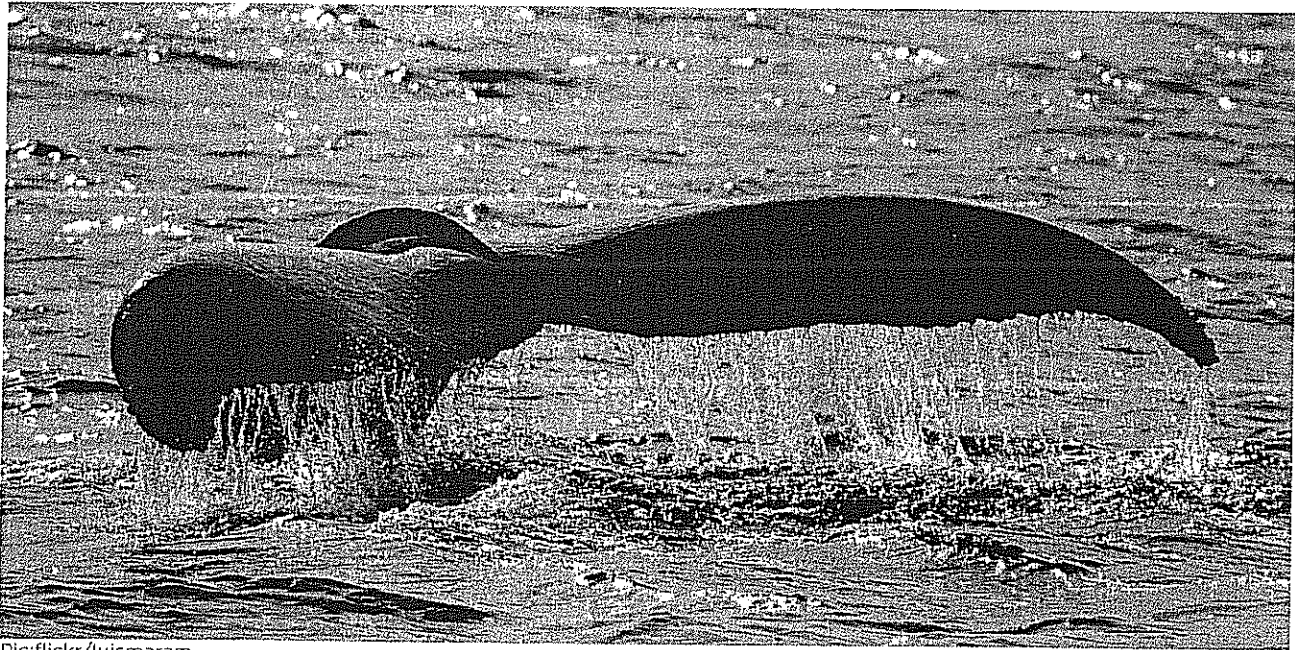


FRAMING GEOISM FOR ENVIRONMENTALISTS

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Environmentalists are only just starting to appreciate the necessity for natural resource charges on pesticides, acidifying fertilisers and other polluting petrochemicals in food production.

Finite land & resources and rising population point to an inevitable environmental crisis, with all the associated economic and social costs. The environmental movement has responded with calls for pigovian taxes – that is, taxes levied on market activities that generate negative externalities. These are useful approximations to the natural resource charges that geoists have long advocated, although the all-important issue of the locational value of land has still eluded most environmentalists.

While fresh water, fish stocks, forest resources, and the “dumping grounds” of our oceans and atmosphere appeared virtually infinite in Henry George’s day, his principles that enable each of us to share the Earth equitably are just as relevant. Indeed, they are vital.

Why do philosophy curricula so often deal in abstract issues yet avoid the everyday practical issue of right ownership? That is, what properly belongs to me, the individual, and

what rightly belongs to society? What is the underlying nature of “property”, especially when “property rights” hold an almost religious significance to some?

Geoists cut through the confusion by first rejecting the neoclassical conflation of land and capital into simply capital, always opposed on the other side by the second factor of production, labour. We unequivocally assert that the gifts of Nature, produced by no man, should rightly belong to all equally. Put another way, we all should have equal opportunity to the land and natural resources, and therefore these should be freed up to enable us to apply our labour to them and open up productive work opportunities. It is simply wrong (and economically foolhardy) to own outright natural resources – instead, we should rent them according to their value, with the rental payments

effectively reimbursing society for their exclusion from their birthright. Environmentalists are consequently satisfied that the True Price applied to the use and abuse of natural resources will force users to use them sparingly.

The property rights of capital, however, are inherently quite different. Given that the true cost of natural resources has been paid in any productive endeavour, the product of labour is rightly the sole property of the producer, and the state has no right to confiscate any of it. In other words, taxes are legalised robbery, and only emergency measures (natural cataclysms or threat of war) would ever justify the confiscation that is taxation of labour or capital.

George pointed to the environmental importance of collecting the rent from land, and contemporary geoists have adopted his principles to deal with current concerns, including environmental issues. If governments collected the rent from land then land would be forced to be put to its optimum use, giving rise to a much more compact and resource-efficient cityscape, much more amenable to shorter commutes, walkable communities and the provision of efficient public transport. Valuable agriculture land would be safe from sprawling cities. Urban infrastructure and other

snared resources (broadband networks, rail lines etc.) would be self-funding as the uplift in land values would be collected for the public purse rather than accruing to landowners and making land more unaffordable.

Environmentalists are only just starting to appreciate the necessity for natural resource charges on pesticides, acidifying fertilisers and other polluting petrochemicals in food production. We pay too little for our conventionally-grown food nowadays, which embodies massive and underpriced quantities of water, fuel and eroded soil. If these hidden subsidies were effectively eliminated by the adoption of natural resource charges then organic produce would be far more competitive.

Charges on natural resources reduce the wastage and overall use of such resources and so contain the seeds of eventual fiscal problems for governments, for the revenue from such sources will diminish over time. However, collecting the rent from land does not force land out of use – indeed, just the opposite will apply. In other words, if the gaze of environmentalists were extended to land then governments would have a truly sustainable source of funding for education, social welfare and other needs.



How is it that the Monsantos of this world (the peddlers of destructive broadacre agriculture) have been allowed to frame how we calculate farming efficiency? Farming productivity should be reckoned in terms of efficient use of resources (which would be the case in a geoist system), but the conventional measures calculate efficiency in terms of gross output per farmer, no matter how much wastage of water, oil, soil and the destruction to waterways, atmosphere and water table. Armed with a fully-informed geoist perspective, the rent-seekers who live off the backs of others and the fruits of Nature can be exposed and halted.

