

The World Conservation Strategy As A Dystopian Vision

by John R. Livingston *

The World Conservation Strategy (WCS) was published in 1980 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).¹ Its mandate was to establish a universal understanding of environmental problems and to secure the acceptance of planetary management goals. In the face of massive desertification, deforestation, the erosion of soils, the pollution of freshwater supplies, the extinction of species and many other ecological disasters, it seemed prudent to have one overall strategy for dealing with environmental ills. The authors of the WCS agreed that non-human resources had to be identified and protected in order to secure the integrity of ecosystems as well as our own future.

The question of the value of the WCS is debated by those who want to protect wild nature (preservationists) and those who want to manage it (conservationists), that is, by those who reject the industrial growth ethos and its conservation/development imperatives and those who want to remain on the path that industrial society is following. The approach that the WCS takes toward nature is clearly not new. In fact, its philosophical roots appear to extend deep into the history of Western thought where it finds its place in a tradition of utopian speculation that asserts the dichotomy between reason and emotion.

In this paper I will examine the WCS as expressive of that utopian tradition, a tradition which only helps, in the end, to do the bidding of the industrial growth society. Contrary to the utopian tone of the WCS, I think that the premises upon which it rests are flawed, and as such give us good reason to locate this document in a dystopian tradition of thought, a tradition which has shown itself to be intolerant of nature.

The aim of the WCS is to help advance the achievement of development through the conservation of living resources. The Strategy

specifically states that it:

- 1) explains the contribution of living resource conservation to human survival and to sustainable development;
- 2) identifies the priority conservation issues and the main requirements for dealing with them;
- 3) proposes effective ways for achieving the Strategy's aim.²

Its three main objectives are:

- 1) to maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems (such as soil regeneration and protection, the recycling of nutrients, and the cleansing of waters) on which human survival and development depend;
- 2) to preserve genetic diversity (the range of genetic material found in the world's organisms) on which depend the functioning of many of the above processes and life-support systems, the breeding programmes necessary for the protection and improvement of cultivated plants, domesticated animals and micro-organisms, as well as many scientific and medical advances, technical innovations and the security of the many industries that use living resources;
- 3) to ensure the sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems (notably fish and other wildlife, forests and grazing lands) which support millions of rural communities as well as major industries.³

These, however, were only its overall aims. Its specific goals and their justification were more fully delineated along six lines:

- 1) development, the modification of the biosphere, should be undertaken to "satisfy human needs and improve the quality of human life" (sec. 1.3).
- 2) conservation, the management of the biosphere, must "yield the greatest sus-

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tainable benefit to present and future generations," must be "positive, embracing preservation, maintenance, sustainable utilization, restoration and enhancement of the natural environment" (sec. 1.4).

- 3) the preservation of genetic materials entails "the protection and improvement of cultivated plants and domesticated animals" for scientific advance, technical innovation, and the security of industry (sec. 1.7).
- 4) since much of the planet will be transformed, such alterations must achieve the social and economic objectives of development (sec 1.7).
- 5) "where agriculture can supply more food, more economically and on a sustainable basis, than can the utilization of wildlife, the conversion of wildlife habitat to farmland is rational" (sec. 7.7).
- 6) for "global solidarity," a new "economic order [must be] achieved, a new environmental ethic [must be] adopted, human populations [must] stabilize and sustainable modes of development [must] become the rule rather than the exception" if we are to prevent further environmental deterioration (sec. 1.12).⁴

As it stands, the WCS seems to be very reasonable and common-sensical. How else can we proceed? Human life will be improved and benefited, and nature will be conserved. Throughout, the WCS is written in a tone that suggests that it is beyond being impugned, that its tenets demand an adherence that is morally obligatory. On the surface it appears to allay even the objections of those who decry a managerial approach to nature. After all, the Strategy appears to advocate solutions that are positive and embracing, solutions which seem to speak on behalf of nature. According to the stated goals of the WCS, however, the economic goals of industry will take precedence over the preservation of nature. This is evidenced by the status that agriculture is accorded by the "rational conversion of wildlife habitat to farmland," and by the reduction of domesticated species to "genetic information." What is more, with the acceptance and implementation of the WCS, it is reasoned that a new environmental ethic will be adopted, that human populations will stabilize, and that all humans will benefit from the new economic order that would result from a stabilized population and the adoption of an environmental ethic. However, to achieve

such an economic order we need global solidarity. As the WCS states in section 16.11, the only problem facing the strategy is "not one of not knowing what to do, but of getting agreed action done." Shortly after the WCS was published, people who examined the document began to wonder what the WCS was really trying to say. It became clear to readers who are defenders of wild Nature that the main problem facing the strategy was not one of "getting agreed action done." What came under attack was the WCS's underlying assumption that it offers the solution to all environmental problems by its definitions of "environmental" and "problem."

Clearly there are at least two problems which advocates of the protection of non-human phenomena felt were not sufficiently addressed by the WCS. The WCS never sets forth a clear argument for the use of Nature to feed a growing human population. Since an exponentially growing human population would necessitate the resource development of natural areas, and protection of such areas would, consequently, become virtually impossible, we have to wonder why the WCS only makes brief mention of the need for human populations to stabilize. Preservationists also argue that the non-quantifiable and non-economic values which they attribute to nature are given insufficient treatment in the document. The WCS concludes that wildlife has only "symbolic, ritual or cultural importance" (sec. 4.9).

What is perhaps most significant, though, is the underlying worldview of the WCS which such omissions illuminate. It is clear that the WCS assumes that salvation lies in increased productivity, and that conservation is not an attitude or an activity but the centre of authority, the ground of ethical obedience. (Notice that throughout, strategies are to be adopted because conservation demands "X"; moral responsibility lies not in the individual but in obedience to the development ethic, and grounds for accepting or rejecting this authority are never set for in premises. Conservation/development is given a strange independent, transcendent status.) The WCS also assumes that development is a global necessity, that science and technology can solve any environmental problem, and that the status quo must be maintained. The bottom-line is that it assumes global utility and insists on global unity, universal acceptance and application of the industrial growth ethos and the conservation/development imperative. We notice, however, that because the WCS takes their assumptions to be obvious and insists on objectives that are taken for granted, the worldview the Strategy espouses is never clearly

set forth. We now turn our attention to see how these assumptions, objectives and western bias came to be obvious or taken for granted.

The purpose of the remainder of this paper is to sketch the historical root of the commodification of nature in Western culture and to illuminate how the WCS embraces and perpetuates this ideology. The intended product is to show how the utopian speculation in much of Western philosophy has lead toward a dystopian relationship with nature once it has been put into practice.

The World Conservation Strategy did not spring out of a vacuum. Its nature-intolerant cosmology has been around in some form seemingly forever. Many authors⁵ have claimed that Western society's relation to nature was perverted in the original Judeo-Christian notion of Genesis which gave us the first concrete statement of our separation from nature:

Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.
(Genesis 1:28)

Very early then, it seems that we have a recipe for planetary management. Humans, created in God's image, stand at the apex of creation and are custodians of God's power on earth. There is a problem of interpretation, however, with this role. In one view human beings may be seen as stewards who must act responsibly towards that which they have proprietary rights over. In another view, the concepts of power and subdual seem to act as imperatives compelling humans to adopt certain attitudes and realize certain courses of action. In neither case, however, is the absolute dominion over nature questioned. Viewed as despot or responsible steward, humanity, in either interpretation, has full rights to do what it wants with its natural resources.

Clearly the human/nature schism has been around a long time. It was certainly in place when Plato began to ruminate about humanity's role on earth and the perfectly just state: Utopia. In *The Republic*⁶ Plato attempted to give humanity, now thoroughly removed from nature conceptually, a notion of how the perfectly just state, predicated on reason, might work. Human beings, supposedly freed from any ecological system, required a rational, artificial system to regulate and structure their actions in relation to one another. What

subsequent generations inherited from Plato was the explicit argument that no system could be considered utopian unless it fully stressed harmony, order and stability, and reason above any emotional or physical concerns.

Even though Plato set the precedent for a Utopia grounded in the separation of humanity and nature, reason and emotion, he was no despot over nature. The identification of Utopia with the despotic treatment of the non-human arose some twenty centuries after Plato with the advent of scientific inquiry. Francis Bacon in particular, viewed science as the handmaiden of Utopia. He declared that by means of science, humanity was in a position to not only have knowledge of nature's secrets, but also to master it. Not one to mince words, Bacon declared that "natural science therefore has no other goal than to more firmly establish and extend the power and domination of humanity over nature."⁷ Bacon, like Rene Descartes, clearly voiced the basic values, beliefs and assumptions of humanism predicated on Plato's dualism and emphasis on reason.⁸ He steadfastly maintained though, in contrast to Plato, that power, control and subdual must direct our perceptions, decisions and actions if we take reason to be the means by which to establish Utopia. He viewed natural objects with contempt for they represented the antithesis of reason. They were impediments that had to be overcome. In order to realize Utopia we had to rid ourselves of anything non-rational. Freedom lay in the emancipation from determined bodily responses, from biological constraints.

Though there were other interpretations of humanity's role on earth, humanistic speculation shared some common features. It was assumed that in knowledge of Nature and the self all humans could be liberated from superstitious and false doctrines and made socially equal through advances in science. For humans to realize their utopian ideals, they had to exist in a thoroughly rational, human-centered universe. Emotion, being antagonistic to Reason, had to be expunged from human nature. These attributes -- the control of Nature, the control of self, faith in human abilities and a belittling of the physical and the natural -- were endorsed under the new set of beliefs, assumptions and values that became a major strain of humanism. By the sixteenth century human interests and values were given a completely superordinate position with regards to the interests of non-human nature. Within humanism utopian thinkers asserted the dignity and worth of humans and their capacity to

achieve self-realization through the use of Reason and the scientific method.

Humanistic conceptions of Utopia took on a new dimension with the union of science and technology. The union of scientific research, technological innovation and industrial mass-production allowed Nature to be productively managed and "harvested." Once machines made it possible to suit our own ends, the utopian ideal of all humans being equal materially, if not socially, seemed to be at hand. In hindsight we know this did not occur. The reason equality did not occur is because there are implicit contradictions in the humanistic, rational conception of Utopia that thwart its realization.

Bacon's rationalism and dualism allowed him to view the utopian state like the mind/body dualism. Just as the mind must rule the body so in Utopia the rulers must govern the people. However, if humanism believes a goal of Utopia is the social equality of the people, where is social equality in a state that emphasizes rulers and subjects, the governors and the governed? Reason dictates the subject/object split between the rulers and the ruled in Utopia. Hence, as long as we stress rationalism and dualism as necessary conditions of Utopia, we cannot establish the perfect state, a state with social equality. Since, on the one hand, a major strain of humanism asserts the essential dignity and equality of humans, and rationalism, on the other hand, dictates a subject-object relation in Utopia, there is a contradiction between the egalitarian ideal of the former and the necessarily elitist view of the latter. The very ideals of humanism, when united with rationalist imperatives, form a contradiction that makes the realization of those selfsame ideals impossible. One cannot have a social structure that is at once egalitarian and elitist. Thus most critics of rationalism agree that humanistic ideals tend to be rejected in favour of a reasonable, functionally efficient Utopia. Consequently, the formal structure of Utopia tends to supplant the human content. Therefore when Utopia is taken to its logical extreme, Dystopia is the inevitable result.

Utopia becomes Dystopia in a particularly evident way in two twentieth century novels, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*⁹ and George Orwell's *1984*¹⁰. Rather than demonstrating this trend theoretically, both authors set out to portray a completely rational, ordered Utopia. The novels are horrifying because they express the logical conclusion of Platonic and humanistic values. Themes basic to both works

grow out of Utopian beliefs such as freedom through reason, the denial of the emotions, the denial of the self, the mastery of Nature (including human Nature -- genetically and conceptually), the sense of power entailed in the subject/object split, the dignity of humans, the desire for social equality, the need for systemization and the need for standardization. Huxley and Orwell conclude that such notions when solely rationally-based are, if not blatantly chimerical or self-contradictory, then decidedly inhuman. They show in their fiction that reason, as the sole organizing principle of Utopia, debases humans by stripping them of their dignity and individuality. In order to maximize social utility, people are reduced to the status of objects useful to the state. In *Brave New World* we see the individual defined solely in terms of concepts such as "progress,"¹¹ "improvement,"¹² "wasted,"¹³ "gratuitous,"¹⁴ and the list goes on. All human elements, such as freedom, self-expression, and spontaneity, are superceded by the person's functional role in the state. In such a state, each person must fulfill his/her appointed task without thought of freedom or equality (in 1984 Orwell achieves this by making the concepts of freedom and slavery tautological). Such concepts are dangerous because they are inefficient. As Huxley points out, the worst that can be said of such a state is that it is inefficient rather than inhuman. In Utopia humans lose those things that make them human (emotions and the desire to create), and become slaves to their own creation. Furthermore, because humans have no access to history in Utopia (that is, to the roots of their beliefs and concepts) they have no idea who they are. Not knowing who they are or what they want, freedom and equality cease to be their goals.

What Orwell and Huxley attempted to show in their texts was that the very human attitude that commodifies Nature, that turns it into a source of resources for the attainment of human goals, turns in on itself and commodifies humans. In denying human physical existence, human emotions and human individuality in the hope that their rationality will liberate them and make them equal with others (as the Platonic-humanist tradition assumes) humans lose their essence, their intrinsic worth.

1984 was published in 1949, the WCS in 1980. The authors of the WCS should have known that dualistic and humanist utopian speculation merged with science and technology and taken to its logical extreme, yields Dystopia. As I see it, the WCS is the apotheosis of dystopian irrationality and inhumanity. The

WCS ignores Huxley's and Orwell's call to examine history and to trace the roots of our assumptions. The central flaw of the WCS is that the authors utterly ignore the past. Perhaps this is because the past is threatening since it indicates the cultural relativity of ideas, and the possibility of alternate images, interpretations and values. An awareness of the past carries with it a demand to provide the basis or justification for our goals and assumptions. The past is, in some sense, our conscience. It is the enemy of dogmatic pronouncements and ideologies. It judges our institutions and makes us uneasy about our self-justifications and rationalizations. Perhaps, more than anything else, it challenges our belief in "necessary" activity and "absolute" truth. The only way to make us feel better is therefore to forget the past. In this way we can deem our activity right, appropriate and necessary, and our decisions and objectives valid. It seems to me that, above all else, the WCS is an avoidance of the past.

In ignoring history it is easier for the WCS to claim that it is rational and it is also easier to justify a strategy which would otherwise appear to be a confusing, if not contradictory, set of recommendations, suggestions and objectives. By ignoring history, the WCS finds it is easy to equate Reason very narrowly with efficiency, productivity and utility and to overlook its much broader base of curiosity, humility and wonder. The WCS assumes the Platonic division of reason and emotion is an absolute truth. It debases reason by identifying rationality with expediency. Reason, in the WCS, becomes rationalization, a cynical justification for behaviour that acts without reflection. Every page of the WCS carries objectives that are justified because they improve and enhance, are efficient or useful. Where, though, are the anticipated criticisms that force definitions and arguments? Why does Nature require improvement and enhancement? Should non-human nature be reduced to useful commodities for us? Should appropriate behaviour be defined simply in terms of efficiency?

In 1984 Orwell made it clear that, in order for the stable, efficient and rational Utopia predicated on power, control and subdual to work, it **must** invent the past. It must be completely standardized/systematized/homogenized and must have the complete obedience of the members of the state. To achieve its ends, the perfect state must destroy individuality. Individuality presupposes questioning and self-expression, characteristics that

undermine authority. To protect its sovereignty the state must ensure individuals view themselves solely in terms of their efficient functioning. This is most easily realized through genetic engineering and through the destruction of language, in other words, the elimination of real dichotomies. By making dualistic concepts tautological (that is, self-contained, self-perpetuating and self-justified) the state ensures that the individual cannot think or question. In controlling the individual, both biologically and conceptually, the state ensures that its objectives are realized, and its commands are obeyed.

What if we view the WCS as a utopian vision? The WCS's perfect world is modelled on the Platonic and humanistic Utopia of order, efficiency and Reason. Its insistence on the need for global solidarity entails the complete standardization and homogenization of worldviews. There is no room for unique cultural conceptions of conservation. Idiosyncratic conceptions and behaviour undermine the industrial growth ethos. As I said at the beginning, the security of industries employing living resources is specifically mentioned in two of the three central aims of the Strategy. Control through genetic engineering is also a given, though not yet for the human species.

Perhaps the greatest indication of the WCS's dystopian vision is its equating of conservation with development. Historically, naturalists, among others, have regarded these concepts as polar opposites. By making these concepts tautological the WCS clearly exhibits the role it believes it plays, as the ultimate authority on planetary management. It won't tolerate opposition and its mandate requires no justification. By pre-empting individual questioning (tautologies are necessarily true) it hopes to convince the reader that its pronouncements and objectives are unquestionably necessary. Every strategy is seen to be logically entailed by the initial tautology. Definitions are to be seen as superfluous, unnecessary. As in 1984, obedience is ensured by making thought and questioning impossible. The destruction of language and the violation of the rules of rationality, permits the WCS to be self-justifying. The Strategy's conclusion that opposition to the strategy "is not one of not knowing what to do, but of getting agreed action done" really does cease to be a problem once informed dissent is disallowed and once conceptual flexibility is lost. Having dissolved the distinction between conservation and development, the WCS assures the fulfillment of its utopian objectives. With the demise of

critical acuity the WCS can effect the world-wide acceptance of its resourcist bias, of the industrial growth ethos and the conservation/development imperative. The utopian goal of global solidarity can be achieved through a standardization of beliefs and values.

The WCS embraces Plato's dualism and hierarchy of values/virtues, Bacon's notions of control and power, and the humanistic ideal of liberty and salvation achieved through science and technology. At the same time the Strategy seeks to make Reason the sole organizing principle of Utopia. It thus overlooks the implicit social contradictions entailed by the realization of a completely rational system and the implicit contradictions for the preservation of wild non-human Nature. In short it fails to see the Orwellian ramifications of its tunnel-vision. The following ingredients of the WCS's worldview indicate, I think, a dystopian vision:

- 1) it assumes utility/efficiency and productivity;
- 2) it assumes improvement and enhancement;
- 3) it assumes global economic solidarity;
- 4) it assumes unquestioned obedience to the conservation/development imperative;
- 5) there is a lack of definitions, and reasoned arguments;
- 6) there is no sense of history, of the possibility of revising images and values;
- 7) the language is tautological;
- 8) it assumes genetic engineering is positive;
- 9) it disregards individuality;
- 10) it assumes systemization/standardization/homogenization;
- 11) it assumes domination and control;
- 12) it over-emphasises Reason;
- 13) it has complete faith in technology and management;
- 14) it provides its own self-justification.

That these ingredients mirror those of 1984, and that 1984 is seen as completely inhumane and cruel suggests to me that something very dangerous has happened to our thinking. I think that the almost universal acceptance of the WCS is cause for alarm.

Notes

1. International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, United Nations Environmental Programme, and World Wildlife Fund, *The World Conservation Strategy*, 1980.

2. *Ibid.*, p. iv.

3. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1967), 155:1203-1207.

6. Plato, *The Republic*, translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974).

7. William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 48.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

9. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Panther Books, 1977).

10. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Books, 1954).

11. Huxley, p.17.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

