

# 10 Action plan for the ecological crisis

There is mounting evidence that we have reached a crucial moment in our social relationship with nature. The facts show that sustaining global capitalism is incompatible with maintaining human life. There are limits to the naked abuse of nature by capital and we have gone beyond that point. Many of the eco-systems that make up the planet's ecology, which includes humanity, have become destabilised. What some have called the "buffer" between human activities and the rest of nature has disappeared as a result of quantitative changes expressed in the rapid and uncontrolled globalisation of the productive forces.

Our relationship to nature is the cornerstone of our existence as socialised human beings. We have a given unity with nature that, while grossly distorted by capitalism, is absolute. We depend for our day-to-day existence on air, food and water and struggle to acquire those basic needs. We are also that part of nature that thinks and acts upon nature itself. In doing so, we transform the world around us and in the process change ourselves. These fundamental relationships are the basis for all human existence, its societies, great civilisations and our modern, urban life. So when nature is threatened in the way that it is now by the power and rule of globalised capitalism, we are all in danger and at risk.

Capitalism's own inner logic compels it to take from nature in an unplanned, arbitrary fashion. It does not and cannot respect nature because it regards it primarily as part of the production

process, whose aim is year-on-year increase in profits. In this way, production depletes and ruins the very nature that it rests upon. Moreover, as capitalism extends its reach into areas not previously dominated by markets and production for profit – for example, the human genetic code – it deepens further our alienation, our removal from a direct relationship with the world outside of us and also with ourselves.

This alienation is not a secondary or psychological question but is a reflection in individual thought, behaviour and feelings of material social, class relations. The most significant arena in our relationship to nature is the economic process. Yet here we are deprived of any influence, let alone control. The present system is organised on a highly socialised basis, often involving workers in many different countries working in a collaborative way. But this whole process is controlled from start to finish by capital and its inherent need to expand. Nature itself produces land and raw materials. These, for the most part, are privately owned. While we are free to sell our labour power to an employer, once bought it becomes a good for use by the capitalist alone. In fact, the more the world is filled with commodities, the less we have for own use. Karl Marx discovered that “this fact simply means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer”. He described this process as “a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation”. In other words, we are totally alienated from the world around us. We cannot act to safeguard nature while we are denied both the power to do so and a direct relationship with nature that is not mediated by the needs of capital.

Capitalism is a system that through its own internal logic pursues capital accumulation for its own sake. The only interest is whether commodities produced are exchanged for money because until they are, the value – including profit – they contain is not realised. As production for profit is the overriding driving force and an end in itself, it is immaterial what goods are actually produced. As it sets out to create wealth rather than meet need as its first priority, capitalism is in effect on a treadmill. Failure

to accumulate sufficient capital will lead to bankruptcy and closure and the victory of competitors. The inherent drive, therefore, is towards constant expansion and transformation of the means of production. There is no standing still for capital. Even when companies turn in adequate profits, these are measured in comparison with the previous year's. When markets are saturated, capital searches for new commodities to produce and exchange. Products are built to last shorter and shorter periods, while new models are introduced in rapid succession. Scientific breakthroughs are applied as technology as soon as possible and subordinated to this goal, without a full investigation of the potential risks. These barriers are created anew and as a result, capitalism only poses the problems afresh. The only real restraints are those set by competitors in a branch of production and the periodic crises of over-production, when capitalism goes into reverse. Capital in the shape of factories and offices is then destroyed and workers made unemployed. Assessing this phenomenon as it appeared in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx noted:

For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognised as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionises it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces.

### **Irreversible change**

The period of intense globalisation over the last quarter of a century coincides with the dramatic deterioration in humanity's

relationships with nature. In March 2004, the respected World Resources Institute (WRI) said that 10 years after the ratification of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) the position had deteriorated. “We have not made significant progress in curbing global warming in the last decade. In fact, the latest scientific reports indicate that global warming is worsening,” said Dr. Jonathan Pershing, director of WRI’s climate, energy and pollution programme. He warned:

We are quickly moving to the point where the damage will be irreversible. Unless we act now, the world will be locked in to temperatures that would cause irreparable harm. To stabilise the atmospheric concentrations of the greenhouse gases that lead to global warming, we must ultimately bring net emissions of these gases to near zero.

Climate change could drive a million of the world’s species to extinction as soon as 2050, according to a report in the journal *Nature* in January 2004. A study of six world regions suggested a quarter of animals and plants living on the land could be forced into oblivion. The scientists studied six biodiversity-rich regions, representing 20% of the Earth’s land area. The study used computer models to simulate how the ranges of 1,103 species – plants, mammals, birds, reptiles, frogs, butterflies and other invertebrates – are expected to move in response to changing temperatures and climate. The scientists considered three different possibilities – minimum, mid-range and maximum expected climate change, on the basis of data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They also assessed whether or not animals and plants would be able to move to new areas. They concluded that from 15% to 37% of all the species in the regions studied could be driven to extinction by the climate changes likely between now and 2050.

Professor Chris Thomas, of the University of Leeds, UK, said: “If the projections can be extrapolated globally, and to other groups of land animals and plants, our analyses suggest that well over a million species could be threatened with extinction.” Some species will no longer have any climatically suitable habitat

left, and others may be unable to migrate far enough to reach hospitable surroundings. The authors added: "Many of the most severe impacts of climate change are likely to stem from interactions between threats, factors not taken into account in our calculations, rather than from climate acting in isolation." They single out as examples habitat fragmentation and loss, and competition from new invasive species.

### **The danger from what we eat**

Industrialised, intensive farming methods of agriculture were introduced on a large scale to increase the output of food after World War II and reduce the price of commodities. The price paid in terms of resources, soil erosion, pollution, ill health, obesity and climate change is incalculable. The position has deteriorated sharply in the last 25 years under the impact of corporate-driven globalisation. An emphasis on quantity, uniformity, and ruthless price-cutting has created an ever-greater reliance on intensive, industrialised production.

Most farmers and consumers are the source of wealth for a handful of corporations that control what is known as agribusiness – chemical manufacturers, food processors and supermarket giants. Two grain traders – Cargill and Archer Daniel Midland – control 80% of the world's grain trade; four companies (Syngenta, Dupont, Monsanto, and Aventis) account for nearly two-thirds of world pesticide sales; and in the UK, the major supermarkets now control 80% of all grocery sales. Tesco, the most ruthless and dominant firm, is now a transnational corporation, coming in as the world's sixth largest food retailer, operating in 12 countries. Tesco's profits for 2003 soared by 22% to £1.7bn, equal to half the income generated by the entire UK farming industry. The combined revenues of the world's top 30 food retailers exceeded \$1,000,000 billion in 2001, according to the Institute of Grocery Distribution. The top 10 grocery retailers account for 57% of the combined revenues for the world's top 30 food retailers. On its own Wal-Mart, which owns Asda in Britain, accounted for 21%. Wal-Mart is one of America's most notorious low-paying, non-union corporations.

According to Mike Hart of the UK Small and Family Farms

Alliance, half a century ago, 50-60% of every pound spent by the consumer on food was returned to the farmer. Today in much of Europe and North America the figure is down to only 10-20%, while in the UK the share is 9%. Hart says that the increasing gap between farm gate and retail prices is in some cases down to “clear profiteering”. For example, in 1991 the farm gate price of potatoes was 9p per kg and the retail price was 30p – a 21 pence difference and a 233.5% mark up. In 2000 the farm gate price was 9p per kg but the retail price was 47p per kg, the difference now being 38 pence – a huge mark up of 425%. The same applies to cauliflower’s farm gate price of 24p in both 1990 and 2000 with a retail price of 73p in 1990 and 98p in 2000; an extra 25p per cauliflower and a profit increase of 35%. He told Friends of the Earth in a 2003 report:

Both of these products require no processing other than grading and packing, both of which are done by the farmers before being put on the supermarket shelf, so clearly the increase in the farm gate to retail difference is due to supermarkets wishing to increase profit margins at the farmers’ expense. This is a clear abuse of their power in the food chain and a practice which is and will cause severe damage to UK farming. British farmers have delivered the higher and higher standards demanded by supermarkets but have been rewarded for doing so by supermarkets forcing down farm gate prices to levels which cause immense hardship among farming families, to the extent that agricultural charities are now paying out record levels of support for farming families and the number claiming state benefits are at previously unseen levels. The low farm gate prices being paid to farmers by supermarkets are destroying any chance we have of a sustainable farming system in Britain. Without profitable farming the environment, landscape and rural communities suffer. It is clear that supermarkets are using their near monopoly position in the food chain to make excess profits at the expense of both farmers and consumers.

Orchards were once a key part of the traditional English landscape, but they are rapidly disappearing from our countryside. Over 60% of UK apple orchards and about 50% of

pear orchards have been lost since 1970 and the decline is continuing. Apples are imported from as far away as New Zealand and China, and are produced at high volumes convenient for the supermarkets. Supermarkets shop around the globe to find the lowest prices, using communication technology to engage suppliers in a reverse auction. Transport of food over long distances, particularly by road and air freight, increases the amount of greenhouse gases produced and so contributes to global climate change. The distribution of one kilogram of apples from New Zealand sold in the UK accounts for its own weight in carbon dioxide emissions. Meanwhile, 20% of fruit and vegetables sold in supermarkets contain more than one type of pesticide residue.

In Britain, a team of agricultural economists led by Jules Pretty has calculated that the hidden cost to society of intensive farming is at least £2.3 billion each year. Significant costs arose from contamination of drinking water with pesticides, from damage to wildlife, habitats, hedgerows and drystone walls, from emissions of gases, from soil erosion and organic carbon losses, from food poisoning and from bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). This figure did not include the more than £3.5 billion in government subsidies paid to farmers or health care costs from poor food choices.

Globally, farmers use 10 times more fertiliser than in 1950, and spend 17 times as much on pesticides, according to the Worldwatch Institute. While the effectiveness of these applications is diminishing, the cost to the environment is increasing. The contamination of waterways, the biodiversity decline, the spread of toxic chemicals and climate change are all results of intensive farming based on maximising output from a given area. Monoculture farms, which dominate the Midwest of the US, are heavy users of pesticides and fertilisers, since growing a single crop encourages pests while taking nutrients out of the soil. Run-offs from these farms leaks into the Mississippi and ends up in the Gulf of Mexico. The excess nutrients then help to produce algae blooms that kill life in vast areas of the ocean. These blooms, as well as coral reef destruction, are common in coastal areas on all continents.

The intensive use of pesticides, fertilisers, herbicides, antibiotics and growth agents in industrialised farming is thought to contribute to ill health in both animals and human beings. Among them are hormonally active substances which can trigger processes in the body that would not normally occur and lead to the development of disease. These chemicals are known as “endocrine disruptors”.

Hormones are used to accelerate the growth rate of animals so that they can reach market earlier. Many scientists believe that the potential for hormones in food to cause metabolic and reproductive problems in humans needs further evaluation. Hormonal Growth Promotants (HGP) are in implants designed to slowly release small quantities of hormones from the ear of cattle to the tissues. Most of the beef raised in the United States today is produced with the use of hormones of some kind. The arguments for using hormones in meat production are mostly economic. With hormones, conversion of feed into meat is more efficient, thus theoretically lowering producer’s costs.

Processed foods contain many artificial additives, preservatives, colourings or flavourings, and hydrogenated fats, which are directly related to increased rates of heart disease. Current UK regulations allow for 7,000 artificial additives to make food last beyond its natural sell-by date, and alter its appearance to make it more attractive to the consumer. They also allow the addition of water to increase weight. In May 2004, researchers from the University of Southampton found that additives had a “significant” impact on the behaviour of children. In tests, they discovered that the proportion of children with high levels of hyperactivity was halved when the additives were removed. The same month, the House of Commons health committee issued a stark warning about the dangers of obesity, which in England has grown by almost 400% in 25 years. The committee found among the causes was the fact that “healthy-eating messages are drowned out by the large proportion of advertising given over to highly energy-dense foods; other types of food promotion, as well as pricing also make buying unhealthy food more attractive and economical than healthy alternatives; and food labelling, a key tool to help consumers



choose healthy foods, is frequently either confusing or absent”.

**The destruction of the soil**

- ▶ soil erosion is responsible for about 40% of land degradation worldwide
- ▶ about 20% of irrigated land in the developing world has been damaged to some extent by waterlogging or salinity
- ▶ about 30% of livestock breeds are close to extinction. About 75% of the genetic diversity of agricultural crops has been lost since 1900
- ▶ an estimated 250 million people have been directly affected by desertification, and nearly 1 billion are at risk
- ▶ one in every five people in the developing world is chronically undernourished, a total of 777 million individuals
- ▶ 55% of the 12 million child deaths each year are related to malnutrition.

UN Food and Agricultural Organisation

**Food safety concerns**

- ▶ in industrialised countries, up to 30% of people suffer from food borne illnesses every year
- ▶ an estimated 70% of the approximately 1.5 billion annual cases of diarrhoea in the world are caused by biological contamination in foods
- ▶ contaminated food plays a major role in the epidemiology of cholera and other forms of epidemic diarrhoea, substantially contributing to malnutrition
- ▶ the incidence of food-borne diseases may be 300 to 350 times higher than the number of reported cases worldwide
- ▶ overuse of antibiotics has led to the appearance of resistant strains of bacteria. Factors contributing to this include overuse of antibiotics in farm animals and crops.

UN Food and Agricultural Organisation

**Banana bonanza profits**

Banana plantation workers are paid just a penny for every pound's worth of bananas sold in Tesco, not enough to feed their families. Tesco takes 40p. The UK importer/riper is barely breaking even just to stay as a Tesco supplier.

If banana suppliers make a mistake in the packaging requirements or date, they have to pay Tesco £25,000 ("Emergency Product Withdrawals"). Tesco demands payments from its suppliers to cover the costs of its compliance with the Ethical Trading Initiative. According to a letter leaked to *The Grocer*, Tesco demands £69.50 per quarter per supplying site, a demand which, according to one supplier hits smaller businesses hardest since they are more likely to have a number of sites.

Information from Bananalink & *The Grocer* published by Friends of the Earth 2003

Every week Tesco makes £1m surplus from selling bananas, most of which are grown in Costa Rica, from where a GMB delegation has just returned. Bananas are the single most profitable item sold in British supermarkets and the leading stores, including Tesco, are involved in a price war that has seen the cost of a kilo of fruit plummet from £1.08 to 74p in less than two years. Because of their monopoly position, the supermarkets are able to dictate how much they pay for their produce and the net effect has been the loss of 11,000 jobs and a 40% wage cut for Costa Rican plantation workers over the same period. Working conditions on the plantations that supply Tesco are horrendous and the environmental effects of intensive banana production are disastrous. This depressing scenario is mirrored across other Latin American banana-producing countries and is a savage indictment of a global trading system dominated by corporate giants like Tesco who could not care less about the fate of the workers who enable them to declare such obscene profits.

Bert Schouwenburg, Regional organiser, GMB  
*The Guardian*, 27 April 2004

**Genetic modification dangers**

Genetically-modified (GM) crops only intensify the contradictions. In the hands of agribusiness corporations, GM is a mechanism for increasing the power and control of business over food production at the expense of small farmers, organic production, consumers and the developing world. For capital, GM is a new area for profit making rather than helping to meet people's needs. As a result, risk-taking is rife while field trial results are distorted or even lied about. The fact remains that transgenic modification is certain to have unpredictable results, because of the nature of the process. Food scandals like BSE have only increased the belief that the corporations are not concerned about the long-term effects or repercussions as GM crops interact with other organisms. As a result, there is a massive opposition to agribusiness/GM throughout the world.

GM oilseed rape, maize, soya and cotton have been grown commercially in North America since 1996. They are all used in vegetable oils and animal feed, and soya is widely used in processed food. But there is evidence that all is not what the corporations claim. A study published in May 2004 revealed new evidence to show how genes from biotech crops can spread to nearby non-GM plant relatives. The data comes from research on maize engineered to produce powerful toxins in its leaves and stems. These substances, normally produced by bacteria, are lethal to insect pests that try to eat the maize plant. But an Arizona-Texas team says the way the crop is grown in some countries may lead to insects becoming resistant to the GM plant and pesticides. The research was reported in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. In the US and some other nations, Bt maize has to be grown alongside so-called "refuges" of conventional varieties – a strategy aimed at preventing insects from becoming resistant to Bt. But the new work shows that the Bt gene is finding its way into those refuge plants through pollen that is spreading tens of metres. "The refuge is supposed to be toxin-free but in fact the seeds, that is the next generation – some produce the Bt toxin," Professor Bruce Tabashnik, from the University of Arizona Department of Entomology, told the BBC. "This may increase the potential for

some insects to become resistant.” And this tolerance could extend to Bt sprays as well.

Richard Lewontin, the eminent American biologist and opponent of capitalism, in an article in the *New York Review of Books*, assessed the work of the US National Academy of Sciences on GM. Through its research arm, the National Research Council, it had produced an expert report to guide government regulatory policy. Lewontin noted:

The real problem revealed in the NRC report, although it did not seem to bother the panel, is that the data on which “safety assessment” is currently based are not produced by the federal agencies themselves but are provided by the very parties who are asking for approval to distribute the new variety in the first place. Moreover, no one seems to have noticed that there is, in fact, an aspect of the process of genetic engineering that does make that process unusually likely to produce unpredictable results.

All the attention has been paid to the physiological effect of the gene that has been put into the recipient, but none to the effect of where it is inserted in the recipient’s genome. Genes consist of two functionally different adjacent stretches of DNA. One, the so-called structural gene, has information on the chemical composition of the protein that the cell will manufacture when it reads the gene. The other, the so-called regulatory element, is part of a complex signalling system that concerns where and when and how much protein will be produced. When DNA is inserted into the genome of a recipient by engineering methods it may pop into the recipient’s DNA anywhere, including in the middle of some other gene’s regulatory element. The result will be a gene whose reading is no longer under normal control.

One consequence might be that the gene is never read at all, in which case it will probably be bad for the recipient and will never be part of a useful agricultural variety. But another possibility is that the cell will now produce vast amounts of a protein that ordinarily is produced in very low amount, and this high concentration could be toxic or be involved in the biochemical production of a toxin. Yet another possibility is that a toxic substance that used to be produced only in one part of a plant, not ordinarily eaten, could

now be manufactured in another part. Tomatoes are delicious, but you would be ill-advised to eat the leaves and stems because they contain toxins. It is not impossible that a genetically engineered tomato might, by bad luck, start to produce these toxins in the fruit. Thus the process of genetic engineering itself has a unique ability to produce deleterious effects and, contrary to the recommendations of the NRC report, this justifies the view that all varieties produced by recombinant DNA technology need to be specially scrutinised and tested for such effects.

For farmers, there are serious problems of economics, especially in North America where GM crops accounts for 20% of the total. GM seed can be up to 40% more expensive than non-GM varieties. There are often lower yields, despite the claims of the manufacturers. Export markets have collapsed in the face of world-wide hostility to GM. Meanwhile, the biotechnology companies are suing many farmers for infringing company patent rights, saying that they have unlicensed GM plants on their land. A US non-GM farmer whose crop was contaminated by GM was sued by Monsanto for \$400,000!

### **Sustainable capitalism not an alternative**

Given the depth and nature of the ecological crisis, nothing less than a fundamental transformation of economic and social relations will do. The nature of the crisis is global in that it affects every country. In this, it mirrors the globalisation process of the last 25 years, with its plundering of nature. The global scale of the crisis has made it even more certain that capitalism cannot deal with the issue. It has neither the capacity nor the will to undertake global action. The failure of the Kyoto Protocol demonstrates that in a conclusive way.

But there are parties and pressure groups that believe that capitalism is capable of mending its ways, of repairing itself. This, they argue, is achievable through a mixture of regulation, localisation, limiting growth, restructuring of bodies like the World Trade Organisation, better use of technology and less consumption by people in the developed economies. All these “solutions” amount to a defence of the status quo of alienated

capitalist rule and a continuation of commodity production for profit.

The Green Party in the UK argues that it is “economic globalisation” that is damaging ecosystems, because of its emphasis on free trade and the power of the markets. By deliberately using the term “economic”, the Greens carefully leave capitalism as a social system out of the loop. *Green Alternatives to Globalisation*, published in 2004, says the party “aims to reconstruct the patterns of human activities and relationships so that they come to respect the natural systems on which they depend”. Thus the Green Party is about *managing* nature rather than creating the conditions for establishing new relations with nature outside and beyond capitalism. In that sense, like the capitalists, the Greens see nature as a resource. Except they would treat it better.

This view of our relationship to nature is thoroughly one-sided and taken out of social context. Nature stands on one side of the equation and humanity on the other in this formulation. Their interaction is seen as inherently harmful and the inevitable conclusion is that economic activities must be restrained to “guarantee the central goal of sustainability”. This is the same party, of course, that on its website advocates population control because “high rates of population growth... can have a damaging effect on sustainability”.

In *Green Alternatives to Globalisation* the authors, Michael Woodin and Caroline Lucas, want to “restrain and democratise the West’s power” and regret that the “enormous array of conventions, treaties and agreements by which international relations are regulated” are rarely enforced. Their starting point is that the “theory” of economic – not capitalist – globalisation is flawed and are slightly bemused that this has “provided no impediment to the spread of the process itself”. They never ask themselves why because the answer lies within capitalism as a system of accumulation, which is expressed in the specific character of corporate-driven globalisation rather than globalisation in general.

Instead, for the Green Party, world leaders are supporters of corporate globalisation as a result of intense lobbying which

“appears to have had a hypnotic effect”. The “shameful fact” is that the same leaders have “little control” because they have handed over their powers to unaccountable bodies like the WTO. This is what they set out to remedy with a series of proposals aimed at limiting growth, localising economic production using import controls and regulating the economy to “ensure that production is driven by need rather than by profit”. This is all pie in the sky, based on reducing capitalist globalisation to an idea that has had a mysterious impact on world leaders. Unfortunately for all of us, capitalism is not an idea, or a theory but a real social system whose institutions churn out ideas that inevitably reinforce the status quo. As such, those regulations that do exist can never challenge or undermine its basic mode of operations. Capitalism cannot regulate itself out of existence.

Even the authors acknowledge past failures to regulate the transnational corporations. In 1993, they point out, attempts to finalise a code of conduct on TNCs were formally killed off and the UN Centre on Transnational Corporations was closed down. A code of conduct proposed by the UN Commission on Trade and Development has been ignored. To which, we could add, the collapse of the Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002, where the corporations – working with supportive governments like New Labour – ensured that regulating their activities was kept off the agenda. The Green Party’s agenda is essentially middle-class, against big capital for small capital, for local capital against global capital. They admire Adam Smith, the founder of modern capitalist political economy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whose market economics “were place-based and consists of small, locally-owned enterprises that are geared to meet the needs of the community”.

Environmental groups like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace favour a more sustainable economic system – also without changing the parameters of social ownership and control. They lobby for better regulation and control of carbon dioxide emissions, for example. These are the main contributors to global warming. Typical is the Greenpeace policy on CO<sub>2</sub> which appeals to the government to halve the development of

new oilfields, and “start the shift to a genuinely sane energy path using renewables and energy efficiency”. The government, says the pressure group, should redirect existing fossil fuel and nuclear subsidies to renewable energy technologies and energy efficiency. They remind the government that its own committee on business and the environment recommended a “transition to a low-carbon economy”. The aim of all this advice is to produce a “sustainable” economy – which is one that is less harmful to nature but is otherwise unaltered. Greenpeace works with, among others, the notorious World Bank, one of the enforcers of corporate globalisation. The pressure group hopes to persuade the World Bank to adopt a more “sustainable” policy towards energy resources.

But as we have shown, capitalism continuously recreates ecological damage because its life is based on accumulation and expansion, where nature is simply a set of resources. Capital is, at the same time, all in favour of eco-friendly business practices – so long as they do not interfere with the main business of making money. Some oil corporations, for example, work closely with environmentalists to give themselves a “green image” and show concern. In essence, capitalism has incorporated the concept of sustainability unto itself. Why, even New Labour has a commission on sustainability!

BP is perhaps the best example of this. The oil corporation is now producing an annual “sustainability” report. Its first edition, published in April 2004, insists: “For us, ‘sustainability’ means the capacity to endure as a group by renewing assets, creating and delivering products and services that meet the evolving needs of society, attracting successive generations of employees, contributing to a flourishing environment and retaining the trust and support of customers, shareholders and communities.” The report sings the praises of the corporation for the contribution it has made in the areas of community investment, human rights, education, renewable energy etc. etc. To all intents and purposes, BP is an “ethical” company, doing its best to operate in a responsible way. Lord Browne, the group chief executive, maintains that BP is driven by an “aspiration to transcend the apparent trade-off between energy-led



improvements in living standards and environmental degradation. Our goal is to enable energy to be produced and consumed in ways that do no long-term damage to the planet or its people.” You can’t ask for more than that! Unfortunately, BP also has to acknowledge that operational greenhouse gas emissions actually rose by 1.4 million tonnes in 2003.

On the eve of the Johannesburg Earth Summit in 2002, a number of activists met in Girona, Spain, to discuss future strategy in the light of the “greenwash” of corporate globalisation. They issued a declaration and invited organisations to support it. By July, more than 80 groups around the world had signed the declaration. In it they explained that the original Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was a significant victory for the corporations. “It was the first major international conference on environment and development where business successfully mobilised to engineer certain outcomes. Although governments made some positive commitments, corporations and their lobby groups succeeded in countering many demands that conflicted with the interests of business, including dismissing any notion of binding regulation of transnational corporations and substituting their own ‘voluntary’ agenda.”

The declaration explained how organisations like the World Business Council for Sustainable Development had emerged as an international force and created a momentum which is described as “greenwash”. This is basically an attempt to achieve the appearance of social and ecological good without any corresponding substance. “Through branding, corporate philanthropy, high-profile partnerships with NGOs and governments, and isolated but highly publicised ‘best practice’ projects, corporations are making every effort to improve their image. All in order to avoid making the necessary changes to their core business practices demanded of them by civil society. By creating a benign public image and dominating international fora, corporations have exercised a virtual veto power over many initiatives seeking to impose obligations on them or force them to comply with basic social and environmental standards.”

Despite their acute analysis, the signatories to the Girona declaration ended with a tame call for “legally enforceable

regulation of corporations... as a first step to asserting democratic control over the economy". This is simply not on the agenda, as the outcome at Johannesburg and the failure to implement the Kyoto Accord have demonstrated. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) mentioned by the declaration is a coalition of 170 international companies drawn from 35 countries, united, says their website, "by a shared commitment to sustainable development via the three pillars of economic growth, ecological balance and social progress". These stated goals opportunistically echo the demands for sustainability made by environmental groups. As the WBCSD say: "The pursuit of sustainable development is good for business and business is good for sustainable development." In its own way, the WBCSD exposes the extremely limited nature of many of its opponents, locked in as they are to making the present system work better.

Finally, the bankruptcy of the environmental movement was perhaps best expressed by James Lovelock, the scientist and the creator of the Gaia hypothesis of the Earth as a self-regulating organism, in a shattering statement in May 2004. Implicitly acknowledging that the Earth, far from self-regulating was heading for ecological disaster, Lovelock abandoned all his beliefs and called for a rapid extension of nuclear power as an urgent remedy for global warming.

Individual efforts to halt the destruction of ecosystems range from recycling rubbish, changes in consumption patterns such as

**Enlisting the environmentalists**

Capital is more than happy to enlist the mainstream movement as a partner in the management of nature. Big environmental groups offer capital a threefold convenience: as legitimisation, reminding the world that the system works; as control over popular dissent, a kind of sponge that sucks up and contains the ecological anxiety in the general population, and as rationalisation, a useful governor to introduce some control and protect the system from its own worst tendencies, while ensuring the orderly flow of profits.

*The Enemy of Nature*, Joel Kovel

buying locally-produced organic produce, using public transport where possible, to small-scale production that respects nature. As gestures of goodwill towards nature it is not possible to find fault with these activities. In the end, however, they can make no impact on the most significant determinant of the crisis – a system of production where exchange values have overwhelmed use values to an unprecedented extent. In fact, they tend to become subsumed as part of the status quo. Recycling has become almost an official activity, encouraged by local councils and government. Out of that has grown an entire recycling industry.

### **Our proposals**

The simple notion that “owning” nature is historically absurd is our starting point for proposing a way forward. However it is presented by capitalism, there is nothing “natural” or eternal in the present circumstance where external nature is deemed private property for use and exploitation in the pursuit of profit. In fact, this expropriation only dates from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of capitalism. We have shown how the unparalleled expansion of this type of production under corporate-driven globalisation has produced a qualitative turning point in humanity’s relationship to nature. Our co-evolution with nature is threatened by a systemic ecological crisis that capitalism as a global system is incapable of tackling and can only worsen. Our destiny is to end the absurd by terminating private ownership of the forces of production, through expropriation of the expropriators. In doing so we end our alienated relationship with nature and production and thereby create the conditions for dealing with the ecological crisis. We will then be in a position to “bequeath it an improved state”.

Global capital, facilitated by the revolutions in technology, has developed sufficient capacity to meet human need for the first time in human history. Far from reducing the amount of interaction between humanity and nature, we need to increase it to a higher, more scientific level than ever, developing consciously the human character of nature and the natural character of humanity.

From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as good heads of the household.

*Capital* Vol III, Karl Marx

This is completely different to the philosophy of both the capitalists and the Greens. Both make nature and human beings into absolute opposites, ignoring the fact that human society - its agriculture, industry and cities - are now one of the biggest parts of nature. In the case of capitalist ideology, the principle is one of mastery and domination of nature and natural processes in order to produce profit. In the case of the Greens the principle is that human beings must withdraw from nature, returning to some point where their impact on it was less.

Human beings not only get from nature what they need in order to live, but they ARE nature – they are the aspect of nature that thinks, their social organism is human society. That is why our interaction with nature changes us, manifesting itself in health pandemics like Aids, malnutrition, drought, floods and even obesity.

What is required therefore is that the part of nature that has developed a scientific understanding of it, should elevate its interaction with nature to the highest possible conscious level, recognising always that nature is primary and therefore we must take great care in what we do. One of the most damaging results of alienation is that this primary relationship is hidden from most people. In the rich countries, they are driven from pillar to post for jobs, work increasing numbers of hours, are forced to eat food that makes them ill and stressed beyond belief. In the poorer countries, exploitation continues to plumb new depths.

We must ensure that we take what we need without damaging ourselves or nature. This interaction should be guided by the most advanced scientific approach, examining the complexity of

our mutual relations at the deepest chemical, biological and ecological level. The Greens make human beings into defeated opponents of nature, who should withdraw from the battle and return to some mythical and harmonious past. On the contrary, we maintain that human interaction with nature IS life – productive, conscious and scientific life. Therefore our co-evolution with nature must not be minimised but maximised, made more sophisticated and more serious and careful at the same time.

Ending production based on capital accumulation will transform our ecology. We will replace the creation of exchange value with the production of useful objects, of use values. We will transform what we make, and the way in which we transform nature. Workers will co-operate internationally to plan production to the benefit of the majority. This will bring about a shift to farming for local food and a programme of infrastructure improvement to bring the basics of housing, water and power to all. Urban planning will set out to redesign and restructure the cities and end the alienation of town from country. Eliminating massive over-capacity and a refocusing of the economy to the provision of the basic necessities of life will bring improved efficiency in the use of energy and raw materials, and lessen the impact on nature.

All enterprises will have access to the best and most recent scientific and economic knowledge in order to move to life-cycle production – production planned from the extraction of raw materials to the reclamation of waste after the end of the product's life and the remanufacture of the waste products into useful components for the same, or other, productive processes. Scientific research, which is today directed towards helping capital to grow at the expense of nature, will focus instead on restoring damaged eco-systems. Economic and community planners will work with scientists and communities to produce holistic plans that meet people's needs. The resources wasted by capitalism will be redirected towards immediate large-scale investment in solar power and desalination, recycling of waste and land reclamation.

## **A programme for action**

### **Production**

- ▶ production under the control of the workforce in alliance with consumers, producing goods built to last to reduce extraction of raw materials and dependence on non-renewable energy forms
- ▶ an end to production for obsolescence and the artificial creation of new “needs” by advertising and marketing
- ▶ life-cycle production that respects eco-systems, including humanity’s. All production must demonstrate eco-sustainability based on recycling and restoring principles
- ▶ science in the service of humanity, seeking out technological innovation, focussing on renewable energy and reuse of materials on the basis of a holistic outlook on nature and humanity
- ▶ immediate action on climate change. The scrapping of unnecessary transport of food and goods around the world. Implementation of new technologies to reduce carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane emissions
- ▶ massive investment in the use of solar energy, hydrogen fuel cell propulsion systems, and biofuels to replace carbon-based energy sources
- ▶ investigation of the ecological case for wind and tidal power
- ▶ public investment in new forms of affordable public transport tailored to individual needs in both urban and rural areas. The long-term phasing out of mass private car use and a switch to car pools. An end to mass road building programmes
- ▶ renewal of urban settlements to make them more energy efficient, based on people having to travel short distances for work.

### **Agriculture**

- ▶ social ownership of agribusiness monopolies that presently control production, distribution and retail sales of food

- ▶ common ownership of land
- ▶ an ecosystem approach to agriculture that manages soil, water, plants and animals as parts of a functional whole
- ▶ integrated pest and production management, preventing pest outbreaks through naturally occurring predators, parasites, pest resistant varieties and traditional cultural methods
- ▶ conservation agriculture, ensuring soil fertility through better nutrient cycling by micro-organisms in the soil. Low- or no-tillage and mulching to help soil structure
- ▶ an emphasis on crop rotation/diversification to suppress weeds and pests and reduce the necessity of synthetic applications
- ▶ more use of organic applications where practicable and the phasing out of pesticides
- ▶ integration of crops and livestock in the same farming operation, encouraging pasture and forage crops in rotation to protect soil and encourage fertility through manure
- ▶ an end to factory rearing of livestock
- ▶ moratorium on GM so that the results of technological transgenic modification can be scientifically estimated before use
- ▶ scientific investigation of all existing and proposed food processes to check for safety and nutritional value.

**Running a Temperature** is a punchy analysis of the underlying causes of the destruction of the planet's eco-systems. It locates the source of climate chaos within the wasteful capitalist system of production and the intensity of the last 30 years of corporate-driven globalisation. It sets out detailed action plans to tackle the eco-crisis and is the first in a series of pocket guides scheduled for publication this year.

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*Dr Boris Kelly-Gerrey, marine scientist*

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