

THE WORLD CHANGED TODAY: A TEN YEAR REFLECTION FOR A CLIMATE CHANGING WORLD

PAUL WACK

In this article Paul Wack offers us a reflection on two of the most important issues for the planning profession: climate change and the public's short attention span. He starts by addressing a 1895 poem depicting an optimistic view of the future which the late musician John Denver used to recite during his concerts, and in which Paul finds much inspiration for his classes. The article also ties into the next one, titled "Hot Topic", dealing with the same theme and originally published in the APA's Planning magazine.

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Ten years ago while walking to the opening reception of the annual California Chapter American Planning Conference in Monterey, an event of personal meaning happened that I would not learn about until the following day. Singer/Songwriter/Activist John Denver died in a plane accident that was completely preventable. In a tragic lesson learned, Denver forgot to check the fuel gauge of his experimental aircraft and crashed into the ocean within two miles of the reception site, the Monterey Aquarium.

A year later I published an article in the Association of Environmental Professional's *Environmental Monitor* (Summer, 1998) highlighting a poem that I use in almost all my classes, which appears below. Denver's music and volunteer work was an inspiration to me during the early years of my planning career in the Central Coast. When I visited his Windstar memorial site near the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) in Colorado a couple of years ago (30 minutes before the photo of me in the APA Planning Hot Topic article was taken), I was reminded how much he continues to influence me. I give a donation every year to RMI's Solutions Fund in his honor.

An "Ambulance Down in the Valley," originally written by Joseph Malins in 1895, was an inspiration to Denver. At one of his web sites, Denver illustrates his optimism and commitment about a future of possibility through this poem about prevention.¹ If Denver were alive today I suspect that he would still recite this poem during a concert and connect it to the challenges facing a climate changing world. Since he can't, I offer the poem as a tribute to him for making a difference in my life, including his challenge: "that in the polarity between darkness and light, there is the balance; that in the cycles of life and death, there is harmony; that in the incredible diversity of life there is equilibrium; that even as there is a way, there is not one way."

¹ www.wstar.org/Windstar/Org/Founders/possibility1.html

This article attempts to bridge the "Ambulance in the Valley" poem to the reprinted American Planning Association Planning magazine article "Hot Topic" that follows, originally published last summer. The connection is a climate changing world that will challenge the planning profession for many decades to come. The idea of thinking about the seventh generation is not so abstract these days, if our future based professional job description and sense of moral responsibility to the unborn is any measure. The "Hot Topic" article opens with: "What a difference a year makes." This could be the "copy and paste" quote of 21st century. Only future editions of Focus will know for sure.

“An Ambulance Down in the Valley”

*T'was a dangerous cliff as they freely confessed,
Though to walk by its edge was quite pleasant.
But over its edge slipped a Duke and an Earl
And it had fooled many a peasant.*

*The people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally.
Some said “Put a fence around the edge of the cliff,”
Others, “an ambulance down in the valley.”*

*The lament of the crowd was profound and quite loud,
As their hearts overflowed with great pity:
But the ambulance carried the cry of the day,
As it spread to the neighboring cities.*

*So a collection was made to accumulate aid,
And dwellers in highway and alley.
Gave dollars and cents not to furnish a fence,
But an ambulance down in the valley.*

*“For the cliff is all right if you’re careful”, they said
“And if folks ever slip and are falling;
It’s not the slipping and sliding that hurts them so much
As the shock down below when they’re stopping.”*

*And so for the years these mishaps occurred,
Quick forth would the rescuers sally,
To pick up the victims who fell from the cliff,
With the ambulance down in the valley.*

*Said one in his plea, “It’s a marvel to me
That you’d give much greater attention,
To repairing results than to curing the cause;
Why you’d much better aim at prevention,*

*For the mischief, of course, should be stopped at its source:
Come friends and neighbors, let us rally!
It makes far better sense to rely on the fence,
Than the ambulance down in the valley.”*

*“He’s wrong in his head,” the majority said.
“He would end all our earnest endeavors.
He’s the kind of a jerk who would halt our good work,
But we will support it for ever.*

*Aren’t we picking up all just as fast as they fall,
and giving them care quite liberally?
Why, a superfluous fence is of no consequence
If the ambulance works in the valley.”*

*Now this story seems queer as I’ve given it here,
But things oft occur which are stranger.
More humane we assert to repair the hurt,
Than the plan of removing the danger.*

*The best possible course would be to safeguard the source,
And to attend to things rationally.
Yes, build up the fence and let us dispense
With this ambulance down in the valley.*

Joseph Malins, 1895



*Kaweah River Valley,
Sequoia Park.
Photo: V. del Rio*

Ambulances as mitigation

The purpose of highlighting the “Ambulance in the Valley” poem is to make us think about how humans generally respond to challenges with the traditional reactive approach to problem solving. Zachary Smith (2001: xi) argues that humans suffer from what he calls the “Environmental Policy Paradox”, in “that we often understand what the best short- and long-term solutions to environmental problems are; yet the task of implementing these solutions is either left undone or is completed too late.” The symbol of this paradox is the ambulance that catches those that fall from the cliff, which proponents would argue “aren’t we picking up all just as fast as they fall, and giving them care liberally? More humane we assert to repair the hurt, then the plan of removing the danger.” I suspect most planners would argue that “the best possible course would be to safeguard the source”, meaning in the context of global climate change, not to focus on “end of the pipe” fixes, but confront the sources of increasingly adverse human forces to normal global climate change: arrogant and aggressive behavior in the use of land across the planet. This conduct is not sustainable.

Climate Change as a Hot Topic

The recent *Planning* magazine article that follows is reproduced with the permission of the American Planning Association in an attempt to initiate dialog about the future of planning and the planet that humans call home. When Apollo 8 transmitted an image of Earth in the 1960s, generating the idea of “Spaceship Earth,” it became clear to most of us experiencing this miraculous event for the first time on our televisions that we didn’t have many options for an alternative cosmic ZIP code. As The Eagles, a rock group, reminded us in their 1970s song “Last Resort”: “there is no more new future frontier, we have got to make it here.” 30 years brings us to the viewpoints contained in the *Planning* article, which opens with introductory observations by CRP faculty member Ken Topping, reminding us that in the matter of global warming, “Katrina elevated the issue for everyone.” Several other planners from across the country offer observations suggesting that the planning profession is not in the business of “gloom and doom.”

The Planner’s Dilemma: Short Attention Spans

One challenge for planners is that tomorrow matters and should be part of any decision affecting a community. Unfortunately, most humans are influenced by decisions of the moment and possess short attention spans, as argued by Anthony Downs in his classic 1972 article “Up and down with ecology – the issue attention cycle”. Downs argued, during a time when the environmental movement was “leaping into prominence,” that it would eventually fade from public and media concern due to boredom and/or attraction to other new issues of immediate interest. The cycle provides a precautionary tale for planners with long term interests in climate change.

The issue-attention cycle involves five stages. First, is the “pre-problem stage,” in which the issue has not achieved public attention, but scientists, interest groups and policy advocates are concerned because of the trends reflected in their cumulative studies. Downs argued that an issue may rumble under the surface of public awareness for years before something happens to attract attention. Rachel Carson’s early 1960s classic “Silent Spring” is one example of igniting public interest in DDT and other environmental issues. Some would argue that former Vice President Al Gore’s recent Oscar winning documentary “The Inconvenient Truth” is one catalyst that has catapulted global warming or climate change to the attention level it is now experiencing. Gore’s documentary, released a month earlier, had an interesting impact at the United Nation’s World Urban Forum held in Vancouver,

Canada last summer. The theme of the conference was the anticipated historic transformation of the global population from rural to urban, including poverty, as represented by conference participant Kai Lee's article ("An Urbanizing World") in the 2007 edition of *State of the World*. However, I noticed there was increasing buzz of conversation among the 10,000 attendees representing 150 countries about global warming. It topic appeared to be elephant in the tent.

Whether it was the Gore film, or the image on the cover of the *Time* magazine's April 3rd issue of a polar bear on a shrinking block of ice, or some other catalyst, it was clear that 2006 might be the year that the second phase of the Downs cycle blossoms. This phase is described as "alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm." The accelerating attention the media and politicians are currently giving to climate change is being fueled by the release of a series of scientific reports issuing a collective warning that the debate about climate change is over, and it is time for humanity to deal with it. Prevention is being replaced with the challenge to adapt, as recommended in the recent report of the normally conservative United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC.² Climate change, or global warming, has been in the news cycle during recent months, feeding the "alarmed discovery" notion of Downs.

² <http://www.ipcc.ch/SPM2feb07.pdf>



Polar bears starving due to climate change. Image retrieved from www.greenpeace.org.uk/MultimediaFiles/Live/Image/4223.jpg

A question Downs would perhaps ask at this time is how long will the rapidly escalating interest among the public continue before the cost of mitigating the evolving impacts of climate change starts to surface? This would get the third phase of the issue-attention cycle started: "realizing the cost of significant progress" to solve the problem. Perhaps lessons from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans or the earthquake/tsunami experience in Southeast Asia in 2004 will be instructive, as these events eventually move us to the fourth phase: "gradual decline of intense public interest". Will there come a time when these events and the overall public interest in climate change enter into the final phase of the issue attention cycle, "the post-problem stage"? This is when the issue has been replaced by other pressing matters and "moves into a prolonged limbo," seasoned with periodic events that temporarily "recapture public interest." News at eleven!

Carpe Diem (seize the day)

As Ken Topping notes in "Hot Topic", planners are generally optimists and enjoy challenges. Planners tend to seek proactive approaches to solving problems, rather than merely reacting. Can planners be proactive in response to problems that require adaptation over prevention as the only perceived option, assuming the significant body of scientific knowledge about current trends in climate change is correct? John Randolph, in his popular environmental planning textbook suggests we can be proactive through "learn by doing," by pursuing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates adaptive management (scientific learning) with collaborative environmental decision making (social learning) (Randolph, 2004: 34).

The encouraging news is that for every report or commentary on the dark side of climate change, there are counter forces seeking the lighter side as an opportunity to confront this global-to-local challenge for human civilization. The almost daily onslaught of news, books, studies, documentaries, Web sites, and even cartoons, is overwhelming and too numerous to mention in this short article. However, a couple of examples serve to illustrate that the opportunities for making a difference are growing as exponentially as the world's population, consumption, and greenhouse gases.

Recently, Cal Poly was one of the many sites to host the *2010 Imperative Global Emergency Teach-in* at Chumash Auditorium. Part of the program was a presentation by architect Edward Mazria, representing Architecture 2030. He told the audience that buildings are responsible for almost half of all greenhouse gas emissions annually, with about 76 percent of all electricity generated by power plants in the United States is consumed by the “Building Sector.”³ Mazria highlighted the Challenge 2030 campaign in which the design and development community is to implement a progressive fossil fuel/greenhouse gas reduction standard calling for all new buildings to be carbon neutral by 2030.

³ <http://www.architecture2030.org>

Another example is the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), a rapidly expanding national coalition of building industry leaders promoting structures “that are environmentally responsible, profitable and healthy places to live and work.” The USGBC established “LEED” –the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System™ – representing a national benchmark “for the design, construction, and operation of high performance green buildings.” The USGBC has recently adopted the LEED for Neighborhood Development Rating System which “integrates the principles of smart growth, urbanism, and green building into the first national standard for neighborhood design.”⁴ The potential of incorporating the LEED certification process into local planning agency development review procedures is strong and starting to be implemented in a number of counties and cities in California, and across the nation.

⁴ <http://www.greenbuildingcouncil.org>

In last year’s California Energy Commission’s *Integrated Energy Policy Report Update*, the estimated 20 million increase in the state’s population by 2050 represents a severe challenge to energy resources and climate change “and suggests a need for fundamental shift in approaches to land use and development” (California Energy Commission, 2006: E-7).⁵ Moreover, the report acknowledges that “land use planning has not incorporated energy considerations to any significant extent.” (op cit.: 74). It will be interesting to see if the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR) addresses this issue when they update the current (2003) *General Plan Guidelines* this year.

⁵ *The current California State population is of 36 million.*

We appear to be living in an “exponential era” of change and uncertainty. With “peak oil” meeting climate change, human adaptation seems the only immediate option. At the planning level it will be sustainability challenging climate change. It can be an exciting opportunity to expand the planning toolbox to participate in an interdisciplinary adventure to make a difference, or it could end up like a scene out of the classic short film “Bambi Meets Godzilla” by the end of this century. In the short run, it will be interesting to see where climate change resides within the issue-attention cycle one year from now. Stay tuned.

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DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY: A CHALLENGE FOR THE NEXT FOCUS

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Have you ever been stuck trying to respond to the question “what is “sustainability””? Many planners have a basic understanding of what they think this concept means, but have a difficult time articulating it through a succinct definition that generates at least a responsive nod appreciation for the attempt, especially among the general public. Paul Wack and FOCUS issue a challenge to see if anyone on this planet can offer such a definition for a concept that potentially possesses the necessary components to confront the evolving forces of climate change.

*Sustainability is not something to be defined, but something to be declared.
It is an ethical guiding principle.
- Bert De Vries*



Paul at Cal Poly's Open
House in 2004.

What is sustainability (or sustainable development)? Defining this “fuzzy” term has been an ongoing issue for years with little resolution. The range of definitions generated during the past two decades has been as mixed as the bargain bin at the local flea market. Of course the most common definition cited is the well known Brundtland Commission offering that sustainable development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, which is often criticized as being too simplistic and development-biased (Brundtland, 1987). Defining sustainability continues to be a challenge as the concept becomes increasingly integrated into planning education and practice (Gunder, 2006).

The challenge here is to encourage academics, practicing planners, and students to create a simple definition that does not require a dissertation to explain, but retains a touch of simplicity for ease of discussion.

For starters, I offer the following pseudo formula: $S = E^3 + F^7$.

S means sustainability; E^3 means economy, environment, and equity; and F^7 means the future to at least the seventh generation.

I have considered adding “ + NS⁴” to represent ‘The Natural Step’, which is the basis for APA's Policy Guide Planning for Sustainability (see <http://www.planning.org/policyguides/sustainability.htm>).

Send your “Sustainability Definition for Simplicity” entries by email to Paul Wack (pwack@calpoly.edu) before January 1, 2008. They should not exceed 100 words long. A panel of distinguished faculty and students will select the best three entries, which will be properly acknowledged and cited in next year's FOCUS. The authors of the winning entries will receive a life-long subscription to our journal! We look forward to hearing from you.

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