

Mixed messages obscure the importance of action

Sep 05, 2003

Watching the news, it seems that there's a new environmental crisis occurring almost daily: global warming, pollution, habitat destruction, species depletion and extinction, and much more. The bad news is plentiful and painful.

But then, on a fairly regular basis, a nice-looking man pops up and says that everything you are seeing is an exaggeration. The environment is fine. Everything's fine. Go buy a new SUV. It's okay... Such a nice-looking man.

To the average person, it must be quite confusing. What's going on here? Are the stories on environmental calamity really an exaggeration?

The quick answer is no. On a global basis, the environment we depend on for our lives is in trouble. Natural services that provide us with essentials like a stable climate; clean water, fertile soils and others are being depleted. We are heading in the wrong direction if we want to leave the next generation with the quality of life and opportunities that my generation took for granted when we were young.

So, why the mixed messages? Well, part of the problem lies in the way the media present news stories. First, they are presented as episodic, focusing on single events rather than issues and analysis. Second, media stories are driven by conflict, so reporters are always encouraged to find someone to contradict prevailing opinion, turning complex problems into a simplified, false "he says, she says" dichotomy. And third, there are well-financed interests at work who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, so they lobby hard to make sure their voices are heard.

Scientists have a duty to warn society of any potential environmental problems. But because of the incremental nature of science, not all predictions made come to pass. Sometimes, action is taken to avert the problem and sometimes the prediction turns out to be wrong. When that happens, it enables critics to say that there never really was a problem in the first place and environmental scientists are merely Chicken Littles who should be ignored.

To see if there is any truth to this argument, scientists at Princeton University and others conducted a study that looked at the costs and benefits of society's reaction to environmental alarms. Their report, published in the journal *Science*, examines the costs and benefits of measures such as the Clean Air Act in the United States and others to see if society truly benefited from these actions.

It has. The researchers found that, for example, regulation has played the dominant role in improving air quality in the United States, earning Americans more than \$22 trillion in net benefits over 20 years. Furthermore, they found that in states or nations with equal wealth, those with higher memberships in "green" organizations and higher civil liberties have lower levels of air pollution. And they go on to point out that the costs of responding to environmental problems are often far less than originally anticipated.

The researchers conclude that society receives substantial benefits by responding to environmental alarms. In fact, they point out that "our environmental alarm is currently too conservative, not too liberal." In other words, far from being Chicken Littles, environmental scientists are perhaps being too cautious in communicating environmental problems. Certainly public policy makers are slow to respond, as "Problems of detecting warning signals and overcoming vested interests inevitably lead to delay in regulation, often incurring damages that could have been prevented with higher sensitivity."

Critics of this report will no doubt say something to the effect that it's merely a case of alarmists supporting alarmists, but that argument amounts to nothing more than grasping at straws. The sooner we get serious about dealing with our environmental problems, the greater the benefits will be. True, it would be easy to listen to the nice lobbyists who tell us that everything is just fine, but waiting to take action will only make the good news less frequent and the bad news much worse.