

# Time to maximize cleanliness

When it comes to producing pollution, efficiency isn't necessarily a good thing



GRAHAM  
LETTNER

At a glance, the concept of efficiency seems pretty much foolproof. The idea of accomplishing a job while minimizing time, effort and cost is music to our modernized ears. Why waste extra resources or money if you can do a job more efficiently? Doing more with less seems a win-win solution every time.

Well, not quite. Some applications of efficiency are better suited than others. A more efficient auto-plant produces more cars with fewer resources. That sounds pretty harmless—smart even. However, a bomb factory, run more efficiently, can kill more people per unit-cost, since the bombs it manufactures use fewer resources per bomb, and therefore cost less money. This doesn't sound quite as good as cheap Pontiac Sunfires did a moment ago.

So I'm a bit wary when increasing efficiency is touted as a strategy, because efficiency isn't always a real solution. Being more efficient at producing bombs or cars can save money, to be sure. But if your goal isn't saving money but fostering world peace or reducing pollution, then cheaper bombs and cars aren't very useful.

An example of the limits of efficiency can be found in the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from oil sands production. In 2004, Suncor's gross

GHG emissions came in at 8.6 million tonnes, an increase of 51 per cent over a five-year period. This was the case despite a decrease of emission-per-barrel (emission intensity) of 21.4 per cent since 2000, because total production had increased by 91 per cent over the same five-year period.

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It's almost criminal that climate change couldn't be more understanding of Suncor's efforts to be more efficient as they nearly doubled their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over a half-decade.

Historian Ronald Wright, in his recent Massey lecture, spoke about this inability of technology to free humanity from its own technological jams. It's a logical error we love to indulge in: while our hurried application of advanced technology has gotten us into certain global fixes, we'll be damned if further hurried application of even more advanced

technology won't get us out (see climate change, nuclear proliferation, drug-resistant diseases, etc). That's why, while a field like nanotechnology holds a world of possibility, the lack of ethical discussion and preventative investigation about health and environmental consequences of nano-particles leads me to expect some very big headaches from this very small idea.

It's troubling to recognize that pursuing efficiency is often more accurately classified as an attempt to postpone changing our bad habits for as long as possible. Problems such as achieving global economic sustainability and alleviating the suffering of poverty-stricken nations would gain much more from a change in our social attitudes and habits than from some esoteric idea of baking bigger economic pies.

Even the *Economist*, in its abundant econo-centric wisdom, recently reported that a society's happiness plateaus after a certain point even as economic development continues to increase. This simply means that after a certain level of development, happiness is no longer found at the bottom of a pay stub. Here's the kicker, though: we in the West passed that level of development sometime back in the middle of last century.

The needed human advances aren't to be found inside a test tube, or in more efficient home appliances, but instead in society's ability to create good and wise habits and attitudes while giving up its bad habits and attitudes before they invariably get the better of us.

# Not even Captain Planet can save us now



TYSON  
DURST

If you read newspapers or magazines or closely follow Al Gore's career, you'll know that all the evidence is pointing to the environment getting even worse than Captain Planet's hypocritically excessive mullet. Clearly, some substantial action needs to be taken to prevent an environmental reckoning of doom.

While people talk about various strategies to improve North America's environmental record, a couple of minor details usually get overlooked—details that really aren't minor at all. These happen to be the juggernauts of the 21st century known as China and India.

When environmentalists, governments and media pundits are asked about China and India, two countries that have a combined population of 2.4 billion people and counting, there seems to be a stunned response that downplays their relevance to any Western strategies on the environment. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

The West will soon be forced to acknowledge that China will be in sole possession of the number-one position on the global throne of power. To help illustrate my point, let me offer you some statistics courtesy of Ted C Fishman, author of *China Inc.*

First, China will need to build urban infrastructure equivalent to Houston's

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every month in order to accommodate the 300 million rural Chinese citizens that will move to cities in the next 15 years. Second, 74 million Chinese families can now afford to buy cars, and General Motors projects the Chinese automobile market to surpass the US market by 2025. Finally, there are more than 300 biotech firms operating in China, unhindered by animal rights lobbies, religious groups, or ethical standards boards.

Remember, these are just some stats dealing with China. India is close behind in its rapid growth and development, which will also raise more challenges in terms of the environment and resource management within their borders and for the rest of the world.

This is just a sample of the numbers that necessitate a more comprehensive and sophisticated global environmental strategy that works harder to include China and India, rather than allowing them to be excluded from the international table on the environment. But how do you convince such rapidly growing powers that addressing major environmental issues associated with the colossal industrialization and development that they're looking at is in their best interest?

It's certainly questionable whether our governments will seriously consider appeals based simply on morals

and ethics, and whether they believe that ensuring clean air, clean water and the preservation of forests and wildlife is simply the right thing to do for present and future generations. But everybody listens to appeals based on dollars and cents, regardless of what their respective currencies are. By equating environmentalism with good business and economic sense, governments and corporations are more likely to notice. Even more importantly, the governments of China and India, as well as the rapidly increasing number of companies doing business in those countries, are more likely to take notice as well.

If the proposed plans and targets that are gaining more and more momentum in Canada and other Western nations are to have an actual impact in the long term, the two nations that share more than one-third of the present world population need to be a part of those initiatives.

Otherwise, the push to preserve and repair the environment will be completely undermined and neutralized. And unless you're fortunate enough to reserve a spot on the first manned space mission to Mars in the next few decades, that's something that needs to come to the forefront of the current discussion on the future of global environmental protection.

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