

Review by Ian Hore-Lacy

An Ecomodernist Manifesto is a document published on 14 April 2015 over the names of 18 individuals known for their environmental stance and writings. Mark Lynas, Michael Shellenberger, Linus Blomqvist, Ted Nordhaus and Stewart Brand are possibly the best-known internationally, along with our very own Barry Brook, and filmmaker Robert Stone. “We call ourselves ecopragmatists and ecomodernists.” “As scholars, scientists, campaigners, and citizens, we write with the conviction that knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a good, or even great, Anthropocene. A good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world.” Whether all those three powers are growing coherently is not addressed!

For me, the manifesto is remarkable in being the first full-on environmentalist statement I have seen which is congruent with a Christian worldview and my understanding of God’s creation¹. It is positive, science-based, technologically upbeat, realistic in facing up to the expectations of 7+ billion people, and not over the top. “We affirm one long-standing environmental ideal, that humanity must shrink its impacts on the environment to make more room for nature, while we reject another, that human societies must harmonize with nature to avoid economic and ecological collapse” - as recently promoted in Ethos-Zadok publications.

The notion of decoupling what are often assumed to be inexorable effects from developmental causes is central. “Intensifying many human activities — particularly farming, energy extraction, forestry, and settlement — so that they use less land and interfere less with the natural world is the key to decoupling human development from environmental impacts. These socioeconomic and technological processes are central to economic modernization and environmental protection. Together they allow people to mitigate climate change, to spare nature, and to alleviate global poverty.”

“Given that humans are completely dependent on the living biosphere, how is it possible that people are doing so much damage to natural systems without doing more harm to themselves? The role that technology plays in reducing humanity’s dependence on nature explains this paradox. Despite frequent assertions starting in the 1970s of fundamental ‘limits to growth’, there is still remarkably little evidence that human population and economic expansion will outstrip the capacity to grow food or procure critical material resources in the foreseeable future. To the degree to which there are fixed physical boundaries to human consumption, they are so theoretical as to be functionally irrelevant.” This is a remarkable statement given the earlier writings of some of the authors, though its truth is demonstrable over the last 50 years as the technology-enabled forces of economics have achieved what looked impossible to some on the sidelines of that real-world activity.

The trend to urbanization (70% of world population in cities by 2050) coupled with enhanced agricultural productivity has been documented elsewhere², and here it “symbolizes the decoupling of humanity from nature”.

“Taken together, these trends mean that the total human impact on the environment, including land-use change, overexploitation, and pollution, can peak and decline this century. By understanding and promoting these emergent processes, humans have the opportunity to re-wild and re-green the Earth — even as developing countries achieve modern living standards, and material poverty ends.” That is a broad and ambitious agenda, but one which deserves wide support, since a strong view of God’s love and providence suggests to me that it should be achievable.

¹ I would like to think that my 2006 book *Responsible Dominion - a Christian approach to sustainable development*, Regent College Press, is a modest exception.

² eg Doug Saunders 2010, *Arrival City: how the largest migration in history is reshaping our world*, Heinemann.

Contra to some views popular in Christian circles today, “The technologies that humankind’s ancestors used to meet their needs supported much lower living standards with much higher per-capita impacts on the environment.” “Urbanization, agricultural intensification, nuclear power, aquaculture, and desalination are all processes with a demonstrated potential to reduce human demands on the environment, allowing more room for non-human species.” The latter quote is obviously true, but not universally accepted.

Addressing climate change concerns, “Transitioning to a world powered by zero-carbon energy sources will require energy technologies that are power dense and capable of scaling to many tens of terawatts to power a growing human economy.” Since most forms of renewable energy don’t fill the bill, “Nuclear fission today represents the only present-day zero-carbon technology with the demonstrated ability to meet most, if not all, of the energy demands of a modern economy.”³

“The ethical and pragmatic path toward a just and sustainable global energy economy requires that human beings transition as rapidly as possible to energy sources that are cheap, clean, dense, and abundant. Such a path will require sustained public support for the development and deployment of clean energy technologies, both within nations and between them.” That is a contrast to the confusion and contradictory energy policies in many countries today.

So far, a commendable utilitarian focus. But then a clear statement which resonates well with other Christian concerns: “We write this document out of deep love and emotional connection to the natural world. By appreciating, exploring, seeking to understand, and cultivating nature, many people get outside themselves. They connect with their deep evolutionary history. Even when people never experience these wild natures directly, they affirm their existence as important for their psychological and spiritual well-being.”

“Explicit efforts to preserve landscapes for their non-utilitarian value are inevitably anthropogenic choices. For this reason, all conservation efforts are fundamentally anthropogenic” – or anthropocentric. “Along with decoupling humankind’s material needs from nature, establishing an enduring commitment to preserve wilderness, biodiversity, and a mosaic of beautiful landscapes will require a deeper emotional connection to them.”

Transcending economic and political systems, the manifesto asserts that “modernization has liberated ever more people from lives of poverty and hard agricultural labor, women from chattel status, children and ethnic minorities from oppression, and societies from capricious and arbitrary governance.” So more, and more widely, will be better.

“It is our hope that this document might contribute to an improvement in the quality and tenor of the dialogue about how to protect the environment in the 21st century. Too often discussions about the environment have been dominated by the extremes, and plagued by dogmatism, which in turn fuels intolerance. We value the liberal principles of democracy, tolerance, and pluralism in themselves, even as we affirm them as keys to achieving a *great* Anthropocene. We hope that this statement advances the dialogue about how best to achieve universal human dignity on a biodiverse and thriving planet.”

One of the authors calls it “a declaration of principles for new environmentalism”. As such it will be vehemently opposed by the green lobby and by those who write environmental platitudes or advance ideological agendas divorced from consideration of the needs and aspirations of the less fortunate half of the world’s population. It will be treated with suspicion by those who ignore or play down present environmental impacts. And its clear vision may be anathema to today’s populist politicians driven by either environmental romanticism or their most selfish and short-sighted electoral constituents. Its congruence with a biblical perspective on God’s abundant provision for humankind means that it should get strong affirmation from Christian quarters.

³ For the future, they want nuclear power to be 'safer', though current technology is already vastly safer than any alternative. Even the huge Fukushima accident killed no-one.