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# PERSPECTIVES

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## The price of environmental protection

**AN EMERALD EDITORIAL**

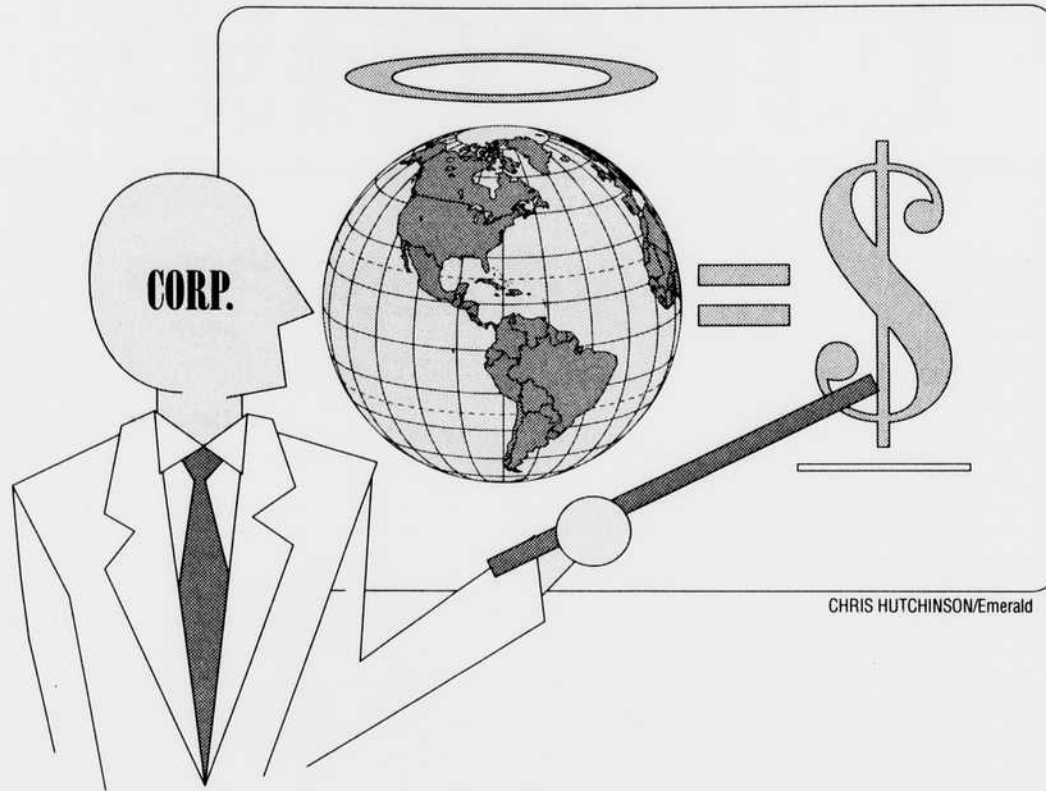
*By focusing on how to profit from environmentalism, the conference on sustainability ignores the inevitable cost of reform*

Some movements seem unavoidable. Take anti-communism. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, politicians on all sides of the political spectrum couldn't find enough nasty things to say about the Communist party or anyone who might one have looked in the windows of its headquarters. It didn't matter what solution you offered or even if you had the opposite approach of other anti-Communist crusaders; as long as everyone used the rhetoric of Red-baiting, everyone was happy. Except the Communists, of course.

These days, there's a new rhetoric for popularity-minded politicians, companies and lobbyists to use — sustainable development. No one is quite sure what the concept means: Left-leaning environmental groups tend to consider sustainability as intertwined with reduced growth and careful restrictions on business, while corporations worry mostly about the development part of the equation and how to sustain profits in the bargain. But everyone knows that, in the 1990s, you'd better be talking about sustainable development if you're going to be talking at all.

Remember who got screwed over in all the discussion about communism? The Communists. Well, in all this discussion about environmentally sensitive business practices, one crucial element stands to suffer: the environment.

That doesn't have to be the case. Sustainability can lead to a consensus between environmentally aware communities and the companies that want to use their



resources, providing for better corporate practices and an increased awareness of what the planet needs to survive. Too often, however, all that gets produced is a lot of hot air (something, given Clinton's pro-business stance on global warming, we can ill afford).

Today, Tuesday and Wednesday, the University risks producing a lot more hot air on the subject of sustainability. A large number of business, government and University groups are sponsoring the First Annual Sustainable Business Symposium.

Many of the groups associated with the event are admirable, and the conference has the potential to allow these groups a positive forum. Companies do need to take small steps toward increased efficiency by reducing pollution, decreasing energy use and respond-

ing to consumer demands for more ecologically friendly practices.

What worries us is that the conference focuses too much on one side of the debate. Corporations are increasingly choosing to participate in discussions where their most vocal critics are absent. If sustainability relies upon discourse among a vast range of interested parties, all those parties need to be involved.

Where on the schedule are radical environmental groups who believe growth is inherently tied to environmental degradation? Even moderate environmental groups are notably absent, largely because the remaining corporate-friendly speakers are more likely to reach a consensus that participating businesses, such as Nike and Fred Meyer, will be happy with.

None of this should discredit environmental gains that are being made by corporations. Nevertheless, just because a company recycles more paper than ever before doesn't mean it doesn't still cut down trees. Whatever claims are made at the conference need to be critically examined.

In particular, assertions that sustainability and efficiency can be achieved without harming profits need to be looked at closely. Conference organizers say in their press release, "We will demonstrate that ecological stewardship can improve profits."

The truth is profitability and environmentalism cannot be linked forever. Noah Walley and Bradley Whitehead argue in the Harvard Business Review that companies that revamped operations in the late 1980s and early 1990s to make themselves more

environmentally efficient have made all the profitable cuts they can.

While we disagree with Walley and Whitehead about whether this justifies more cuts, we certainly believe environmental protection will inevitably incur corporate cost. Companies have profited for too long by exploiting underpriced resources and polluting the environment without paying the hidden ecological and social costs.

Programs, such as the University conference, that focus on profitable ways to save the planet and feature discussions titled "How Businesses Can Target Environmentally Conscious Consumers" ignore the inevitable corporate cost of true sustainability. There are economically sound proposals for environmental reform — one of the most common and potentially effective is a "carbon tax" of some kind. These proposals do not leave corporations unscathed, however, even if they don't harm the overall economy.

Allowing companies to focus discussions only on profitable ways to save the planet creates an environmental discourse in which proposals that harm corporate profits seem radical rather than reasonable. The Sustainable Business Symposium skews the debate, allowing companies and observers to maintain a false view of what effective environmental reform entails.

The bottom line is that environmental programs that start and finish by focusing on the corporate bottom line cannot solve the environmental crisis by themselves. Industry has been a major factor in the creation of the current environmental catastrophe; it must do more than profit from the cleanup.

*This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu*

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

**Collegio misguided**

Among the glut of low-quality responses to an Emerald editorial this year, Jonathan Collegio's blind affirmation of free trade (ODE, Nov. 5) is by far one of the most myopic I've seen. Comparative advantage may be a cornerstone of economic theory, but that doesn't mean it can't be critiqued or questioned in light of issues that go beyond the realm of economics and into questions of things like food security, social justice and environmental consequences. Arguing that more free trade is the panacea for economic ills the world over papers over the violence that "comparative advantage" perpetrates in ways unseen by the economic lens. I'll try to explain why in as few words as possible.

Let's take agricultural trade between the United States and Mexico, for example. The United States is one of the world's largest producers of corn and, for a whole bunch of reasons (climate, scientific research, subsidies (oops, free trade goes out the window with that one)), you might say we have a comparative advantage in the growing of corn. Thus, we have been able to sell or dump lots of cheap corn onto countries like Mexico. So far so good; we get the profits, and Mexico gets

the corn to eat. But let's ask a series of questions. First, what does this do on a large scale in Mexico? Well, not very many farmers, large or small, can compete with U.S. corn imports, so they either go out of business or grow other crops. Most likely is the plantation-grown, out-of-season broccoli and asparagus we are eating this winter that, in order to look good for U.S. consumers, have been sprayed with enough pesticides to kill Rodan. So now Mexico has a comparative advantage in frilly fresh fruits and vegetables that get exported to the plates of us non-seasonal eating gluttons. Second question: What does this do to small-scale Mexican farmers who have grown corn for generations for local and indigenous markets? Again, they cannot compete price-wise in the corn market with cheaper imports and so either leave agriculture or grow wonderful things like cash crops, such as peas for Birdseye or Brussels sprouts, in volatile export markets where lower prices are only a day away. Oh, yeah, lest we forget the other side of the small-peasant coin: Now that large companies are growing broccoli and asparagus, the land those small peasants are (were) on is valuable, so the land is either bought cheaply or taken by any number of strong-arm tactics. It's the double-pincer effect. Either

way, the tradition of small-scale corn growing, most likely through very ecological means of beneficial crop combinations, gets shoved to the wayside by genetically engineered, fertilizer- and pesticide-pumped good ol' American corn.

So in the name of cheap corn for Mexicans, the country's ability to produce corn as a staple crop for the people is gone. This is a serious problem if we address questions about food security in a country that now must rely on imports of corn to feed its people. Does comparative advantage really matter that much when a famine hits or some economic disaster occurs, like the falling peso (oops, already happened), in which the buying power of the poor falls even further? Probably not to the people who aren't eating or can't get enough to eat. And how does the growing of cash crops, Mexico's new comparative advantage, help to benefit farmers forced off their land? It usually doesn't. Not only do most of those people not see the money from these crops (it goes to the multinational corporation or larger landowner in control of the land), but they also get to wallow in gallons of toxins on huge farms, work for very little money and probably lack job security. And let's not forget the lasting environmental consequences of

the fertilizers, pesticides and canning facilities used to grow those off-season vegetables. You could almost say Mexico and its citizens have another comparative advantage in taking on these environmental problems if you stuck this into an economic equation.

With food particularly, the unleashing of comparative advantage in the name of free trade is not all it's cracked up to be. The only problem is one has to step outside of the economic paradigm to appreciate the fact that free trade only helps those with an already large economic advantage and may hurt and affect vast numbers of people in ways that are not easily captured by an equation stating the benefits of comparative advantage. Obviously, the actions of the Zapatistas should tell Mr. Collegio that coming out against free trade is not only not "preposterous" but a matter of life and death. Oh, by the way, it is painfully obvious that Mr. Collegio has never taken a class outside of economics dealing with the social consequences of capitalism in Third World settings. Many are offered on campus. I suggest he try one to open his eyes to a world outside of the bottom line.

**Mike Goodman**  
 Graduate student