



Diamonds are the poor's best friends

REUTERS/DAVID LEWIS

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Environmentalist Saleem Ali thinks there's one surefire way to lift people out of poverty: encourage trade that balances need with greed.

Corporations are evil. They ruin the environment, take advantage of the world's poor and accrue profits that benefit a few, already wealthy souls.

In certain circles, such statements are gospel. There's no use debating their veracity because, well, the proof is everywhere. But maybe, just maybe, what's taken as proof is really unexamined bias. At least, Saleem Ali thinks so.

Ali, director of the Institute for Environmental Diplomacy and Security and a professor at the University of Vermont, believes that

many tree-hugging enviros bark up the wrong tree by vilifying corporations. Instead, he stresses that companies, properly monitored by governments, will increase the livelihoods of the poor. And for many poor people, prosperity is linked to wealthy societies' desire for natural resources. He spells it all out in "Treasures of the Earth: Need, Greed and a Sustainable Future" (Yale University Press, \$20).

Of course, putting this pro-business message out to people, one that heralds the connection between the wants of one group and the betterment of another, has garnered Ali fans and detractors. Forbes magazine proclaimed him "the alchemist" and National Geographic labeled him an "emerging explorer." Some greens, according to Ali, haven't been so supportive of his views.

In a recent phone conversation, Ali, a self-proclaimed realist, talked about how diamonds can save the poor, why the world would be better off if greens worked with

corporations and how our current and impending environmental crises can create unity in a world too often divided along lines of us and them.

Rosette Royale: *Your book's called "Treasures of the Earth: Need, Greed and a Sustainable Future." So how would you define a treasure of the earth?*

Saleem Ali: Anything that we are harnessing from the planet, and it could be used positively or negatively. Even if we're talking about food, we are dependent on the elements to nourish food. Hence we have minerals written on our cereal boxes. So when I talk about treasures, I'm essentially going back to the elements of the earth.

All plant life and animal life need minerals, so (the elements) have a very specific needs-based connection to our sustenance. But then they also provide for more luxury oriented wants, so to speak. The whole jewelry industry is about minerals, whether you're talking about gold or diamonds or other kinds of precious gemstones. So there's this huge spectrum between what we need and what we want, and the book tries to grapple with these and how understanding our relationship to minerals can make us a more efficient and equitable society.

R.R.: *So let's touch upon the topic of greed. Can you name a mineral that we both need and want?*

S.A.: Well, carbon was the fundamental element for organic molecules and it's also, in its purest form, the diamond. A diamond is something we want; we don't need it physically. But the same element forms many other kinds of compounds, like coal, which we do need, given our current constraints of energy. So carbon's an important one in that regard.

But I also have a more nuanced approach. If you think about a diamond, which is a luxury good, if you look at its utility, we clearly don't need it. But the people who produce the diamond, if you look at it from a production point of view, they do need diamonds for generating livelihood. For example, Botswana, which has risen out of poverty, has become a showcase of democracy and development in Africa. And

the only reason that has happened really is because it's the world's largest diamond producer. It didn't have many resources by which it could be lifted out of poverty before that. Their major industry before was cattle ranching. That wasn't environmentally good nor was it particularly lucrative. So, diamonds were in essence something which provided for their needs, even though the sale of diamonds and their consumption in the developed world itself may be considered a want. So if it wasn't for some starry-eyed teenager wanting to buy a diamond ring, you wouldn't have that demand. Need and greed are interrelated and that's the part that's often missed by the mainstream environmental discourse.

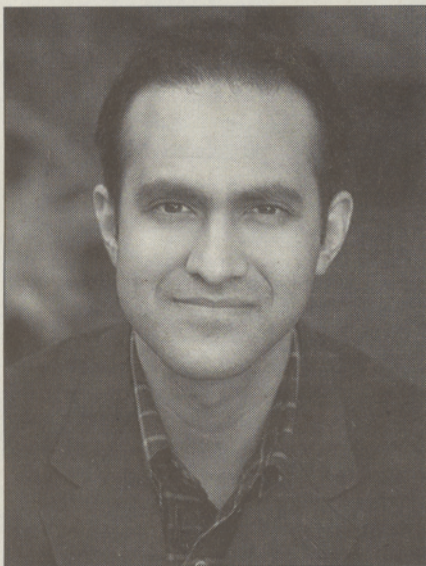
R.R.: *Recently, there's been a term called blood diamonds. It seems there's this ethical movement for people not to buy diamonds because they come from a war-torn and ravaged country.*

S.A.: Yes and I'm very sensitive to that. I've travelled to Congo, to many of these areas where you have conflict diamonds. And clearly, we need to have regulation of any industry.

But you don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Just because you've got conflict diamonds doesn't mean that all cut-diamond consumption is bad. I gave you the example of Botswana, or we could talk about the Arctic region of Canada, where diamond mining is providing livelihoods for Inuit communities to stay in their traditional homeland to reduce the amount of migration to cities. All those things need to be considered when you buy diamonds, so I think it's very important that consumers become more aware where they're buying diamonds from. So in that regard the process in certification is a very valuable process that allows consumers to track diamonds. And it's absolutely incumbent upon developing countries to ensure that their supplies are monitored and managed.

But I think the hunkering down of environmentalists, where they're basically saying, "Well, we should not consume luxury goods," is a little bit disingenuous. When we're dealing with structural levels of

A villager holds some diamonds dug out from a mine outside the village of Sam Ouandja, northeast of the Central African Republic.



Saleem Ali

See **DIAMONDS** page 9