

What Price Life

There is a critical crossroad facing us as a species — and it has nothing to do with “carbon trading” or “global warming” or any other political catch cry per se.

We face a social dilemma: there are more and more people frantically using up a diminishing supply of energy to grow more and more food from less and less soil. Like any vehicle, the one which literally carries us cannot be run flat out, filled with poison, have bits chopped off it daily ... and hope to perform. We are running out of soil. When (not if) that happens, nobody eats. Just before it happens, the scramble for the scraps means lots of people die horrible deaths.

Don't believe it? Just ask one of the tens of thousands who have starved since the onset of the “GFC”. When things run short, they are not well shared.

Don't let anyone tell you the fact of global warming means this is a discussion of whether or not someone should pay for a carbon credit or not. Global Warming, whatever its cause, is impacting already on our ability to eat. If you plan to live more than about 60 more years—or know someone who does—this means you. Diminishing energy supplies and rising costs of energy are impacting on the ability to grow food. If you plan to live more than about 25 years more this means you. Reliance on external inputs to agriculture—mostly fuel and fertiliser—whose costs are rising rapidly is impacting on the ability to grow food. If you plan to live more than about 15 years more, this means you. Unless you plan to share the sort of diet you see on television being enjoyed by our neighbours in the developing world in the next ten years or so, this means you.

We are engaged in a battle for survival. The Globe is heating up — but at the same time, our abuse of the systems which support us is also increasing. Who cares if human activity is causing global warming or not? The fact is we are running out of vital resources rapidly and that situation is being compounded by changes in climate. Both of those storms meet at the soil—at our ability to grow food. It would take some arrogance to believe that when food runs out elsewhere, ours will be ok!

A recent report by CSIRO and others to the Queensland government suggests we will be net importers of food in about 10 years. We currently feed approximately 360 million people outside Australia. Do we really believe that when we aren't feeding them they will export food to us?

I believe that whatever means can be used to have those who consume the benefits of healthy soil help to ensure that it is still there when our descendants come to eat should be used. If that means “carbon trading”, I'm a trader. If there is another way to ensure that our ridiculous scramble into oblivion is halted, I'm for that too.

If there is a way to preserve the lives of those who don't currently benefit from the “scientific gate-keepers” and their efforts to rule our lives I'm for that as well. “Science” has sadly been a powerful tool for evil so far—delivering acknowledged benefits to a thin slice of humanity at an ever-increasing rate (strangely parallel with the distribution of wealth on the planet) — and delivering death and destruction to all the “enemies of our society”. I am not for that. In this debate, convenient and inconvenient “truths” —all proposed by scientists — have been used to cloud the issue nicely. I'm not for that either. Data is easy to manipulate. In matters of heart it makes an unreliable guide.

In this discussion, the truth has gone past the data. Einstein tells us we must find the answers outside the experts who got us here. The way out of this dilemma will not come from those who benefit unequally by maintaining the status quo. The solutions must come from a community of minds—practical, financial, farmers, producers and thinkers. Let the science describe what we did: but don't wait for science to find all the answers before we act.

If you live anywhere up there in the far north and are digging yourself out of snow, think about where the energy that keeps you from dying now ultimately comes from. If you are huddled out of the rain anywhere on the east coast of Australia while millions of tonnes of soil floats past you out to sea, think about how long that can happen before some might have to be replaced.

All energy we use ultimately comes from the sun. Nature stores that energy in the soil. Everything that turns, burns, grows, fuels, feeds, works or lives uses that stored energy.

Without healthy, carbon-rich soil, there is no human life as we know it. Without the soil which made the living things which became the energy we are burning, there is no society as we know it. We've been taking out of the pot for some time: does anyone really think it is bottomless?

So as we contemplate what sort of system, mechanism or approach we should take to dealing with the obvious effects of changes in our climate, I would encourage you to: Dig around in some healthy soil — who knows, you may even find a “carbon cowboy!” Feb 18th 2010