

# **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: THE IMPLICATIONS, ACTORS AND RESPONSES**

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## Summary

The North American region is at a critical environmental crossroads: important decisions have now to be made that will determine whether the region's economic activity and patterns of production and consumption will become more sustainable.

-UNEP *Global Environmental Outlook-2000* (p. 154)

Following this conclusion, the UNEP report states that "a tenfold reduction in resource consumption in the industrialized nations is a necessary long-term target if adequate resources are to be released for the needs of the developing countries." Asked to comment on the practicality of this, the UNEP's director boldly stated: "I am absolutely convinced that it is realistic."

Currently, North American society is dominated by large corporate actors which, through ITAs, increasingly exert authority over the state and heavily influence not only resource use and distribution, but culture and education. It is a society in which consumerism has become a way of life and the supremacy of market forces over the state is taken for granted, at the same time as there has been ongoing environmental destruction associated with rising consumption levels, and a tremendous societal polarization in wealth and the burden of degradation.

There have, however, been many groups active in detecting the problems and advocating for environmentally and socially sustainable changes. These groups include various levels of governments, progressive businesses, technologists, labor, farmers, First Peoples, NGOs, scientists, children, educators, writers, artists, and musicians. In addition to the pursuit of policy changes, many of these diverse actors are also instrumental in generating the sort of cultural change ultimately necessary to reduce the ecological footprint of North American society. Fortunately, the cultural trance of consumerism is not held by heavy-handed coercion, but rather exists at the level of ideas -- where it is

increasingly susceptible to the socially transformative potential of a growing range of ecologically-inspired thought and action.

## **1. Introduction**

This chapter is structured according to a pressure-state-response model. The private corporate sector is identified as the central player forcing the issues surrounding sustainability (i.e. the pressure), to which governments are increasingly ceding authority in a process that is seen to be leading to a state of excessive consumption and environmental degradation. However, myriad groups are currently responding to this pressure -- such as planners, alternative technologists and scientists, labor and social unions, farmers, First Peoples, and environmental organizations, educators and artists -- and they are challenging corporations to reshape the way business is conducted, both through pressure on governments (which remain the most significant counterbalance to corporations) and by challenging citizens across Canada and the United States to rethink the ways they live and consume with respect to the environment, each other, and future generations.

The first section on objectives highlights the problem of North American overconsumption in a global context. This is because current North American consumption levels are having a destructive impact not only on the region's environment, but on planetary environmental support systems, and the need to curtail them is seen to be the central objective for sustainable development in North America. Section two examines major pressures on the local, regional and global life support systems exerted by excessive energy and resource consumption, and the role played by large corporate actors, North America's culture of consumerism, urban and agricultural systems, and government spending in exerting these pressures. Section three looks at the impact of overconsumption on the state of environmental quality in North America and on the planet's life support systems, and at the state of social, political and economic norms which underlie consumption patterns in Canada and the US. It also examines the disproportionate health risks associated with environmental degradation faced by the poor, people of color and indigenous people, whose voices have often been at the margins of formal structures of governance.

The final two sections examine the role of governments and non-state actors in detecting, diagnosing and responding to the unsustainable trends identified. Section four focuses on the process of detection, and section five addresses the corrective actions needed to forge a more sustainable course. As the Brundtland Commission argued, governments have the principal responsibility to collect information systematically, to use it to assess risk, and to introduce policies to promote environmental protection and sustainable development. Actors in civil society are also essential in both applying public pressure on governments to develop new and better policies, and as key actors in their own right as consumers and decision makers in schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business, in science and technology, and other institutions in civil society. Section three of Agenda 21 -- the detailed plan of action produced at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit -- focuses on the need to strengthen the role of major groups involved in the pursuit of sustainable development, such as NGOs, local authorities, business and industry, technologists, trade unions, farmers, First Peoples, scientists, women and children. These actors will be

addressed in various ways in sections four and five, and reflective of UNESCO's broad mandate, the fifth section on corrective response also includes an additional array of actors influencing cultural change beyond those listed in Agenda 21, including environmental educators and cultural actors, environmental writers, artists, and musicians.

## **2. Objective: Addressing Consumption and Sustainability in a Global Perspective**

“Most [high income economies] are running massive unsustainable ecological deficits with the rest of the world. Technology and trade have merely obscured this relational truth by displacing the negative consequences of growth to distant ecosystems and the future. Rising productivity and incomes produce overweening confidence in human ingenuity while imposing ever-larger ecological footprints on the earth.”

-William E. Rees in *Ecological Economics* 29, 1999 (p. 26)

“Consumption growth and patterns are environmentally damaging. Thus the consumption of some harms the well-being of others, in both present and future generations. Consumption growth and patterns have social impacts that deepen inequalities and social exclusion...”

The geography of environmental damage indicates that the rich contribute more, with larger shares in outdoor pollution, global warming, acid rain, solid wastes, and toxics. But the poor bear the brunt in loss of lives and risks to health from pollution and toxins -- and in loss of lives from soil degradation, desertification, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.”

-UNDP *Human Development Report 1998* (pp. 47, 79)

The two overarching and interwoven issues facing humanity at the start of the new millennium are environmental degradation and human poverty and inequality. The profound integration of economies associated with globalization, the growing inequality between (and within) the industrialized and the developing worlds, and the increasingly global reach of environmental problems like climate change together make it clear that the concept of sustainable development cannot be viewed in a purely regional vacuum. North American affluence is dependent on highly uneven global economic relations and increasing internal disparities, and the tremendous environmental burden levied by this affluence must be central to any discussion of sustainability.

However, while confronting excessive resource consumption levels is the principle challenge for making development in North America more sustainable in a global sense, there remains very little popular awareness in either Canada or the United States about the environmental costs of present consumption patterns. Much of this relates to the fact that, as William Rees points out, the environmental impacts of consumption have been transferred temporally and spatially (to faraway rural areas, industrial sites, and distant nations) through technology and trade, making them ‘invisible’ to the average North American as they conduct their daily life and work. This invisibility can, in turn, be related to the lack of perceived responsibility for highly unequal patterns of global resource allocation and the burden of degradation which the UNDP describes so well.

The idea that redistribution in the use of global resources is pivotal to sustainable development was made evident in the Brundtland Report, which asserted that ‘the pursuit of sustainability requires major changes in international economic relations’ (p. 67) and urged the world to pursue ‘vigorous redistributive policies’ (p. 51). Implicit in such calls for redistribution is the need to problematize the North American consumer culture, and for citizens of Canada and the US to assume responsibility for the consumption demands levied by their lifestyles. One staggering example of this heedless consumption is given by the UNDP: the annual cosmetic expenditure in the US (\$8 billion) exceeds the amount necessary to provide basic education across the world (\$6 billion). In contrast to popular and political cultures which frame the international context of sustainability as being foremost an issue of population growth, it is the reduced consumption of the wealthy which is the world’s most urgent social and environmental need. The less than 60 million children born in industrialized countries during the 1990s will consume and pollute more in their lifetimes than will the more than 900 million children born during this same decade in the developing world.

More than any other region, North American society is organized around automobiles, meat-based diets, conspicuous consumerism, and prepackaged and disposable products -- excess which has inescapable environmental consequences in terms of declining resource stocks, fewer forests, wetlands, and biodiversity, and the rising toxicity of the air, water, and soil. The average US citizen consumes the equivalent of five trees worth of newsprint every year (assuming current levels of recycling), of which 65 percent is advertising. Canada produces 29 million tons of solid waste annually, nearly one ton per person (not including the 500 million tons of waste rock and tailing produced by the mining industry), and consumes more energy per capita than any other industrialized nation, followed closely by the US. From 1960 to 1990, the carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel use in Canada increased by 250 percent, and despite improving technologies, levels have continued to rise. With 0.5 percent of the world’s population, Canada uses about 2.5 percent of the world’s commercially sold energy -- roughly the equivalent of Africa, with a continental population of more than 700 million. The US Bureau of the Census noted that in 1996, the average American used an amount of energy that was equivalent to that of three Germans, six Mexicans, 14 Chinese, 38 Indians, 168 Bangladeshis, or 531 Ethiopians.

The large majority of North American energy is still derived from fossil fuels (oil, gas, and coal), the burning of which releases a wide-range of gases and particles into the air, generating smog, acid rain, and global climate change. The per capita level of climate-altering carbon dioxide emissions in North America (19.93 tons/year) dwarfs that of other regions -- nearly five times that of the world average, eight times that of Latin America, and 16 times that of Africa. North America alone, with roughly 5 percent of the world’s human population, emits 24 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions. Per capita fuel use in North America in 1995 was nearly five times greater than that of Europe. By the end of the 1990s, the US alone was consuming more than 25 percent of the world’s economic output, 30 percent of the world’s resources, and 34 percent of the world’s energy. Since 1940, the United States has consumed more mineral resources than did the rest of the humanity in all prior history.

A team of researchers led by William Rees at the University of British Columbia

calculated that the resources consumed and waste assimilative capacity demanded by an average North American lifestyle equates to the renewable yield from 5 hectares (ha) of farm and forestland, far in excess of what would be their 'fair earthshare' (by contrast, and thought still unsustainable on a global level, European citizens demand roughly 3 ha). For the current world population to live a comparable lifestyle and consume at North American rates is a physical impossibility -- it would demand the equivalent of four Earth's of productive land, without even conceding any space to wild species. Furthermore, this same research team has calculated that it would require the equivalent of nine atmospheres to safely absorb the volume of greenhouse gases that would be produced if North American emission levels were the global norm. Sustainability on a global scale clearly demands that North Americans dramatically change the way they live -- the world simply cannot provide for a global population of such high mass consumption.

Despite these realities, the prevailing mind-set in North America continues to view growth and consumption uncritically. Most economic discourse and public policy in Canada and the US still proceeds from the foundation that economic growth is unlimited, increased productivity can address all human scarcity, and technology and ingenuity can solve the environmental problems attendant to this growth. Continued economic and industrial growth have, in fact, been fused to popular conceptions of sustainability. As a result, sustainable development has become de-politicized and made into a largely technological-managerial endeavor in which basic assumptions about economic growth and lifestyles remain unaddressed, and growth has been turned into a prerequisite for addressing environmental issues. However, sustainable development in North America cannot occur without challenging the myth that equates economic growth with progress and environmental protection. As Herman Daly has famously noted, sustainable growth is 'oxymoronic' for North America, and 'if sustainable development means anything at all, it means development without growth.'

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to the pursuit of sustainable development in North America is the question of how, in liberal societies, citizens can be made to reduce their wants and businesses made to recast production levels and processes. This implies that sustainable development in North America will not only require technological and regulatory revolutions, but a moral one as well. A globalized concern for sustainability entails the need for North Americans to recognize that their living standards are untenable, and to make efforts to reverse the economic imbalances and ecological stress demanded by their lifestyles. In a sustainable world, not all regions can simultaneously run such 'ecological deficits' as does North America. In short, real sustainable development in North America demands that there be a dramatically reduced upper limit on the way Canadians and Americans live and consume.

### **3. Pressure: Obstacles to Sustainable Development in North America**

"The fortunate individuals and fortunate countries enjoy their well-being without the burden of conscience, without a troublesome sense of responsibility."

-John Kenneth Galbraith, in the UNDP *Human Development Report* 1998 (p. 42)

In an introductory address to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, George Bush proclaimed that the American lifestyle was not up for debate. This, despite the fact that North Americans use more energy and resources per capita than any other region in the world, and aggregate per capita consumption levels have nearly doubled since the 1970s. So while the US and Canada (and the industrialized world in general) came to Rio with the intent of focusing attention on overpopulation in the developing world, developing nations demanded that the resource consumption and pollution of the industrialized world be the central priority. The subsequent impasse stalled progress, and this very much reflects the ‘business first’ agenda of North American politics and the sanctity with which its citizens view their ‘right’ to consume.

### **3.1 Corporations and the ‘Emerald City’**

#### **3.1.1 The World’s Most Powerful Resource Managers**

Corporations are now widely seen to be the most powerful organizations shaping the use and distribution of resources on earth, and their influence is expanding economically, ideologically and politically as they are increasingly able to defy national boundaries and regulations. Two notable statistics which reflect the enormous economic size of corporations are that, when measured together with nation-states, transnational corporations (TNCs) now account for 50 of the world’s 100 largest economies, while nearly 70 percent of international trade is currently controlled by the world’s 500 largest TNCs. However, as William Greider has noted, “corporations exist to pursue their own profit maximization [and]...are commanded by a hierarchy of managers, not the collective aspirations of the society.” The size and international mobility of corporations has played a pivotal role in the process, described earlier, in which the environmental burden of consumption is transferred to distant locales.

#### **3.1.2 Encouraging Consumerism**

Corporations have also played an enormous role in creating the fervent consumeristic ethos of North American society. The predominance of the market as the arbiter of social relations in contemporary North America is reflected in the fact that people are defined as consumers as much as they are as citizens, and business interests have come to be taken for the common good. Consumerism has become a way of life in North America, and this deeply ingrained pattern of behavior reflects a tremendous ideological barrier to sustainable development. In this age of ‘market triumphalism’, the overwhelming ideological message conveyed to the North American public is to consume, and to work hard as the means to consume more. The preponderance of corporate marketing and iconography in both public and private spaces (in the latter, largely through television) has resulted in a large degree of homogenization in material aspirations. This process of advertising-constructed wants is likened by some cultural critics to another contrived but elusive utopia, the Emerald City.

Corporations are seen to be the ‘key gatekeepers’ to the overwhelming majority of the mass media in North America, either through direct ownership (which is increasingly integrated and concentrated) or because operations are driven by the interests of their advertisers. In 1996, for instance, one newspaper chain in Canada (Southam) became the

majority owner for roughly 60 percent of all daily newspaper circulation across the country, while the top three owners controlled nearly 80 percent of the market. In the US, the 100 largest corporations pay for 75 percent of commercial network television time and 50 percent of public television time. Such corporate dominance over the media can be seen to have shaped the flow of mass communication, allowing contrived visions of the 'Emerald City' to go largely unchallenged in these venues of social reproduction. It is telling to note that US corporations annually spend in excess of \$150 billion on advertising, which is far more than is spent on all secondary education in the US. The construction of wants is particularly dangerous for children, given the increased reliance on television for child 'supervision'. The average American spends roughly 40% of their free time watching television, according to time-research experts John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, and the typical child growing up in the US will see 40 000 television commercials each year and will end up devoting between one and two years of their life watching television commercials.

### **3.1.3 Conditioning the Public Debate**

In addition to advertisements instructing North Americans what to want, corporate public relations departments go to great lengths instructing them what not to worry about. There has been a tremendous growth in public relations firms engaged by corporations to produce statistics, analyses, polls, opinion pieces, and general public image-building campaigns. It is estimated that US firms spend at least \$10 billion annually on public relations, and \$1 billion of that on anti-environmental campaigns. Another significant way corporations influence public opinion and impede sustainability is through the efforts of corporate-funded policy institutions, or 'think-tanks'. These groups, such as the Fraser Institute and Business Council on National Issues in Canada, and the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute in the US, have typically been developed to promote corporate priorities, such as deregulation and privatization, under the guise of public interest.

Corporate-funded think tanks have been shown to have played a very significant role in implanting the ideology behind the dismantling of the welfare state in North America since the 1970s, by challenging long-held assumptions about social rights and replacing them with the widespread notion that state intervention is outdated, uncompetitive, and generally detrimental to the economy. The declining legitimacy of state intervention in the economy has very negative implications for the future abilities of governments to advocate sustainable development. These think-tanks have also consistently sought to subvert the political significance of sustainable development concerns by publicly questioning the existence and severity of environmental problems, opposing environmental regulations and taxation, and generally trying to disengage public concern over the environment. Corporate advertising, public relations, and think-tanks have much greater access to the media than do public-interest organizations, environmental NGOs, and concerned scientists, meaning that the nature of the discussion which the majority of the North American public encounters is highly skewed.

### **3.1.4 Exporting an Unsustainable Dream**

Finally, while cultural exchange is one of the great opportunities of globalization, the

flow of cultural information is overwhelmingly from the industrialized to developing world, led by the US. It is significant to note that the largest export industry in the US is now entertainment, and more than 100 countries now receive US soap operas. The dream of high mass consumption is thus not only being reinforced to North Americans through entertainment, but unsustainable aspirations are being exported to the rest of the world as television and other media such as the internet continue to penetrate the most remote places on earth. This is setting a social standard that cannot be sustained environmentally and is rife with inequality.

### **3.2 Corporations in the Classroom**

In addition to the media, another critical means of cultural reproduction is through education, and here again corporations are making significant inroads throughout North America. Corporate contributions are increasingly filling the voids in education rooted in public expenditure decreases, which are themselves a product of the ideological assault upon the legitimacy of the state and taxation levels that are necessary to support an adequate public education system. This process is serving to further implant an uncritical consumerist ethos in North America's youth.

#### **3.2.1 Skewing University Priorities**

Most universities in the US are heavily dependent on private monies, and Canadian universities are increasingly so, meaning that research funding is becoming ever more tied to commercial viability and that taught programs are emphasizing applied technological and business training at the expense of disciplines which foster critical thinking. The growing convergence of academic and corporate interests at the university level has also been formalized through organizations such as the Business Higher Education Forum (BHEF) in the US and the Corporate-Higher Education Forum (CHEF) in Canada, national coalitions of university presidents and major corporate executives where the aims and activities of the two sectors are synchronized through shared board membership (Ford, AT &T, Pfizer, Eastman Kodak, Johnson & Johnson, Rockwell, Heinz, GE are all members of BHEF, while Imperial Oil, Spar Aerospace, Xerox, IBM, Alcan, and Du Pont are apart of CHEF). These forums typically campaign against government regulation of post-secondary education and in favor of closer business-university ties, and seek to fill government cut-backs to public education with corporate funding.

#### **3.2.2 Consumerism in the Curriculum**

The 'creeping privatization' of all levels of public education systems throughout North America is taking various forms, from corporate-funded teaching materials, vending-sponsorships and advertising promotions, to direct curriculum modification and production. One example is the National Council on Economic Education in the US, which seeks to promote the teaching of economics not only in high schools but in elementary education. Economics as it is taught and practiced is not a value-free endeavor but is rather laden with assumptions of individualistic, self-interested behavior which run counter to the ethos of collective responsibility that sustainable development is dependent

upon.

Even more overtly, there has been a rise in for-profit public education, particularly in the US, where organizations comprised of large corporations -- such as the BHEF and the New American Schools Development Corporation -- use corporate financing to direct profit-oriented elementary schools. Critics lament that such initiatives are effectively turning classrooms into a new outlet of mass media, and are one important way in which public education is becoming privatized. A famous example of this is Channel One in the US, an advertiser-sponsored school television program that reaches more than 12 000 schools daily. Through this arrangement, schools are given free satellite, television and video equipment for each classroom, in exchange for which they must show Channel One's consumeristic message and product marketing directly into the classroom for at least twelve minutes a day, on at least 90 percent of school days, to at least 90 percent of the children. Similar exchanges are being conducted with free computers and internet access provided to schools in exchange for having these systems run constant advertising on a corner of the screen. The association of advertisements with school ingrains in children an ethos in which consumerism is not only viewed uncritically, but is seen as a good and necessary thing. On the other side, corporate executives are being provided with programs, such as 'Consumer Kids' in Toronto, which provide workshops on how to market within school system and on 'How to Grow Your Customers From Childhood.'

### **3.3 Regulating Corporate Governance: International Trade Agreements (ITAs)**

At present, the power of corporations is not only being ingrained at an ideological level, but is being entrenched by an international regulatory regime of trade organizations. Given the international scope of many contemporary sustainability concerns, the dominance of the market in conditioning modern social relations, and the environmental and social implications associated with the global exchange of goods, the governance of trade by international trade agreements (ITAs) could conceivably be central to the global pursuit of sustainable development. However, the current nature of international trade regulation is clearly privileging the expansion of corporate rights by constricting the ability of national governments to regulate the activity of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) both environmentally and socially. By ingraining the rights of corporations over the authority of democratically-elected governments in trade laws, and moving arbitration up to an undemocratic supra-national level, ITAs represent -- in their current form -- some of the most powerful political barriers to sustainable development. Such regulatory regimes, binding to state, provincial and local governments as a matter of constitutional jurisprudence, but which were not themselves participants in the negotiations nor signatories to the agreements, run totally counter to notions of local self-determination and control over resource use.

The fact that ITAs are increasingly constraining national sovereignty -- to the extent of being identified as a barrier to sustainable development in North America -- with the support of democratically-elected governments in Canada and the US, reflects how profoundly government agendas have been shaped by corporate interests. The federal governments of both Canada and the US entered into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and are actively pursuing a strong Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), in addition to being driving forces behind the strengthening of the World Trade

Organization (WTO). However, corporate interests are powerfully entwined with government policy makers and trade negotiators through key advisory panels, such as the US Business Roundtable and the Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations (US), which are made up of top executives from the largest US-based corporations.

### **3.3.1 The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)**

NAFTA came into effect in 1994, extending the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement to Mexico, with the intent of integrating the three economies in a unified regional market. Although the agreement itself does explicitly note a concern for environmental protection and the signatories did resolve to promote 'sustainable development', all but three of the 111 advisors invited to participate in the NAFTA negotiations represented large corporations and there was little public participation in the deal, which many subsequently labeled a 'corporate bill of rights'. This lack of public participation and transparency was also inscribed into the dispute settlement process, as a tribunal of unelected trade bureaucrats was created which conducts its decision making in secret and can administer extensive trade-related punishment to elected governments if they do not accept the rulings.

Particularly disturbing for many was the fact that some important social institutions -- including public sector services such as education -- were classified as service commodities under NAFTA and subsequently opened to competition. As well, the trade challenges that have been made under Chapter 11 of the agreement have served to erode national environmental protection laws. The most famous example of this is the challenge made by Ethyl Corporation, a US-based corporation with operations in Canada, which sued the Canadian government for \$250 million under the investor-state provision of Chapter 11, arguing that Canada's ban on the import of methylcyclopentadienyl manganese tricarbonyl (MMT) -- a ban which had been made for human health and environmental reasons -- was an illegal trade barrier. Before even going to the NAFTA panel, the Canadian government reversed its course and unbanned MMT out of an assurance that it would lose. This is suggestive of how the governance of environmental health is shifting from democratically elected governments to undemocratic trade panels.

### **3.3.2 The World Trade Organization (WTO)**

The WTO has similar authority over national governments as does NAFTA, but on an even larger scale. The WTO is an ITA created in 1995 out of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT), with the goal of eliminating barriers to international trade and investment. The WTO comprises 134 member-states (plus 33 with observer status), and has both legislative and juridical powers, making and enforcing wide-ranging rules governing the liberalization of global trade in goods, services, and intellectual property. Opponents criticize the WTO for both its partiality, having consistently placed the rights of corporations to conduct business over environmental concerns, human rights, and labor standards, and its structure, which is highly undemocratic, non-transparent, and unaccountable. The WTO's dispute settlement process allows countries (typically, following the impetus of corporations which perceive themselves to be economically disadvantaged by a particular law) to challenge environmental, health, safety, and labor standards in another country as unfair trade

practices and, as with NAFTA, WTO decisions are conducted privately by a panel of trade experts (also like NAFTA, it is a formal requirement of WTO tribunals that their conduct be kept secret).

Following the ruling of a WTO tribunal (successful appeals are virtually impossible), the losing country may then be forced to change its laws in accordance with the decision or otherwise face trade sanctions. To this point, every environmental or public health law challenged at the WTO level (or previously, under GATT) has been found to be an 'illegal' barrier to the conduct of business. Perhaps the most infamous environmental example of this has been the weakening of the US Clean Air Act. The US government was forced to withdraw provisions of its Clean Air Act when, through a challenge from Venezuela (which was actually spurred by a subsidiary of a US corporation), it was ruled that US cleanliness standards for foreign gas refinement (designed to reduce emissions) were in violation of trade rules. Other provisions of the US Clean Air Act which banned the import and sale of goods produced by ozone-depleting production methods -- merely implementing the international ozone agreement (the Montreal Protocol) -- are also in conflict with the WTO's requirements. This illustrates how not only national environmental laws, but also multinational environmental agreements (MEA's), have been neutralized by ITAs.

Canada and the US have not only had their own environmental standards attacked, but have actively sought to reduce those of others. Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, for instance, has challenged a decision by England and France to restrict the use of asbestos in construction because Canada is a major exporter of asbestos, as well as challenging Europe's ability to restrict imports of old-growth Canadian lumber. In a case of enormous global significance, Canada and the US intend to use the WTO to challenge Europe's decision -- made out of environmental and health concerns -- to prohibit the importation of food containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs), because GMO crops account for a large percentage of North American food exports.

### **3.3.3 Eroding Environmental Regulation**

In short, the trade goals and export access of corporations are overwhelming all other public policy concerns through ITAs. ITA rulings have levied some serious setbacks to environmental protection and have set extremely dangerous precedents, as many national laws established to protect the environment can now be challenged by other member countries as non-tariff barriers to trade. While governments can theoretically still set standards above those of the baseline level upheld by ITAs, higher standards are extremely difficult to defend against the legal challenge that they represent a non-tariff barrier to trade. In fact, it was estimated by the chief US negotiator at one of the preparatory meeting for the Rio Earth Summit that as much as 80 percent of US environmental legislation could be challenged as an illegal trade barrier through the WTO, and that WTO panels would declare most of this illegal. Even basic citizen's rights, such as access to environmental and safety information through product labeling -- necessary to allow people to make informed consumption decisions -- are increasingly imperiled. Thus, the ultimate result of the WTO's goal of harmonizing international standards, opponents charge, is that it is leading to a 'ratcheting down' process whereby national standards are reduced to the lowest common denominator, nations are inhibited from employing import

or regulatory barriers for environmental, health, or social reasons, and TNCs are virtual sovereigns. In other words, the ability of governments at all levels to act in the interests of their citizens and for sustainable development is being sacrificed in the name of free trade.

The WTO does call for strong government intervention in one regard: defending the monopoly rights of corporations over information and technology which has been patented, something which is being intensely contested in the developing world with respect to genetic resources. Sanctioned by the WTO, North American corporations have been particularly aggressive in pursuing patent protection for seeds and genetic materials found in developing nations, through an insidious process referred to as ‘biopiracy’. The appropriation of wealth derived from traditional ecological knowledge (as this biological wealth has often been purposefully manipulated over millennia) and foreign resources is but another example of how North American economic activity is impinging on sustainable livelihoods abroad, and hence sustainable development in North America cannot be understood in a vacuum.

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Daly, H., Cobb Jr., J. (1994). *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (2nd. ed.), 534 pp. Boston: Beacon Press. [This represents one of the classic articulations of ecological economics, demonstrating how classical economic theories have created a socially and environmentally destructive growth-obsession, and how the market mechanism may actually be reoriented to serve the needs of communities and the environment.]

Durning, A.T. (1992). *How Much is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth*, 200 pp. New York: WW Norton. [This presents a vivid indictment of the unsustainability of North American consumption patterns.]

Goodland, R. (1997). Environmental sustainability in agriculture: diet matters. *Ecological Economics* **23**, 189-200. [This demonstrates the unsustainable and uneconomical nature of animal agriculture in the United States, and how it is propped up by misplaced subsidization and the failure of prices to account for the real environmental costs of production.]

Korten, D. (1995): *When Corporations Rule the World*. San Francisco: Kumarian Press. [Korten provides an authoritative account of the emergence and current role of corporations as the dominant actors influencing environmental and social conditions on a global level, but with an emphasis on North America.]

Kneen, B. (1998). *Farmageddon: Food and the Culture of Biotechnology*, 240 pp. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers. [This presents a thorough and accessible review of the issues associated with genetic engineering as they relate to food systems.]

OECD (1996). *Environmental Performance Review: United States*; OECD (1995). *Performance Review: Canada*. Paris: OECD. [These provide an excellent outline of environmental legislation and government departments and agencies involved in environmental policy making, as well as reviewing the integration of environmental concerns in a number of sectoral cases studies.]

Rees, W.E., Wackernagel, M. (1995). *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers. [This presents an accessible overview of the innovative concept of ecological footprinting, clearly implicating the unsustainability of North American consumption levels.]

Roseland, M., Cureton, M., Wornell, H., Henderson, H. (1998). *Toward Sustainable Communities: Resources for Citizens and Their Communities*, 256 pp. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers. [This book addresses a number of sustainability issues -- such as greening urban areas, water and sewage, waste reduction and recycling, energy efficiency, atmospheric change and air quality, transportation planning and traffic management, land use and urban form, housing, and community economic development -- with more attention on the physical, rather than social, aspects.]

Sachs, W., Loske, R., Linz, M., Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy (1998). *Greening the North: a Post-Industrial Blueprint for Ecology and Equity*, 288 pp. London: Zed Books.

[This provides one of the best overviews of the myriad of ways in which industrialized societies are currently unsustainable, but provides hopeful visions of how they can be reoriented towards a more sustainable future in balance with global limits.]

Slovic, S. (1999). Giving Expression to Nature: Voices of Environmental Literature. *Environment* 41(2), 1-11 & 25-32. [This provides an excellent history of environmental writing in the United States, and an annotated bibliography of more than 30 classics and recent favorites in American environmental literature].

Tokar, B. (1997). *Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash*, 224 pp. Boston: South End Press. [This provides a history of environmental movements in the United States, challenges mainstream environmental agencies and 'official environmentalism', and calls for a broadly-based, popular ecological movement featuring grassroots political participation and international alliances.]

Wapner, P. (1996). *Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics*. Albany, NY, USA: State University of New York Press. [This examines the role of a number of transnational environmental groups, including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the World Wildlife Fund in their efforts to engage civil society in environmental issues and pressure governments to adopt more progressive environmental policies.]

United Nations Environment Program, *Global Environmental Outlook (GEO)-2000*. New York: United Nations. [This provides an excellent review of the condition of contemporary environmental issues, both globally and regionally, and states as its key finding that the continued poverty of the majority of the planet's inhabitants and excessive consumption of the minority are the two major causes of environmental degradation on a planetary scale, and that urgent and dramatic actions are needed.]

### **Biographical Sketches**

**Tony Weis** is a Ph.D. Candidate in Geography at Queen's University (Canada). His doctoral research focuses on international political economy as it relates to peasant agriculture in the developing world and the challenge of building sustainable food systems. More specifically, his research is concerned with how Jamaican peasants and cooperatives are adapting to the challenges of the evolving international food regime. He has published articles on the political economic barriers to sustainability in the developing world, the political economic context of Jamaica's deforestation crisis, and the development lessons of farmer's cooperative in Jamaica. In addition to his studies, Tony has been involved in various forms of environmental and social justice activism. He has also served on the Executive Committee of the Eastern

Canada Chapter of the Sierra Club, been a Board member of a Public Interest Research Group, campaigned with a First Peoples action group, been active with two groups concerned with the ethical treatment of animals, and is currently a research associate (animal agriculture and environment) on the *Changing the World -- One Bite at a Time* research team. He has also published an array of articles on various themes of environmental and social justice in different media outlets.

**Anita Krajnc** is a Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at the University of Toronto. Her doctoral research focuses on the role of scientific knowledge and public education in building international environmental regimes. She has published articles on neo-conservative ideology and the decline of the Ontario Environment Ministry, the art of green learning, and the environmental lessons from the early American labor and civil rights movements. Her current research interests include the changing institutional capacity of governments in Canada and the US to address environmental issues. Anita has worked on a Greenhouse Gas Miser project for Environment Canada and has served as legislative assistant to a Member of Parliament. She has also participated in the campaign to protect Canada's western ancient temperate rainforests in Clayoquot Sound, Vancouver Island. The 1993 civil disobedience campaign to save Clayoquot had a transformative effect, leading her to volunteer with Greenpeace in 1997 in their efforts to save the Great Bear Rainforest on the mid-coast of British Columbia. In 1999, she co-founded the Peaceful Parks Coalition, which aims to protect Ontario's wild spaces from a conservation biology perspective.