A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by

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A Possible Solution for the Illegal Immigration Problem

I had written a small note about the immigration problem over five years ago, but as it is an even more critical problem today, let me address it again.

First of all, let me comment about the U.S. immigration policies which have at least one major shortcoming, that of student visas. We have the best graduate schools in the world, and students from all over the world want to come here for their masters or PhD degrees. So they obtain a student visa, work for four to six years on a research project usually funded by the U.S. government or some other funding source, develop a new technology, and earn their PhD. They are allowed to stay in the U.S. one more year through the OPT (optional practical training) program. But then their visa expires and if they can't find a company to sponsor them, they have to go back to their country and take the technology they developed with them. But if they came to the U.S. illegally, they could stay. Does this make any sense?

Now what does immigration have to do with the environment, the overall topic of most of my articles? The answer is that one of the strategies employed by organizations that want to operate in an environmentally sustainable manner is called *systems thinking*. Here is a brief explanation. Too often, people look at the result of a particular outcome and come to a conclusion as what one single event caused that outcome. In most cases, it is not a single cause but a set of things that are responsible. This set of things can be called a system, and the things can be people, vehicles, cells, molecules, plants or whatever. To form this system, these things are interconnected in such a way that over time they produce their own patterns of behavior. The system can be moved, activated, constrained, or driven by some outside forces but the result is dependent on the characteristics of the system itself. The system must consist of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose.

An example of a system is the possible result of a flu virus. A person does not catch the flu, but rather, the person establishes a set of conditions within his/her body that allows the flu virus to flourish within the body. A baseball game consists of players, bats, and a ball (the elements), the rules of the game (interconnections), in an attempt to win the game (purpose). These examples and more can be found in an excellent book titled "Thinking in Systems" by Donella H. Meadows. In her book, she presents the basics of systems, explains why they work, and presents opportunities while making you aware of some traps.

I decided to write about this subject because of two examples where systems thinking can have a positive impact on solving two major problems: climate change and

illegal immigration. If we think of climate change as a system consisting of all the sources of carbon dioxide emissions (elements), the impact of the emissions on our atmosphere (interconnections), and the warming of the planet (purpose), we can then suggest means of impacting the system in a beneficial way. Basically, we need to reduce the elements and one way of doing it is through a carbon tax or a carbon fee. And what would be done with the funds collected? The best alternative would be to return that money to all the citizens in the U.S. equally. The more environmental citizens would receive more than they paid as a tax. The less environmental citizens would pay more in the form of a carbon tax than they would receive back from the collected funds.

The illegal immigration problem is not new. While in office, President Carter was also concerned with the large number of illegal immigrants from Mexico. He believed that nothing could be done about that immigration as long as there was a large gap in the living standards and working opportunities between the U.S. and Mexico. Keep in mind that the U.S.-Mexican border is believed to be the only border in the world between a first-world and third-world country. Carter went on to suggest that rather than spending money on border guards, barriers, and/or fences, we should spend the money helping to build the Mexican economy. In addition, he said that this should be done until the illegal immigration stopped – when there no longer would be this great desire for Mexicans to come to the U.S. Obviously, this did not happen as it was difficult for Carter to explain this strategy to Congress. But think about it as a system. It consists of Mexican people (elements), means and barriers to immigrate to the U.S. (interconnections), and the need to have a better life (purpose). Instead of looking at the interconnections, we should be looking at the purpose. By improving the purpose – a better Mexican life – the rest of the system functions without a problem.

This same strategy can be applied to the refugees from Syria. Instead of allowing them to enter the U.S., the money that our government will allocate for their life in the U.S. can be better spent in Syria. Find a safe area in Syria and develop it using fewer funds than would be spent in the U.S. After all, the cost of living in Syria is much less than in the U.S.

A good example where this kind of system worked was in Greece. After World War II, Greece was an impoverished nation and for the next few decades, the Greek people were coming to the U.S. any way possible – legally, illegally, through Canada, visiting and not returning, etc. But since Greece's economy had improved and the country eventually joined the Euro Zone, immigration to the U.S. from Greece had slowed downed considerably. The current financial crisis is another story.

We can actually think of the Earth as a self-regulating system with its goal to control, or regulate, the surface conditions in such a way to be as favorable as possible for contemporary life. But unfortunately, we are making it difficult for the Earth to achieve this goal.