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

by

George P. Nassos

Our Current Consumption Rate is Not Sustainable

During the past three to four years, I have written articles about many various environmental issues. There are three issues, however, that I consider the most critical facing our society today. One is the slow depletion of non-renewable energy sources, such as oil, gas and coal, and the need for the development of renewable energy like solar and wind. A second and related issue is the global warming being caused by mankind consuming these non-renewable energy sources. And the third critical issue is the shortage of potable water. Each of these issues is primarily due to the growing population and the increasing consumption of our natural resources.

I recently read an excellent book titled "Collapse", by Jared Diamond, that deals with many cultural and environmental issues that, in turn, led to the collapse of certain societies. Diamond talks about the great variation today in consumption of the many nations in the world. Consumption is defined as the needs of people for survival in terms of food, energy, materials and the disposal of waste. The disparity in the consumption rate is that it is 32 times greater in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan and Australia than in the developing countries.

Today, the world population is estimated to be around 6.5 billion people of whom only about one billion live in the fully developed countries listed above. By the middle of this century it is estimated that the world population could grow to nine billion people, and there are questions as to whether the earth can support this number of people, or will it collapse. It is not really a question of how many people are on this earth, but what is the consumption rate of these people?

People in third-world countries are aware of a major difference in the consumption rate per capita, although they probably don't know the magnitude of the difference. In general, their goal is to catch up to the developed countries, but if they believe their chances of catching up are hopeless, they could get frustrated, angry or even participate in terrorist activities. Another option is to emigrate to a first world country like the U.S. and Western Europe, but then they would contribute to the consumption rate of that country.

If one considers the fastest growing economy in China, these people are already aspiring to increase their consumption to the 32 factor. If the Chinese were to succeed, it would be equivalent of doubling the world's consumption rate. If India were to do the same thing, the consumption rate would then triple. If the entire world had the same consumption rate as these first world countries, it would be the same as having 72 billion people on this planet at the current consumption rates – and there is no way the earth could handle this.

Since we are in no position to restrict the rest of world from improving their quality of life, the only answer is that we, in the United States, must lower our consumption rate. But will we do it for the benefit of the rest of the world? Whether we want to or not, we must reduce our consumption rate because what we are doing today is not sustainable.

If we reluctantly agree to reduce our consumption rate, does it mean that we will have to reduce our quality of life? Definitely not! For example, the people in Western Europe consume half as much oil (gasoline) per capita than we do in the U.S. But their standard of living is considered higher than ours in terms of life expectancy, health care, infant mortality, vacation time, quality of public schools and several other criteria. Have you ever stopped to think how your large gas-guzzling automobile contributes positively to any of these quality-of-life factors? It is not a question of just helping the rest of the world as they improve their quality of life, we also have to consider how we are going to help our grandchildren and their children.