

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

by  
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## **Why Are We Spending More Than We Have?**

During the past few years, we have been reading more and more about organizations and people over-extending themselves with respect to their financial situation. People without the necessary means were committing to purchase homes they could not really afford. We have had the collapse of Merrill Lynch, AIG and numerous banks. The automobile industry is in bad shape with GM shutting down its Oldsmobile, Pontiac, and Hummer (about time) lines while trying to sell Saturn and Saab. Individual credit card delinquencies are finally starting to level off. The City of Chicago is in such poor financial shape it has been selling assets to obtain cash for its current operations. The State of Illinois is in such bad financial shape that the governor wants to increase the income tax by 50%. The Obama administration recently announced a budget deficit of \$1.56 trillion – that is trillion, not billion – for 2010 and a 2011 budget of \$3.83 trillion. And even countries, like Greece, are going broke. Greece continues to spend 13% more than it brings in. A few years ago, it sold future airport fees and lottery proceeds for current cash to meet its needs. Basically, we are spending our future assets.

This unfortunate pattern is exactly what we are doing with the earth and the deficit is growing rapidly. The earth can be considered a living organism that provides all of our needs in terms of food, clothing, shelter, energy and waste disposal. These resources are either renewable, such as topsoil, fresh water, fish, and forests; or nonrenewable such as oil, ore deposits, and coal. It was as recently as 1960 that we were consuming the earth's resources at a rate of 50% of what it could provide. In 1980, we were consuming the resources at the same rate as they were being generated. Unfortunately, today we are consuming 40% more than what we have. Like Greece, we are borrowing from the future, but unlike Greece, there is no one that can bail us out.

One of the causes of this over-consumption is that low costs and improved extractive technologies have made recycling and conservation unattractive, and thus accelerating the depletion of our resources. This has been reinforced by an increase in population and a commensurate increase in consumption resulting from these lower costs. So it appears that progress in technology may very well hasten the collapse of our environment. As ecologists say, "Nature has no reset button."

It is critical that we take action now as later will be too late. We don't want to experience a collapse like the island of Nauru, considered one of the richest nations in the world in 1976. It was continuously inhabited for 100 generations living within its ecological limits. In less than one generation, Nauru was stripped of its rich phosphate deposits and its current inhabitants are living in poverty on a barren landscape.

We must revert to a sustainable world, “meeting today’s needs without sacrificing the needs of future generations.” The world’s current population is about 6.8 billion and it is expected to peak at 9 billion within 50 years. Achieving sustainability will not be easy when we are already consuming 40% more than we have and the population expected to increase further by one-third. We don’t need large homes – most families can live comfortably in a 2000 sq. ft. house. We don’t need automobiles with large engines consuming gasoline that we don’t have. Europeans consume half as much as we do and their quality of life is considered better than ours in many respects – longevity, child mortality, vacations, retirement, et al. We need to add renewable energy, like wind, solar and geothermal, to our electric grid in order to meet the growing demand as our old nuclear plants are being shut down. In 2008, Germany added about five times as much solar energy as the U.S. yet its solar resource, the energy from the sun, is less than any part of the U.S. other than perhaps Alaska.

We must all do our part to protect God’s gift – a sustainable earth. We cannot wait until there is a threat like the collapse of Nauru – it may be too late. For the sake of our grandchildren, let’s change our spending habits.