

Fact or Fiction?



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Environmentalism & Culture

When Pepsi had their slogan, "Come alive with the Pepsi generation," translated into Chinese, it was understood as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave."¹

What means one thing in a first world country can mean something quite different in developing countries. Culturally rooted beliefs that influence behavior patterns can interfere with application of environmental and health remedies.² Sometimes developing countries get caught in the middle and because of political pressure, end up in situations worse than before the changes were made. As Desowitz discloses: "Health professionals working in the tropical regions have largely ignored modification of behavior as a means of disease control. Nor have they taken into account the behavior and beliefs of the target populations when designing health campaigns. The notion persists among health authorities that high-technology panaceas can, by themselves, be effective. Many are surprised when their drugs, vaccines, and sanitation projects are rejected or allowed to fall into disuse."²

It Doesn't Always Work

The following example from Desowitz involving stoned toilets in Somalia shows the problems that can arise when countries in transition in areas of health and the environment. "Health advisers from a Western nation were appalled by the toilet habits of the Somalis. The entire country seemed to be covered with indiscriminately scattered human feces. Hardly a toilet, flush or any other kind, was to be found in this impoverished nation. Fecally transmitted parasitic, bacterial, and viral diseases were rife. So with all the best intentions, these experts decided to use their government's aid funds for a pilot project that would provide simple water-seal toilets to a selected village. In due course, several hundred of the cast concrete devices were placed over soak-away

pits that had been laboriously dug to the prescribed dimensions. The advisers then returned to their offices in the capital, satisfied that they had propelled these people onto the road to modern sanitation."² A year later when the experts returned they found the toilets to be horrible messes. Each one was blocked by a pile of stones and made useless. When the advisers asked why anyone would dump stones into a toilet their respondent was surprised. "Doesn't everyone know?," said the elder, "that Somalis distracted themselves while defecating by clicking two stones together and when they finished they dropped the stones into the most convenient receptacle—the water toilet seat."²

Sometimes New Technology Doesn't Fit the Culture

Money and Bate³ caution against the export of inappropriate attitudes from developed to less-developed countries. Case studies of malaria in South Africa and cholera in Peru show the fatal consequences of allowing western preoccupations with trivial risks (such as the cancer effects of pesticide residues in foods and chlorine compounds in water) to influence health policy in the third world.

Stuart Nagel in his recent book provides some examples from the Philippines. "The first example involves informing farmers as to how they can double their crops through better seeds, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizer, and machinery, but not providing for any increased storage facilities to put the doubled crop. The result was that much of the increased productivity rotted in the fields. The second example involved informing farmers how they could arrange for as many as four crops per year, instead of one crop per year, through special seeds that have a three month season. The crops go from being put into the ground to being ready to harvest every three months. The

farmers, however, were not informed as to how a one person farm could plow, weed, and harvest four times a year and still be able to attend fiestas."⁴

Asmerom discusses the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) meant to serve as a catalyst and coordinator of various global environmental programs. He says: "The fact that it is located far away from the regions where its activities were to be carried out means that it has no control over what is going on in the designated areas. For this very reason alone, it has been described as a toothless tiger trying to wield authority from a distance."⁵

Flannery reports that development of conservation programs in countries such as Papua New Guinea is fraught with difficulty because Western notions of conservation often appear to be completely non-sensical to the local people. "Many villagers believe that the animals of the forest have always been there and that they will always remain. When faced with clear evidence of a decline in abundance, or even extinction, they will point to a place over the mountain saying, 'There's still plenty there. Little do they realize there is always a village 'over there, inhabited by people who, when asked the same question, point back in their own direction'"⁶

Language Can be a Problem

Communication across linguistic barriers can also present a problem. For instance, Inuktitut, the preferred language of most Inuit living in the Eastern and Central Arctic, has no equivalent for many of the scientific concepts and terms typically used in discussing chemical contaminants. Powell and Leiss state: "Inasmuch as the notion of industrial contaminants and of their detection by scientific means falls outside the sphere of traditional experiences, indigenous populations have been inclined to interpret con-

taminant information in the light of their past experiences with outsiders. Because the contact with southern visitors and the transition from living on the land to settlement life that followed brought about profound disruptions and radical changes in the living conditions of northern aboriginals, they have grown wary about external interventions. As a result, contaminant information and advice provided by scientists and other outside experts tends to be received with various degrees of skepticism, suspicion, and mistrust”⁷

Michael Parfit, in an article in *National Geographic*, describes the Inuit lifestyle in detail typical of that magazine. Without even getting into the complexities of environmental issues, he asks these fundamental questions, without providing answers. “How do you regulate hunting and fishing to reflect the Inuit need for food, the profound Inuit attitude toward animals, and the Inuit skill with modern weapons? And how do you create a viable cash economy in a society just one generation away from a subsistence way of life?”⁸ Is it any wonder environmental issues suggested by first world countries can be such a problem in this region.

Baum makes this observation: “Today the greatest divide within humanity is not between races, or religions, or even—as widely believed—between the literate and the illiterate. It is the chasm that separates scientific from pre-scientific cultures. Consider this possibility: Humanity is composed of two fundamentally different types of people. One experiences awe and asks the questions why? and how? The other experiences awe and composes a story or song, or dances around a fire. The two cultures are grounded in two different ways of knowing the world, of experiencing and responding to awe at the grandeur of nature and existence. Is one better than the other? Well, that depends. On a purely metaphysical level, probably not.”⁹

Lastly, from Mark Dowie: “No one who attended the nongovernmental organizations (NGO) preparatory meetings in New York would have been surprised by the behavior of American environmentalists in Rio. There and in Rio third-world delegates and observers found them imperious and insensitive. “We don’t want to be lectured as to what we should do, unless it is done in a cooperative and democratic way,” said Indian delegate Mani Shankar. “I am not about to go to my people and tell them they must face more deprivation because some lady in Maine is fretting over the cutting of a tree or because some chap in San Francisco wants to drive his Volvo in better conscience. We can sit down and talk when

we realize that one job in Cincinnati is not one bit more important than one job in New Delhi.”¹⁰

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