

## Nature is the 99%, too

The economy is built on the idea of relentless growth, which is an environmental and health disaster for all but the 1%.



**An ever-growing economy requires ever-growing supplies of natural resources - unfortunately, the planet we live on has a finite amount of resources [GALLO/GETTY]**

What if rising sea levels are yet another measure of inequality? What if the degradation of our planet's life-support systems - its atmosphere, oceans and biosphere - goes hand in hand with the accumulation of wealth, power and control by that corrupt and greedy 1 per cent we are hearing about from Zuccotti Park? What if the assault on America's middle class and the assault on the environment are one and the same?

It's not hard for me to understand how environmental quality and economic inequality came to be joined at the hip. In all my years as a grassroots organiser dealing with the tragic impact of degraded environments on public health, it was always the same: Someone got rich and someone got sick.

In the struggles that I was involved in to curb polluters and safeguard public health, those who wanted curbs, accountability and precautions were always outspent several times over by those who wanted no restrictions on their effluents.

We dug into our own pockets for postage money, they had expense accounts. We made flyers to slip under the windshield wipers of parked cars, they bought ads on television. We took time off from jobs to visit legislators, only to discover that they had gone to lunch with fulltime lobbyists.



Naturally, the barons of the chemical and nuclear industries don't live next to the radioactive or toxic-waste dumps that their corporations create; on the other hand, impoverished black and brown people often do live near such ecological sacrifice zones because they can't afford better.

Similarly, the gated communities of the hyper-wealthy are not built next to cesspool rivers or

skylines filled with fuming smokestacks, but the slums of the planet are. Don't think, though, that it's just a matter of property values or scenery. It's about health, about whether your kids have lead or dioxins running through their veins. It's a simple formula, in fact: Wealth disparities become health disparities.

And here's another formula: When there's money to be made, both workers and the environment are expendable. Just as jobs migrate if labour can be had cheaper overseas, I know workers who were tossed aside when they became ill from the foul air or poisonous chemicals they encountered on the job.

The fact is: We won't free ourselves from a dysfunctional and unfair economic order until we begin to see ourselves as communities, not commodities. That is one clear message from Zuccotti Park.

Polluters routinely walk away from the ground they poison and expect taxpayers to clean up after them. By "externalising" such costs, profits are increased. Examples of land abuse and abandonment are too legion to list, but most of us can refer to a familiar "superfund site" in our own backyard.

Clearly, Mother Nature is among the disenfranchised, exploited and struggling.

### **Democracy 101**

The 99 per cent pay for wealth disparity with lost jobs, foreclosed homes, weakening pensions and slashed services, but Nature pays, too. In the world the one-percenters have created, the needs of whole ecosystems are as easy to disregard as, say, the need the young have for debt-free educations and meaningful jobs.

**"If you are a CEO who skims millions of dollars off other people's labour, it's called a 'bonus'."**

Extreme disparity and deep inequality generate a double standard with profound consequences. If you are a CEO who skims millions of dollars off other people's labour, it's called a "bonus". If you are a flood victim who breaks into a sporting goods store to grab a lifejacket, it's called looting. If you lose your job and fall behind on your mortgage, you get evicted. If you are a banker-broker who designed flawed mortgages that caused a million people to lose their homes, you get a second-home vacation-mansion near a golf course.

If you drag heavy fishnets across the ocean floor and pulverise an entire ecosystem, ending thousands of years of dynamic evolution and depriving future generations of a healthy ocean, it's called free enterprise. But if, like Tim DeChristopher, you disrupt an auction of public land to oil and gas companies, it's called a crime and you get two years in jail.

In campaigns to make polluting corporations accountable, my Utah neighbours and I learned this simple truth: Decisions about what to allow into the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat are soon enough translated into flesh and blood, bone and nerve and daily experience. So it's crucial that those decisions, involving environmental quality and public

health, are made openly, inclusively and accountably. That's Democracy 101.

The corporations that shred habitat and contaminate your air and water are anything but democratic. Stand in line to get your 30 seconds in front of a microphone at a public hearing about the siting of a nuclear power plant, the effluent from a factory farm, or the removal of a mountaintop and you'll get the picture quickly enough: The corporations that profit from such ecological destruction are distant, arrogant, secretive, and unresponsive.

The one per cent are willing to spend billions impeding democratic initiatives, which is why every so-called environmental issue is also about building a democratic culture.



**Degrading the planet's resources is reckless and although the 1% may profit, it will hurt us all [GALLO/GETTY]**

### **First Kill the EPA, then Social Security**

Beyond all the rhetoric about freedom from the new stars of the Republican Party, the strategy is simple enough: Obstruct and misinform, then blame the resulting dysfunction on "government".

It's a great scam.



### **In depth coverage of the global movement**

Tell the voters that government doesn't work and then, when elected, prove it. And first on the list of government outfits they want to sideline or kill is the Environmental Protection Agency, so they can do away with the already flimsy wall of regulation that stands between their toxins and your bloodstream.

Poll after poll shows that citizens understand the need for environmental rules and safeguards. Mercury is never put into the bloodstreams of nursing mothers by consensus, nor are watersheds fracked until they are flammable by popular demand. But the free market ideologues of the Republican Party are united in opposition to any rule or standard that impedes the "magic" of the marketplace and unchecked capital.

The same bottom-line quarterly-report fixation on profitability that accepts oil spills as

inevitable also accepts unemployment as inevitable. Tearing apart wildlife habitat to make a profit and doing the same at a workplace are just considered the price of doing business. Clearcutting a forest and clearcutting a labor force are two sides of the same coin.

### **Beware of Growth**

Getting the economy growing has been the refrain of the Obama administration and the justification for every bad deal, budget cut and unbalanced compromise it's made.

The desperate effort to grow the economy to solve our economic woes is what keeps Timothy Geithner at the helm of the Treasury and is what stalls the regulation of greenhouse gasses. It's why we are told we must sacrifice environmental quality for pipelines and why young men and women are sacrificed to protect access to oil, the lubricant for an acquisitive economic engine.

**"There's only so much fertile soil or fresh water available, only so many fish in the ocean, only so much CO2 the planet can absorb."**

The financial empire of the one percenters and the political order it has shaped are predicated on easy and relentless growth. How, we are asked, will there be enough for everyone if we don't keep growing?

The fundamental contradiction of our time is this: We have built an all-encompassing economic engine that requires unending growth. A contraction of even a per cent or two is a crisis, and yet we are embedded in ecosystems that are reaching or have reached their limits.

This isn't complicated: There's only so much fertile soil or fresh water available, only so many fish in the ocean, only so much CO2 the planet can absorb and remain habitable.

Yes, you can get around this contradiction for a while by exploiting your neighbour's habitat, using technological advances to extend your natural resources and stealing from the future - that is, using up soil, minerals, and water your grandchildren (someday to be part of that same 99 per cent) will need. But the limits to those familiar and, in the past, largely successful strategies are becoming more evident all the time.

At some point, we'll discover that you can't exist for long beyond the boundaries of the natural world, that (as with every other species) if you overload the carrying capacity of your habitat, you crash.

Warming temperatures, chaotic weather patterns, extreme storms, monster wildfires, epic droughts, Biblical floods, an avalanche of species extinction... that collapse is upon us now.

In the human realm, it translates into hunger and violence, mass migrations and civil strife, failed states and resource wars.

Like so much else these days, the crash, as it happens, will not be suffered in equal measure by all of us. The one percenters will be atop the hill, while the 99 per cent will be in the flood lands

below swimming for their lives, clinging to debris or drowning. The Great Recession has previewed just how that will work.

An unsustainable economy is inherently unfair and worse is to come. After all, the car is heading for the cliff's edge, the grandkids are in the backseat, and all we're arguing about is who can best put the pedal to the metal.

## **Occupy Earth**

Give credit where it's due: It's been the genius of the protesters in Zuccotti Park to shift public discourse to whether the distribution of economic burdens and rewards is just and whether the economic system makes us whole or reduces and divides us.

**"Nature's... an amazingly diverse community of species... we have yet to fathom how it all fits together."**

It's hard to imagine how we'll address our converging ecological crises without first addressing the way accumulating wealth and power has captured the political system. As long as Washington is dominated and intimidated by giant oil companies, Wall Street speculators and corporations that can buy influence and even write the rules that make buying influence possible, there's no meaningful way to deal with our economy's addiction to fossil fuels and its dire consequences.

Nature's 99 per cent is an amazingly diverse community of species. They feed and share and recycle within a web of relationships so dynamic and complex that we have yet to fathom how it all fits together. What we have excelled at so far is breaking things down into their parts and then reassembling them; that, after all, is how a barrel of crude oil becomes rocket fuel or a lawn chair.

When it comes to the more chaotic, less linear features of life like climate, ecosystems, immune systems or foetal development, we are only beginning to understand thresholds and feedback loops, the way the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. But we at least know that the parts matter deeply and that, before we even fully understand them, we're losing them at an accelerating rate. Forests are dying, fisheries are going, extinction is on steroids.

Degrading the planet's operating systems to bolster the bottom line is foolish and reckless. It hurts us all. No less important, it's unfair. The 1 per cent profit, while the rest of us cough and cope.

After Occupy Wall Street, isn't it time for Occupy Earth?

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.*

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