Harmonizing Human Progress, Environmentalism, and Vulnerable Communities

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Politicians and policy-makers now recognize that society has reached an impasse where the negative impacts of human advancement must be controlled through action. Under the influences of industrialization, increased migration, and globalization, urban centers in developing countries are growing at exponentially larger rates (Montgomery, 2008). Smaller cities, as a consequence of their rapid expansion and lack of policy, face issues such as low-quality sanitation, high infant mortality, and insufficient quantities of drinkable water. According to Mark Montgomery (2008), a researcher who focuses on the dynamics of urban populations, these areas and their problems are products of unprecedented development which can only be helped through intervention. Alongside Montgomery, Margaret Thatcher, a former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, has discussed the harms of human development and activity. In her 1989 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Thatcher testified for the pressing matters of climate change and ecological destruction. The blame, according to her perspective, falls to deforestation, carbon emissions, and other undertakings of mankind. Similar to Montgomery, she advocated for immediate international action to address the growing environmental changes.

Heeding Thatcher’s warnings, it becomes important to fully acknowledge that mankind faces increasingly severe environmental degradation due to human action. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA, 2019) states that meteorological events, such as hurricanes, droughts, and heatwaves, will grow to be more extreme. The administration’s researchers claim that these changes are due to an increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, a phenomenon resultant of human activity. Further, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP), a collection of human waste in the Pacific Ocean with a mass of 320 million metric tons, is growing exponentially and causing significant ecological damage as it expands (Lebreton et al., 2018). Environmentalism has emerged in response to these byproducts of progress which threaten the stability of society. The movement aims both to repair the damage that has already been caused and to prevent future harm from occurring (Elliott, 2018).

Yet, despite possessing a humanitarian goal, environmentalism struggles to balance accessibility and its agenda. Prominent environmental strategies target items such as plastic straws, food packaging, and other single-use items that are pointed to as major pollutants (Perberdy, Jones, & Green, 2019; Staggenborg & Ogrodnik, 2015). These items behave as accessibility aids for many, however, and serve vital purposes for individuals existing within vulnerable communities. Patients suffering from conditions which limit mobility or dexterity often rely on products such as prepackaged foods and straws in order to safely consume nutrients (Sauder, 2017; Wong, 2018). Additionally, these products must be made from plastic, rather than materials such as pasta, paper, and silicone, to prevent allergy risks and disintegration during use (Sauder, 2017; Wong, 2018). Parallel to the disability community, individuals living in food deserts, areas of extreme food scarcity or inaccessibility, also face challenges when single-use plastics disappear. In the absence of fresh fruits and vegetables, these communities become dependent upon prepackaged goods and made shelf-stable using plastic (Mead, 2008; USDA 2009). The need for a response to damaging human development, as identified by Thatcher (1989) and Montgomery (2008) and coupled with the current limitations of environmentalism, raises the question: How can the environmentalist movement respond to the detrimental environmental effects of modern human behavior whilst ensuring the protection of vulnerable communities?

# Looking to the Oceans

In 2000, the United States founded the US Commission on Ocean Policy. The committee was tasked with advising both Congress and the President in the hopes of creating an effective and coordinated strategy for managing oceanic ecosystems (Ehrmann, n.d.). Its inception signaled to the international community that aquatic health had become a key environmental concern. This idea was further affirmed by a study published in 2017 through the Archives of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology which illustrated the current magnitude of oceanic pollution. It found that contaminants such as mercury and polychlorinated biphenyl, two chemicals which are known for their environmental toxicity, have become increasingly present in the marine food web and were predicted to double by 2050 from their levels in the 1990s. The study attributed the origins of the contaminants to both natural causes, such as run-off from land, and human activity, such as shipping and oil exploration (Brown & Takada, 2017).

## Post-Consumer Waste

Looking past natural causes, environmentalists concentrate only on mankind when attempting to combat aquatic pollution. More specifically, the movement calls attention to forms of post-consumer waste – end-user products that are discarded after they have performed their intended use (Taha, 2016). In an interview, Eric Goldstein (2018), an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, attributed the growing rates of water pollution to a newfound “throwaway culture.” He claimed that the best course of action for eradicating ocean contamination was first to target single-use items. Supporting Goldstein, Dune Ives (2017), a contemporary environmentalist and the Executive Director of the Lonely Whale Project, also advances the notion that eliminating disposable products with limited lifespans would serve best to promote the ocean health. Moreover, both Goldstein (2018) and Ives (2017) identify straws as a “gateway plastic” and claim that, by centering them as the focus of environmentalist action, dialogue is sparked and effective action is created.

## Turning to Pre-Consumer Waste

However, in contrast to the claims of Ives and Goldstein, the action of eliminating post-consumer single-use plastic waste falls far from being a good first step towards ending ocean pollution. Beyond the fact that removing them would hurt both the disability community and individuals living in food deserts (Sauder, 2017; Wong, 2018; Mead, 2008; USDA 2009), these products are not the primary perpetrators of aquatic contamination. Instead, as highlighted by Bloomberg columnist Adam Minter (2018), pre-consumer waste products, items that are disposed of long before they reach consumers (Taha, 2016), are creating a severe and largely unaddressed impact on Earth’s oceans. Returning to the GPGP, currently 52 percent of the patch’s mass is attributed to fishing nets, lines, and ropes, with an additional 47 percent consisting of hard plastics, sheeting, and films. While most of the present plastics were found to be eroded beyond the point of identification, accumulations of mega plastics could credit 86 percent of their masses to fishing nets (Lebreton et al., 2018). An additional study from 2016 discovered that approximately 145,000 neglected crab pots reside in the Chesapeake Bay on any given day. These pieces of fishing equipment create lasting damage to aquatic ecosystems long after they have been left behind by their owners (Bilkovic et al., 2016). Both the Chesapeake Bay and the GPGP represent an enormous and increasingly more damaging presence of pre-consumer industry waste in the oceans. In response to phenomena such as these, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) affirmed that abandoned fishing gear, which the body terms ‘ghost gear’, poses a significant threat to marine habitats and wildlife (FAO, 2018b). In its report titled Technical Consultation on the Marking of Fishing Gear, the organization states that ghost gear poses perhaps the most significant threat to the welfare of marine species (FAO, 2018b). The FAO proposes implementing international guidelines and standards which encourage the marking of fishing gear and facilitate the reacquisition of lost equipment. The goal of these standards is to reduce the presence of ghost gear in aquatic environments and, as a consequence, substantially reduce harmful ocean contamination (FAO, 2018a). Supporting the FOA’s claims, a study from 2018, which reviewed the current potential methods for tagging and identifying gear, stated that the future of the fishing industry may rest in the hands of marking technology (He & Suuronen, 2018).

The FAO’s plans for increasing regulation on the fishing industry do not come without limitations, however. As Margaret Thatcher stated in her 1989 speech, less economically advantaged countries require assistance in order to address environmental issues. Minter (2018) points to the fact that fishermen who operate in developing countries, where infrastructure surrounding waste management is frequently lacking, will have a harder time adapting to new environmental standards than their wealthier counterparts. In Indonesia, for example, fishermen must be incentivized with money in order to overcome the costs of labor and time required to retrieve lost equipment (Minter, 2018; FAO, 2018b). Alongside the need for incentives and a lack of developed waste management, equipment used to recover lost gear in developing countries also presents a potential limitation. Fishermen are forced to use inexpensive drags to recover their discarded materials. These large nets, while they can be effective at removing ghost gear, can damage sensitive marine habitats and often present a cost that outweighs any environmental benefit (FAO, 2018b).

Nonetheless, action has been taken to ensure that industry in developing countries can still participate in the FAO’s new standards without being significantly disadvantaged. The UK’s Aid Programme, which has since been rebranded as the Department for International Development, provides assistance to developing countries so that they may meet more rigorous environmental regulations (Thatcher, 1989; Department for International Development, 2019). Additionally, the FAO, having identified its issue, has committed itself to capacity building in these nations. Its capacity building strategies include adding value to end-of-life gear, education and incentivization in small fishing collectives, and structuring its guidelines so that the level of complexity of gear marking depends on local conditions (FAO, 2018a; FAO, 2018b).

# Revising Current Environmentalist Strategy

Considering the hazards that stem from banning single-use plastic forms of post-consumer waste, disability advocates have called for the reevaluation of environmentalist strategy (Wong, 2018). It is apparent that once accessibility is considered, policies such as those proposed by Ives and Goldstein can be adapted to suit vulnerable communities. Wong (2018), a disability activist and director of the Disability Visibility Project, suggests that establishments offer both plastic straws and renewable alternatives. She posits that this will allow individuals with disabilities to utilize necessary products, while also encouraging more able consumers to select the environmentally friendly choice. The City of Seattle currently implements such a policy. Food serving establishments within the city are required to use recyclable and compostable alternatives to disposable products such as utensils, food containers, and straws. However, Seattle makes exemptions for persons with physical or medical conditions that create a need for single-use straws (Seattle Public Utilities, n.d.). The policy prevents the creation of unnecessary harmful post-consumer waste, while also allowing vulnerable populations to gain access to necessary accessibility aids. Additionally, as only food service businesses, such as restaurants and food trucks, are limited by the policy, products necessary for individuals living in food deserts will not be affected.

Concerns have been raised with these adapted policies, however. The City of Seattle does not make it mandatory for establishments to provide straws as accessibility aids; it rather provides them the option to do so (Wong, 2018; Seattle Public Utilities, n.d.). Further, other entities elect to adopt an upon-request policy. In 2018, after receiving backlash directed towards its original plans to remove disposable straws from its stores entirely, Starbucks announced that it would continue to provide straws to individuals who “need or request them” (Starbucks Corporation, 2018, para. 1). Disability advocates were quick to argue that, while it may seem like an effective system, providing straws upon request still limits accessibility (Enking, 2018). Fear exists that, due to the invisible nature of some conditions such as multiple sclerosis and myasthenia gravis, accessibility aids may be denied to individuals who do not outwardly appear disabled (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, n.d.).

# In Conclusion

Human development poses a unique set of issues for society today. Processes such as industrialization, globalization, and poorly regulated expansion have created significant problems for urban centers (Montgomery, 2008). Turning to the environment, activities including deforestation and the emission of carbon threaten the wellbeing of Earth’s ecosystem (Thatcher, 1989). One prominent movement, environmentalism, has arisen in the name of addressing severe environmental degradation (Elliot, 2018). However, in spite of its humanitarian goal, the environmentalist movement utilizes strategies which harm vulnerable communities. By targeting post-consumer single-use plastic waste, environmentalists hurt both the disability community and individuals living in food deserts (Sauder, 2017; Wong, 2018; Mead, 2008; USDA 2009). Alternative strategies for addressing environmental degradation, that do not create hazards for vulnerable populations, include targeting pre-consumer industrial waste and revising environmentalist strategy. By creating policies that hold corporations accountable, environmentalists are able to eliminate severe sources of ecological damage. These sources include the unregulated actions of the fishing industry, which can be credited with the creation of more than half of the GPGP (Lebreton et al., 2018). However, considerations must be made for developing nations who may have difficulties keeping to environmental standards (Minter, 2018; Thatcher, 1989) Looking back to post-consumer waste, environmentalists can continue to target single-use plastics with the condition that they encourage inclusive policies that allow for exemptions to be created for the less able. Yet, these policies must acknowledge the invisible nature of certain illnesses in order to remain effective (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, n.d.). Utilizing these strategies will ensure significant positive environmental change while also protecting vulnerable communities.

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