

Southeastern World Affairs Institute Black Mountain, North Carolina July 31, 2011  
Conference Summary By David Boraks

Friday night I mentioned that I'm always amazed how all the presentations at this annual conference seem to weave together in the end. Our speakers and our questions and our discussions really feed off one another, which is exactly what a conference like this is supposed to do.

Let's take a look back at what we've heard this weekend. Our discussions at such a high-level were in the tradition of the Southeastern World Affairs Institute strives for, with some great speakers - and some great information you can take home and use.

Our theme this year, "Going Green Around the Globe," looked at issues both international and local - and how they're related. As Ernie McLaney told us Saturday morning, changing the picture globally "takes a massive change in behavior and thinking."

There are many "human influences and behaviors that affect the balance of nature," he said.

Some of us are ready for those changes - some of us are already trying to change. In off-hours conversations around the Blue Ridge Assembly this weekend, we've been comparing notes about our own communities, and about the places we've traveled - Asia, Africa Europe. [And what better way to see what's at stake than with Jay Williams' amazing photos of the Amazon and the Arctic.]

For me, it's about getting back to practices I remember from my childhood. At our house, we recycle - most weeks now it's more than we throw away. We dry our laundry outdoors - my wife Shelley Rigger has become a champion of backyard clotheslines. We have a vegetable garden. I bicycle around town and to the grocery when I can. We've stopped using paper towels and I'm working on getting plastic bags out of the house (still work to do on that one). I'm sure many of you have similar stories.

More and more people are getting it, at the household level and the community level.

LISA LEE MORGAN

On Friday night, Lisa Lee Morgan - managing partner and strategist at Calor Energy in Charlotte - began our conference with her talk "Solving for Zero Waste and Clean Energy."

She introduced a problem that underlies everything we're talking about - global warming - saying, "I believe, and science confirms, that the atmosphere is heating up from excessive emissions of carbon dioxide. Weather, geography, life as we know is changing, and deteriorating at an accelerating rate."

By 2015, just four years away, the atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> will reach 400 parts per million. "Peace, freedom and the rule of law are threatened," she said, so finding "a peaceful, sustainable way of living our lives" is critical. In particular, we need a worldwide push for lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

One solution is to use technology to build sustainable communities, like those she visited in Germany. "Germany has a robust national policy to promote renewable energy," Lisa said. (Why can't we?) She described places like Ivenack and Hagenow, where the "waste loop" and the "energy loop" are closed or nearly closed. That is to say - there is no waste - it's all recovered and reused, in energy and recycled materials. And all or most of the energy is generated from renewable sources, including burning refuse-generated fuels and solar power.

She also gave us a tantalizing preview of a "confidential project" Calor is working on in North Carolina that someday could create one of these fully sustainable communities. Its goals: Net zero energy needs, net zero waste, and low water use. It will have residential, commercial and industrial areas as well as an "energy park."

What will motivate property owners or developers to take on projects like this? Money, Lisa said. The trick to selling projects like this, she said, is to prove the financial models work.

ERNIE McLANEY

On Saturday morning, Ernie McLaney's fascinating painted captured the big picture - what's happening and what's at stake if we don't change our ways. Until this month, he was executive director of the Center for Sustainability at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte.

He warned that we have to change, and said it won't be easy: "It takes a massive change in behavior to make this change."

First, we have to remember that we're part of nature. He said "We forget we are nature, we are mammals, we came from the same stuff that wildlife came from. With each generation we continue to remove ourselves from our connection with nature ... (and) it's having a negative effect on ourselves and our environment."

He gave examples of civilizations that have failed because of their own disconnection with the world around them, from the Nazca in Peru to the Clovis and Anasazi in North America to the People of Easter Island in the Pacific - who helped their own demise by cutting down every last tree on the island.

Ernie said we need more long-term thinking on everything from how development impacts waterways to how we treat our lawns to how we manage land use.

Finally, we must make sure our children are exposed to nature - as many of us were as children. "Our children are losing exposure to the wonders

of nature, preferring instead to be plugged into the nearest outlet for entertainment," he said.

Remember that photo of the empty parking lot at a national park.

"We have to change behavior and think about consequences of our behavior," Ernie told us.

And throughout his talk Ernie reminded us: The Solution is EDUCATION.

GREG PILLAR

Food is another important piece of the puzzle here. And Greg Pillar talked to us about "Nature's Green Thumb: How Going Green Will Produce a Sustainable Global Food System."

Greg is a chemist and chair of the Department of Environmental Science at Queens University in Charlotte. He was back with us this year, after an eye-opening presentation two years ago about how food production and availability are threatening the third world. He reminded us Saturday morning how those problems are not just isolated ones, but affect us all.

Greg told us: "Our global food system is broken, and it needs some repair." He explained that by looking at agricultural production, which he said can be grouped into two broad categories.

Industrial agriculture - The dominant form of agriculture in the US and the West is "industrial agriculture." It's built around petroleum - both as a fuel for equipment and as a key ingredient in pesticides and herbicides. Even seeds, he said - "There's a lot of petroleum involved in getting seeds to farmers."

It's also monoculture - single crops being grown on massive industrial farms according to the principles of manufacturing efficiency.

It's not sustainable for a variety of reasons, he said. First, although we produce a lot of food through industrial farming, we're starting to see signs that food production is not going to keep up with consumption.

The problem is not just production - it's distribution.

Greg told us our global food system currently produces about 2,700 calories of food per day per person. That's comfortably above the basic need of 2000 to 2200 calories per day.

"The issue is not production, it's distribution and poverty," he said. If people don't have the resources to buy the food, it doesn't matter how much we produce."

He showed another chart that showed the number of undernourished people around the globe. The number was declining from 1970 into the 2000s. But in 2008, it exploded - from 800 million globally to more than 1 billion (with the global population now approaching 7 billion) - and that's a number Greg thinks will stay with us.

"We're producing a lot of food, but something is broken."

And the problem won't improve. By 2050, we'll need to increase our production 70 percent from now just to keep feeding the world. And to do that, we won't be able to rely on the petroleum based tactics of industrial agriculture.

Agroecology - So Greg also told us about an alternative - which he called "agro-ecology." It gets away from an industrial approach and is more ecologically friendly in many ways.

It's POLY CULTURE - many crops in one place. Farmers may have 40 to 60 different crops on their farms. This helps with pest control - one plant may repel a pest from another plant.

It integrates animals with plants in the same locale, so waste can be used as a fertilizer, reducing or eliminating the reliance on petroleum-based chemicals. In

To get from INDUSTRIAL to AGROECOLOGY - you take out fossil fuels, take out machines, take out heavily industrialized inputs.

I'm reminded of Lisa Lee Morgan's description of energy production on Friday. She thinks we need to make a shift from a small number of big generation plants to a distributed system of sustainable, small-scale plants everywhere.

Similarly, Greg is describing a shift from big, industrial farms to many more integrated, ecologically sensitive farms distributed everywhere.

JOSH CLARK

Saturday night brought our annual reminder that there's hope in the future - in our youth. Josh Clark is our annual Oscar Merritt Essay contest winner and he talked about what the United Nations is doing to encourage nations to "go green."

I don't know about you, but I learned a lot from his presentation. Among the topics he touched on was the Montreal Protocol, which is dedicated to reducing the use of ozone-depleting substances, by shifting away from use of chloro-fluoro carbons (CFCs).

We learned that by 2030, signatories of the protocol will have completely ended the uses of CFCs and other substances.

And Josh told us about the Maldives, which aren't waiting until 2030. They've become the first country to set its own earlier phaseout goal for CFCs. The problem there is an immediate one: if sea levels rise 3 to 5 feet, half the Maldives will be under water.

If the Maldives can do that, why can't we all? Clearly the Maldives' efforts are somewhat symbolic - shouldn't the rest of us - nations, states, cities and towns and households - do our part?

JUNE ATKINSON

We were honored Saturday night to hear from June St. Clair Atkinson, North Carolina's Superintendent of Public Instruction - overseeing 1.4 million students in 2300 public schools

June started with a primer on the Department of Public Instruction and talked about this year's North Carolina budget problems, which has stripped a billion dollars from our state education budget.

She painted a slightly more hopeful picture of where North Carolina ranks nationally in graduation rates - (I believe it was somewhere around 75%) - it's above the national average and grew at the second 2nd fastest rate (behind Tennessee) between 1998 and 2008. African American graduation rates are among the best in the nation. But she added, "We cannot really sleep until we have a graduation rate that exceeds 85 percent."

Ernie on Saturday talked about the importance of education. And in keeping with our conference theme, June talked about how the Department of Public Instruction has been working with the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources on a Pre-K to Grade 12 Environmental Literacy Plan. "We will prepare students to identify, analyze and address major environmental issues facing our state and the world," she said.

GRAHAM BULLOCK

We concluded this morning with a trip to China. Graham Bullock, who starts next week as an assistant professor of Environmental Studies and Political Science at Davidson College, shared his thoughts on "Greening the Dragon: Sustainable Development in China."

He started by reminding us of how the United Nations views sustainable development. The UN's World Committee and Environment and Development introduced the term in the 1980s and said:

Sustainable Development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

"Nowhere is this development dynamic more prevalent than China," Graham told us. It's home to 1/5 of the world's population, is one of the six most "mega-diverse" countries in the world (in terms of biodiversity) and had an average GDP growth of 9.7 percent annually from 1978 to 2009.

He outlined three schools of thought about the tension between GOING GREEN and developing. And this is an issue throughout the third world.

1) First, that we can grow the economy and protect the environment simultaneously

2) Second, the "polar opposite," what he called "Trade-offs and Tragedies" - that we'll always have to choose between helping the environment or developing.

3) Third, "Ecological costs now - benefits later" - The idea that maybe now while we're poorer, we may have more ecological costs, but once we're rich, we'll be able to afford to protect the environment. ... - Kuznet's curve - once rich enough, spend extra money on env protectiton

He gave a "macro" case study - China's air pollution. The country has 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities - and maybe 2/3rds of China's cities have air-quality issues. "The idea is that China is trying to grow, but that's hurting the environment."

Now remember, we've been talking all weekend about how sustainability is a global problem that requires LOCAL solutions. So Graham took us on a visual and video tour of a sustainable development project he worked on in China's Yunnan Province.

Graham in the early 2000s served as the Nature Conservancy's Ecotourism Coordinator in China. (Incidentally, his grandfather was a missionary to China 1910 to 1949.) In that role, he worked in Yunnan province. It's China's most biologically diverse province, near Burma and Vietnam, as well as one of its most culturally diverse - with 15 of China's 55 ethnic minorities represented there.

In Yunnan, he worked with local authorities to develop eco-tourism infrastructure, from training guides and eco-tourism entrepreneurs to seeding development of an eco-tourism lodge in the remote village of Wenhai. Return trips in recent years have revealed varying levels of success for those efforts. (stay tuned for an article from Graham about that followup)

He says China's challenges are overlapping management authorities, China's intense rural poverty, and limited funding for conservation matched against the rapid pace of development.

But we have learned that a little funding goes a long way, and having a long-term vision and plan are critical, he said.

How do we get change to happen? It's dependent on the people who are there - the people Graham introduced us to ...

WRAPUP

That brings us full circle to what I see as the key theme of this conference - that at least part of the solution - and perhaps the biggest part - falls to us as individuals.

And I agree with Angel - one of the most indelible statements we heard this weekend came from Lisa Lee Morgan.

She had an important lesson for us: She's not out there attacking what's wrong, but rather working positively to bring about solutions. "I am boots on the ground, building these little pieces one project at a time," she said.

I have a similar view of the world. Individual efforts that become part of a collective effort are always more powerful. Think of this as a building wave - A wave has more energy than a raindrop. Like Ernie, I am optimistic. Our wave - if we build it - can bring the change our planet needs.

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And let's end with that quotation from Lisa Lee Morgan that several of us have been talking about. It's a lesson for bringing change:

"I have chosen to focus all of my energy on what I want to create rather than any energy on what I don't want to create. ... So rather than spending my time fighting against something I don't want, I've chosen to spend my time creating what I do want."