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Dawn of an Eco-Friendly World: User-Pays Earth Care to Lower Prices and Taxes

Australia

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How can we guide both our own future and society's towards comfort and sustainability? A new global social contract is urgently needed to re-interpret net zero conditions. At present, countries try to regulate local production while largely ignoring consumer accountability. This allows unregulated goods to compete with regulated ones in global markets. As a result, people living in nations working towards 2050 climate targets could choke, flood, burn or starve due to pollution and environmental harms generated far away.

Eco-friendly lifestyles are better for the planet, the future, animals, plants, and health. Human mistreatment of animals should be illegal at all times, but factory farming routinely employs insanely cruel practices that harm animals beyond what even most animal-eaters consider okay, solely to reduce prices.¹ These systems not only cause extreme suffering, but also degrade ecosystems, intensify climate change, and undermine public health. The disregard for other beings is revolting, counterproductive and hidden in secrecy. Guiding consumer behaviour better therefore has the potential to save lives and the environment.

New global rules are required to realise an eco-friendly world. At present, corrupt behaviour and political lobbying prop up polluting and harmful industries which engage in ethically and environmentally damaging activities; the most vulnerable communities disproportionately bear the costs. These costs manifest as higher healthcare spending, more frequent disasters, environmental degradation, and lost biodiversity. Even for the rest of us, national budgets are negatively inflated, as are product prices and taxation across agriculture, the environment, health, security, and manufacturing, to name but a few areas.

One feasible solution comes through the application of the 'user-pays' principle, an economic approach to costing products whereby prices are reflective of the product's full environmental footprint. Crucially, this would not make sustainable groceries and goods more expensive. Instead, it would reallocate costs by adding proportionate environmental charges to the most damaging products and processes, while leaving eco-friendly goods affordable.

Until laws determine otherwise, people are free to choose whatever they wish, but freedom of choice does not imply freedom from responsibility. Prices should be inclusive of environmental repair: a proven incentive to override habits. Circular economy models

demonstrate that degraded environments can be restored² and this can be achieved through re-investment. In practice, this could resemble familiar systems such as star ratings or fire warning systems, ranging from zero additional cost for eco-friendly products to higher charges for more damaging ones; the exact amounts would be calculated by experts in the relevant jurisdictions.

A New Social Contract: Managing Earth Sustainably in the Anthropogenic Era

The term ‘Anthropocene’ refers to our current human era, one characterised by human domination and escalating environmental disruption; our combined impact on the biosphere is huge, dangerous and growing.³ New ways of relating to nature are needed, that recognise we are mutually dependent. This entails a new social contract for the entire world: people have to face issues together as an interdependent planet.

While debates have long focused on state responsibilities, a new challenge has arisen: planetary interdependence and how explosions in population and consumption now use resources in excess of planetary boundaries. Previously, no scientific awareness of Earth’s finite nature existed. Thus, the current social contract isn’t aware of bio-capacity: dependence on flora, fauna, air and water is not adequately recognised and planned for. Better regulation is needed. A new social contract should manage interdependency on nature.

For example, there are over 570 million animal farms worldwide at present, more than Earth can handle, especially considering that they create pollution, destroy natural habitats, and engage in other forms of environmental exploitation including animal abuse. While these businesses provide incomes, they devastate the land and biosphere, harming personal and public health. Medical and planetary management bodies, meanwhile, such as the Lancet Commission, recommend plant-forward diets as a solution to increasing environmental and climatic concerns.⁴

Realising our global interdependence, a new social contract to address planetary challenges has been advocated by the United Nations.⁵ Embedding environmental responsibility into pricing—like the ‘user-pays’ approach—offers a practical, non-coercive pathway to operationalising this vision.

A Clear Consumer Language to Foster Environment Restoration

Many governments and enterprises worldwide downplay the effects of natural and human accelerated climate change; all the while habitats keep on being threatened⁶—critical planetary boundaries have been exceeded and have resulted in overshoot.⁷ Nevertheless,

opponents either dismiss calls for change as climate alarmism or fail to see climate change as a symptom of overshoot. Information on disasters is vital, but limited. Fewer than half of ‘developed markets’ take action.⁸ Too many people neither believe nor yet care.

Humanity is running out of time; 2050 nears. How can we communicate the impact of population and consumption growth exceeding planetary boundaries? To achieve net zero aims, consumer behaviour needs more effective guidance. The ‘how’ has been well established: buyers behave in a price-conscious manner.⁹

While data and accuracy are important, many consumers require more. In addition to regulating production, economies have to provide incentives to improve consumer behaviour, as well as add restorative environmental work into the prices of goods and services. Societies have to invest more in ecology. This is different from the old model; exploiting environmental gifts and moving on to the next patch. The new system requires environments to be renewed again to viable standards. But it costs money. The ‘user-pays’ principle for the environmental impact of products and services can encourage eco-friendly purchases.¹⁰

Consumer Responsibility and Living within Budget for Net Zero Goals

Over the past two millennia, the Earth’s population has grown from mere millions to over eight billion. Around one thousand times. Yet the Earth’s surface is still the same. In the past century alone, an extra six billion people (and the associated housing and industry) have been added, with many of those keeping pets—it is thought there could be over a billion pets worldwide.¹¹ Meanwhile, almost one hundred billion cows, pigs, chickens, and other farmed animals are bred, kept, and slaughtered for consumption each year.¹² This overload sucks the life out of the Earth. People do have rights and desires, but as a whole species we take way too much and are horribly inefficient and harsh.

When population and consumption were much smaller, regeneration sustained civilisations, provided livelihoods, and enabled societies to overcome complex environments. However, a threshold has now been reached: the limits of bio-capacity are real and urgent.¹³ Core problems are intensified by population growth, but in essence much of the pressure lies in patterns of consumer choice.

Our modern standard of living owes much to the free gifts of nature, but humanity has reached a ceiling, and current levels of demand can no longer be satisfied through living off natural regeneration and laissez-faire agriculture. Adaptation is needed. Simply put, we must ‘live within budget.’ While new resources and efficiencies have been identified, a projected

ten billion people will soon be on Earth; essential assets like soil, water, flora and fauna will become ever more precious. We must economize and broaden horizons.

A proper calculation of product costs would enable the collection of funds to protect ecosystems, support rewilding, improve soil health, and invest in new industries. This would create many new jobs and promote greater justice. At present, oils grown on regulated agricultural land compete with oils grown on less regulated land, such as former Amazon rainforest. Failing to disclose or account for the cost of diminishing wilderness creates unfair advantages, and, in turn, endangers the liveability of both animals and the planet. Each product and production process should therefore be measured for its environmental impact.

Ecological Footprints of Products and Services

Ecological footprints can be determined and costed. Indeed, there are various tools measuring Product Environmental Footprints (PEF), such as those developed by the European Commission.¹⁴ The emphasis is on helping consumers make informed decisions. While this is a democratic and benign view, it isn't well-versed and assumes consumers are receptive and action-oriented, have sufficient resources, and dismiss hype.

Yet not all are. As a result, society is split into environmentally-aware and environmentally-unaware or unwilling persons—the latter may feel information is incompatible with their beliefs, or that it comprises deliberate untruths or fake news. It may also include those with insufficient funds to choose eco-friendly products.

To overcome this artificial division of ecological awareness, consumers must have a stake. Including environmental repair costs directly in product prices, as pioneered by organisations such as True Price,¹⁵ ensures that responsibility is shared equitably and that sustainable choices become the default rather than a luxury.

'User-Pays' Principle as More Effective for Environmental Repair

We are part of the evolving 'tree of life' and need feasible environments to survive. Seeing humans as a 'separate species' overlooks our dependence on the biosphere.¹⁶ It is also in public health and human survival interests to care for the environment.¹⁷ Although we have a private right to claim that divine revelation provides nature for the benefit of people, social rules still apply.

Solutions nevertheless exist. Adequate investments in new technologies help. There are also great projects restoring environments, but not enough by far. At times these are paid

for by donors, but a significant proportion is funded by governments. Much more needs to be done.

Presently, citizens such as eco-friendly product buyers, vegans, flexitarians and users of cultivated protein¹⁸ are asked by authorities to contribute to environmental restoration and sustainability through general taxation. Why general taxation? Why not solely charge those people who add to these problems? Why should eco-friendly product buyers and vegans pay for the consequences of animal farming? Environmental renewal is a public good, and including environmental repair in product prices would solve huge shortcomings in past finance systems, target those persons responsible, and provide incentives to reduce shared burdens.

Using the ‘user-pays’ principle to guide consumers towards eco-friendly choices is analogous to approaches that regulate smoking without prohibiting free choice—by warning about harms and incorporating the long-term healthcare and productivity costs of tobacco use into its price. Why should non-smokers pay? As such, the ‘user-pays’ principle provides tangible incentives and helps fund environmental repair; however, improving societies is also likely to require legal protections, or so-called ‘ring-fencing’, for example in cases of poverty or medical need.

Socio-Political Advantages of Ecological Charges

There are no valid reasons to abuse animals. Contrary to conventional thought, humans are not apex predators; thriving human herbivore cultures have existed for millennia. Animal farming and consumption can be falsely promoted by animal farming industries, including in education. This misinforms people on the role of animal farming in climate change and environmental destruction, needless suffering, and the impacts on culture, diets, goods and ethics. An example of dubious pseudo-scientific ethics is in the ‘Dublin Declaration,’ a statement on animal farming, which has been criticised as scientifically problematic due to its focus on select benefits and downplaying of major risks and harms.¹⁹

The number of farmed animals and the consumption of animals have exploded in recent decades. Stimulating buyers improves sales and short-term income, but it is bad long-term planning and costly to let animal-eaters lead humanity to biosphere doom.

Meanwhile, the UK Climate Change Committee has recommended a minimum 35% reduction in animal consumption to meet net zero goals by 2050.²⁰ Vegan lifestyles help greatly. Non-vegan dispositions can help reach net zero; ‘artificial proteins’ are grown with up to 99% less land and water than animal agriculture yet are similar in taste, texture and

nutrition.²¹ Though these remain marginalised lifestyles. Nevertheless, they are lifestyles that offer countless advantages for the environment, animals, and broader society.

There are even financial and electoral advantages in listening to environmentally conscious voters by prioritising Earth care policies and actions, including advocating lower prices and taxes. In addition to budget savings, another key argument for political leaders is approval. People's intentions and actual behaviours may differ, and research often reflects the values of particular group segments; nevertheless, expectations of change do exist. Ecological charges are popular and they are expected.²² In the future, people may understandably abandon political parties that fail to hold buyers accountable.

Decompartmentalising Compassion

Aside from arguments about the sanctity of animal life, looking after farmed animals and pets is done in such numbers and ways that it exceeds environmental holding capacity. A recent judgement by the International Court of Justice, describes a viable environment as an essential human right, thereby making states responsible for infringements.²³ This should, in theory, be easy to uphold considering more efficient and eco-friendly alternatives exist.

Our relationship with flora, fauna and human groups needs review: what used to be adversaries are now interdependent life-forms. The regard for nature and animals is often based on assumptions, feelings, deep-seated attitudes, early childhood education, and parental care. Many people still embrace Darwin's findings: in evolution the fittest survive. Subconsciously they may apply this attitude not only to external worlds, but also to human community regulations. Compassion can become compartmentalised according to kin, group members, nations, forms, colours, and cultures. Some outcomes include eugenics, abattoirs, feedlots, torture, racism, bigotry, viciousness and war. Brute force and survival of the fittest is cruel and deceptive. Natural law rules *outside* society, not *within* the community.

Subconscious biases are exposed by population and consumption explosions exceeding bio-capacity. Irresponsibly using nature is a form of compartmentalisation—not seeing the link between human well-being and the natural world. Earth care today is largely cost-shifted to other generations. But the negative effects can still be undone. Restoring and rewilding nature re-enables environmental productivity.²⁴

The need to review pricing on products and services is not based on speculation. For example, a recent article in the New York Times calculates the true price of a steak to be over four times higher than current prices, when hidden environmental costs are counted.²⁵ But what public leader wants to champion a platform that increases the cost of living? While

valid at first glance, it is a one-sided question. It overlooks the reality that public and private expenses would be much lower if eco-friendly purchases were rewarded.

This is useful for established environmental and ecological networks to discuss. Equipped with such knowledge, they could confront local representatives, lobby parties to effect change, and publicise the costs of subsidising non-eco-friendly goods and services.

The issue many political parties ignore at peril is overlooking the huge savings to be made in public administration. Systems initially resist change, people survive in established ways, and change is often seen as idealist, meddling with income security. But eco-friendly incentives can deliver better economic results, facilitate cheaper lifestyles, are healthier, and solve environmental stress. They deserve to be advocated as default worldwide.

Conclusion: Guiding Smaller PEFs, Circular Economy, Restoring Environments

It is argued that sustainable economies need laws to ensure nature is used responsibly and restored where damaged. Vested interests may challenge, but nature is no longer an inexhaustible free gift, rather it is a cradle to be cared for. Ecologies can only be regenerated with time, cost and effort.

Nutrition, animal cruelty and environmental activism play a vital role in achieving this. Price is a universal language that consumers, enterprises and governments respond to, while ‘user-pays’ is a fair economic principle for non-eco-friendly products to contribute to the restoration of a viable biosphere. It respects free will, creates essential jobs, and addresses seemingly intractable problems—including conflicts between civic society’s short-term material demands and scientific assessments of long-term risk. It also enables global initiatives that build multilateral cooperation, such as the European Union or United Nations setting PEF conditions for global transport and trade, advancing shared objectives through COP negotiations, supporting multilateral agreements via the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and fostering the creation of global frameworks or unions that establish common rules.

‘User-pays’ pricing is an excellent tactic activist groups can take advantage of to help shape a better future. While views vary by identity and country, a strong majority of Earth’s citizens support international cooperation to address global challenges, even if it means compromising.²⁶ This support is not for a self-serving, top-down world government, but for bottom-up personal activism combined with cooperative, parliamentary, multilateral steps that benefit society and help resolve global issues.

Humanity is teetering on the edge. To effect positive change, we have to think as one mutually dependent world, even as diverse languages and cultures remain part of the regional fabric. Everyone can help minimise their ecological footprint, recognising that national and global footprints depend on both personal behaviour and societal policies.²⁷

For those less inclined towards activism, beyond changing voting behaviour to prioritize equity in taxation and environmental sustainability, one could adopt an eco-social contract, that goes beyond democratic convictions to embrace natural justice. It enables participation in practical everyday reforms and shifts in perspective that integrate ecological limits into economic and social life.²⁸

Just as the French Revolution promoted the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, we now need to expand this vision to include nature as an interdependent partner, adopting a global slogan like “Care, Equity and the Restoration of All Life.”

We sink or swim together. Action is overdue.

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