

UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC THESIS

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY

ASSIGNMENT TYPE: ESSAY

TOPIC 1: "Greedies" versus "Greenies"

Conventional wisdom suggests that capitalism and environmentalism are incompatible. Can the interests of developers and conservationists be reconciled?

Name: Edmond Ng

Date: 20 August 2002

The conventional studies of capitalism and environmentalism suggest that the conflict between the greedies and the greenies will never be resolvable because of the inherent differences in objectives between the developers and the conservationists (Martell 1994, pp.67-75).

In this paper, I will first explain the perspectives and objectives of the developers and the conservationists in association with sustainability and the reconciliation between the greedies and greenies. Global and local examples will be cited to illustrate how capitalism and environmentalism can coexist between conservation and development. Examples of green efforts in Singapore will be used to illustrate how a small city-state island with little or no natural resources maintain a sustainable society.

In a sustainable society, it “is said by greens to require reduced levels of consumption and changes in associated values to do with material fulfilment and acquisition” (Martell 1994, p.48). This statement suggests the need for restriction in consumption, resource extraction, pollution, and the need for change in social lifestyles and values (Martell 1994, p.47). To understand the implications of this statement, we must first understand the perspectives and objectives of the *developers* and the *conservationists* in order to know whether a reconciliation of the two may be possible.

According to Don Libby (1993), the *developers* are those who believe the "environment" is provided as a bounty for human benefit that may be exploited without end while the *conservationists* believe that wildlife,

environment and some limited economic activity can coexist in harmony. This means that the conservationists believe in working within the constraint of sustainability through decisions about choice of technology, energy use, forms of production, and the radical change in social lifestyles and values (Martell 1994, p.47; Giddens 1997, p.533) to restrict pollution and resource depletion, while preserving wildlife and the natural environment.

The capitalists, on the other hand, are primarily concern with material gains and the maximising of profits. Based on this assumption, conservationists believe that with the recent increase of awareness on environmentalism and the sustainability of earth's resources, efforts, in the form of legislations and consumers' demands, will help capitalists to produce products that are environmental-friendly, while maintaining profitability through green capitalism. An example of pro-capitalist greens is the British Body Shop Company, which has been successful in making profits and expanding globally through the selling of less depleting and polluting products (Martell 1994, pp.64-65). The view of green capitalism, however, may not be realistic, since, the production of recycled materials or environmental-friendly products can be more expensive than regular purchaseable items of similar products (Martell 1994, p.69). Other arguments such as cut-backs in economy growth to sustain resource depletion, or tagging a market value for natural resources are also not viable, as the former approach may spell the death of the third-world who are dependent on first world consumers to provide markets for their goods (Martell 1994, pp.68-69; Giddens 1997,

p.533), while the latter may result in developers building additional cost to consumers (Martell 1994, p.70). Even when scientists and economists recognised that leaving nature alone by retaining the forests, wetlands and other natural ecosystems are worth far more to human economies (Straits Times 2002) than using it for goods and services, the reality of a tagged value is subjective in its perceivable worth. It is therefore imperative that in order for green movements to succeed, actions to work with governments and producers may be necessary in order to enforce green consumerism (Martell 1994, p.69) through legislation or enforcing of international practices.

Environmental legislation, such as pollution emission controls by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the air quality controls by the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) are examples of some practices that are seen implemented by governments internationally. Legal cases such as Greenpeace versus BHP and Western Geophysical of March 1991 (Bonyhady 1993, pp.60-61) and the High Court of Australia's ruling for the preservation of the wilderness in SouthWest Tasmania in the case of July 1983 (Doyle and Kellow 1995, pp.202-219) may also serve to provide examples to 'encourage' capitalists toward pursuing environmentally sustainable courses of action.

In Singapore, similar cases of green consumerism may be seen in the light of public forums and opinions feedback. Two such cases include a plan by the government to acquire a piece of land for national defence, which

contain the last hot spring in Singapore (Han 2002), and a proposal by a developer for a golf course in place of one of the two remaining natural parks for mangroves and wetland wildlife (Ng and Sivasothi 2002). In the case of the preservation of the last hot spring in Singapore, its existence was brought to the attention of the public through a news coverage on the closing of this nature offering (Hannigan 1995, pp.64-67). Over the many weeks following the media broadcast, numerous written petitions were made through the national newspapers for the conservation of the hot spring and after a lengthy process of discussions and decision-making, the government and its environmental ministry consented to the apportioning of a space from the national defence area to give way to the place where the hot spring resides.

In the case of the proposed development of the mangrove forest for a golf course, the appeal from greenies had successfully seen the preservation of the few remaining natural reserves in Singapore (Ng and Sivasothi 2002). Although this may be seen as a prevailing success by the greenies, a look at the history of Singapore shows that much of our environment has been developed to accommodate for urbanisation and for the creation of workforce employment (Hamilton 1995, pp.7-11). For an island that is with little or no natural resources, there is always a need to balance between conservation and economy growth. "At the time of the founding of modern Singapore in 1819, forest covered practically the whole of the main island. Of the original forest area, evergreen rain forest made up 82%, mangrove 13% and freshwater swamp forest, 5%. Today, only about 28.6 sq km of

land area is still covered by primary and secondary forest, and this habitat loss in Singapore has reduced her primary forest cover to an estimated 0.2% of the land”(Ng and Sivasothi 2002).

Wildlife conservation in Singapore is seeing the demise of the only native unique wild animals, the cream-coloured giant squirrel and the banded leaf monkey, perilously close to extinction as a result of urbanisation and shrinking forests (Morris 2002). Less than twenty banded leaf monkeys and no more than four cream-coloured squirrel still live in what is left of the tiny island nation’s forests today, spelling the end of the last animal sub-species found only in Singapore (Reuters 2002).

In handling the environmental issues in the founding days of Singapore, the nation was faced with many problems in the areas of air and water pollution, waste disposal and public health. Today, Singapore has turned approximately forty percent of the country’s paper and cardboard waste flow for recycling, adopted a pollution control policy based on OECD standards, built an infrastructure based on clean technology through the accumulation and management of information for a Green Plan, and worked closely with businesses to encourage corporate responsibility for environmental quality (Resource Renewal Institute 2002).

In a city-state nation that is without its own natural resources, Singapore’s environmental conservation is focused on anti-pollution, recycling of waste and the preservation of what is left of the nature reserve. In a situation

where survival and livelihood demands economic growth through urbanisation and creation of jobs, environmental conservation will be balanced with development. In such cases, development usually prevails over conservation.

While developers and conservationists can successfully coexist within a social culture, green movements are usually more progressive only when encouraged by environmental supportive governments, where, beyond legislation for green practices, conservation is also strongly encouraged. In the global context, while it is true that green movements have been successful in slowing down resource depletion and bringing awareness to the people at large, the earth is still faced with resource constraints, if not at the present, will be in the future.

References

Bonyhady, T. (1993) "Bombs, Blockades and Barricades" in *Places worth keeping: Conservationists, Politics and Law*. Allen & Unwin, NSW, pp.40-61, 156-160.

Doyle, T. and Kellow, A. (1995) "South-West Tasmania", *Environmental Politics and Policy Making in Australia*. Macmillan, Melbourne, pp.202-219.

Giddens, A. (1997) *Sociology*, (3rd edn). Polity Press, Cambridge, pp.529-535.

Hamilton, C. (1995) "Ethics, jobs and woodchips" in *ANU Reporter*, 15 March, pp.7-11.

Han, Raymond (2002) "Monday with the Editor: Give what's left of our nature spots a break" in *Get For Me*
<http://www.getforme.com/previous2002/previous210102_Monday_GiveOurNatureSpotsABreak.htm>, 21 January 2002 (Accessed 20 August 2002).

Hannigan, J. (1995) *Environmental Sociology: A social constructionist approach*. Routledge, London, pp.58-75.

Libby, Don (1993) "Environmentalism" in *Newton BBS: Ask A Scientist – Environmental Science Archive - Dept of Energy, University of Chicago*
<<http://www.newton.dep.anl.gov/newton/askasci/1993/environ/ENV059.HTM>>, (Accessed 20 August 2002).

Martell, L. (1994) *Ecology and Society: An introduction*. Polity Press, Cambridge, pp.47-76.

Morris, R. (2002) "Rare Singapore monkeys and squirrels on verge of extinction, scientist says" in *Forest Conservation Portal*
<<http://forests.org/articles/reader.asp?linkid=9706>>, 8th April 2002 (Accessed 20 August 2002).

Ng, P. and Sivasothi, N. (2002) "History: About Mangroves in Singapore" in *A Guide to Mangroves of Singapore*
<<http://mangrove.nus.edu.sg/guidebooks/text/1003.htm>> (Accessed 21 August 2002). National University of Singapore, Singapore.

Papadakis, E. (1993) "Competing Ideas, Practical Politics and Public Relations Strategies" in *Politics and the Environment*. Allen and Unwin, NSW, pp.70-102.

Resource Renewal Institute (2002) "Singapore's Green Plan: A World Leader in Managing Environmental Recovery",
<<http://www.rri.org/envatlas/asia/singapore/sg-index.html>> (Accessed 20 August 2002).

Reuters (2002) "Singapore's Last Unique Animals Face Extinction" in *Forest Conservation Portal* <<http://forests.org/articles/reader.asp?linkid=9909>>, 18th August 2002 (Accessed 20 August 2002).

The Straits Times (2002) "Leave nature alone, it's a lot cheaper", 10th August, Singapore, p.23.