Conserving the Environment
Guideline #10 for Government and Citizenship

by
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One of the most urgent issues of our day, both in the United States and around the world, is climate change and its connection with the burning of fossil fuels on which most of the world’s economies are dependent. Taking into account that China is likely to surpass the United States in about two years as the world’s number one polluter, and in the light of estimates provided by the troubling report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) in February, more and more governments and businesses are promising to take action.

But what action should be taken, on what basis, to try to achieve which ends? With a sense of urgency about these questions, we are using this issue of the Public Justice Report to introduce our newest Guideline on Government and Citizenship (see http://www.cpjustice.org/guidelines/index.html). Climate change is, of course, not the only concern we should have about human responsibility for the environment. Even if the dangers of global warming prove not to be as threatening as currently anticipated, our responsibility for the environment—for the air, water, soil, vegetation, and animal life—is highly important.

As with our other guidelines, this one aims to outline the framework or principles the Center takes as foundational for its engagement in policy research and advocacy. The framework is itself open to criticism and revision, but its purpose is to provide the point of departure, a guide to the policy work in which we are engaged.

This is God’s World

The first paragraph of this guideline (1) states, “This world is God’s creation. Human creatures—made in God’s image—bear a unique responsibility to develop and care
for it. Human stewardship should reflect God’s ongoing care for creation.” We begin with
the recognition that God has called humans to develop or “have dominion” over the earth
and to procreate future generations to continue that development. But we also recognize
that the biblical picture of human “dominion” is one of careful stewardship of God’s
creation on God’s terms. This world is not ours to dispose of in any way we choose. We are
not God. Human dominion in God’s world, therefore, must have the quality of caretaking,
of a listening-to-God kind of development.

The second paragraph (2) takes this theme a step further. “The creation’s vast
diversity holds together as interdependent unity. That which is not human has its own
identity and purpose by God’s design and does not exist merely as a means for human-
chosen ends. Consequently, ecological carefulness should be a condition of all
development.” All creatures come from God’s hands for God’s purposes; nonhuman
creatures have their own dignity and honor. Dominion does not mean freedom to ruin the
creatures God loves. Human stewardship is a priestly calling to lift up the creation in praise
to God. Therefore, stewardly development has to meet the criterion of love for God, for all
our neighbors, and for future generations, as well as the criterion of respect for the needs of
other creatures. God’s commandment to Israel to keep the Sabbath day holy includes
giving the animals a day off. The Sabbath-year obligation includes giving the fields a year
of rest.

Even for our own well-being, actions that poison the soil, or that pollute the waters
in which fish swim, or that lead to ever greater degradation of the atmosphere are suicidal
rather than expressions of potent dominion. This leads to the third statement: (3) “Human
well-being itself depends on a clean environment. Accordingly, love of our neighbors,
including future generations, forbids pollution and other degradations that may do real
human harm.” One of the reasons why the U.S. has as many environmental incentives and
regulations as it does today is because of the immediate dangers of toxic wastes, lead paint,
sewage and fertilizer run-off into ground water, the pollution of bodies of water like the
Chesapeake Bay, and much, much more.

Now think of the implications for future generations of the accumulating
greenhouse gases, primarily carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere. Even if all nations lowered
their carbon emissions significantly in the next few decades, the estimates are that by 2030
those emissions are likely to grow to 40 billion metric tons a year from the 2004 level of 26
billion tons. That increase will contribute to further global warming, the melting of ice, the
rise in ocean levels, the aggravation of severe weather patterns, and the flooding of coastal
areas where many of the world’s poor now live. Over the long term, the patterns of
production and consumption that lead to these consequences do not express love for
ourselves or for our neighbors.

Many Kinds of Stewardship

What shall we do about all of this? Who is responsible to make changes? The fourth
statement (4) of the guideline states, “God has entrusted humans with many kinds of
responsibility that are exercised in different types of relationships and institutions. Each family, school, church, business enterprise, and nonprofit organization must exercise its own responsibility to be careful in its use of resources and in the way it goes about forming the habits, habitats, and practices of those who are part of it.” For all kinds of reasons, parents will (or should) teach their children not to waste food, not to throw trash out the car window, to recycle plastics, paper, metal, and glass, and dozens of other habits. Yet those same families, for reasons related to lifestyles, advertising, the production systems of the economy, and prices may think nothing of driving the car when they could walk, or putting more fertilizer on their lawns than is necessary, or any number of other things that train their children in patterns of behavior that will in the long run contribute to the degradation of the environment.

However, the environmental stewardship burden cannot be laid on individual and family behavior alone. Town councils and businesses bear their own kinds of responsibility for care. Schools, churches and other religious bodies bear important teaching responsibilities. “Yet all of this is not enough,” the fourth statement concludes, leading to statement number five.

Government’s Responsibility

(5) “Much of what constitutes the natural environment has the character of a commons—that which is shared by all. Responsibility for the commons rests primarily with political communities of citizens through their governments, and the vocation of governments is to do justice. Not only should governments be environmentally responsible in their own actions; they should establish and uphold laws binding on everyone to ensure ecologically sound development for generations to come.”

The point here is that no single private party is responsible for the commons. One industrial enterprise may want to restrain its carbon emissions or do a better job cleaning the water it discharges, but if the law does not require it, and other industries do not invest in pollution control, the enterprise that makes the investment may lose market share to its competitors and go out of business. The commons in which every person, institution, and organization operates is one that requires public-legal governance and protection. Legitimate acts of government may be enticements such as tax benefits for certain actions or discouragements such as increased taxes on gasoline and other carbon-dioxide pollutants. Other acts of government may need to be mandatory regulations, such as no lead in gasoline, or a penalty for driving a car that does not have emission controls. But whatever it is, government bears the broadest and most important responsibility to entice or compel behavior that will contribute to ecological soundness rather than ecological degradation.

How should government act? That is a question that cannot be answered simply for there are many ways in which government can act and many different kinds of enticements and regulations it can use to encourage good stewardship. Nevertheless, government’s actions must be those that encourage other institutions and organizations to fulfill their
own responsibilities and not simply pass them on to government. Or to put it another way, government should not simply let businesses and other organizations do what they want and then try to overcome the negative consequences through public clean-up and other reactions. The Center’s guideline then continues as follows:

“Government’s responsibility is to assure that justice is done to the environment as a condition of all types of economic, technological, and scientific development. Governments must not wait until negative consequences of environmental degradation begin to create severe problems before responding to try to restrain the degradation. Local, state, and national governments all bear responsibility to uphold just laws to protect the environment.”

That may sound well and good, you say, but what if we are too late to stop the eventual catastrophic consequences of climate change? Or what if the only way to slow or halt the damage would cause so much economic disruption in the short term that the consequences would be worse? These are, in fact, dangers that economists and environmental scientists are now assessing. Most economists say that drastic action by governments to try to slow or stop carbon emissions is not worth trying because the economic consequences would be too terrible (see Robert J. Samuelson, “Global Warming and Hot Air,” Washington Post, 2/7/07; Martin Wolf, “In Spite of Economic Sceptics, It is Worth Reducing Climate Risk,” Financial Times, 2/7/07). Some who agree that governments must act believe, however, that those actions should aim to help people cope with the coming changes rather than aim only to restrain carbon emissions (Fareed Zakaria, “Changing With the Climate,” Washington Post, 2/12/07).

The problem with most of these arguments, in my estimation, is that they simply take for granted current patterns of social and economic behavior. They ask only pragmatic questions. That may be o.k. if one is merely trying to show on a future-projection basis what is likely to happen if people continue to operate as they do now. But it is entirely inadequate if one is trying to do what the Center is doing, namely, to ask how humans ought to be living responsibly as stewards in God’s creation. Asking that question should lead us to radically reevaluate our lifestyles, our expectations about energy use and the marketplace, and our assumptions about what government’s responsibility is. Asking these more normative questions will open our eyes to other possible avenues of development and not leave us locked into the very patterns of life and thought that have led to the predicament in which we find ourselves today.

The Global Commons

The sixth statement of the Center’s Guideline on the environment concludes with the following sentence. “Yet more must also be done.” More, in other words, needs to be done than can be done by governments acting alone within the borders of their own states. That leads to statement number seven.
(7) “Many growing threats to environmental sustainability are transnational in scope, ranging, for example, from climate change to overfishing of the oceans. Therefore, governments throughout the world, starting with those that are placing the greatest demands on the environment, bear responsibility, cooperatively, to establish and enforce rules to protect the commons so that just and ecologically sound development will be possible throughout the world.”

There have been and continue to be many different kinds of international efforts to address dangers to the global environment, some sponsored by the United Nations, others organized by scientists, environmental groups, and several countries in a given region. Some agreements in treaty form, such as the Kyoto accords, have not met with adequate support by leading states. Negotiations leading to draft agreements such as Kyoto do not necessarily produce sound and achievable outcomes. Simply trying to make an international agreement does not mean that something good will come from the trying. But whatever the past successes and failures, the intensifying pollution of the earth and the rate of our use of its resources demand ever more intense and sound efforts by governments worldwide.

Finally, (8) “To the degree that certain kinds of environmental degradation are reaching, or have already reached, critical levels, the responsibilities articulated above become all the more urgent and should receive the highest level of attention by governments and international organizations.”

It seems hard to argue with those who say that the immediate needs of people for jobs, food, clothing and housing must be a higher priority than trying to stave off environmental dangers that lie decades ahead of us. Yet this is a false contrast. Are not oil companies both providing gasoline now and planning decades ahead for future exploitation of oil fields? Are not businesses both producing goods today and planning for the endurance of their companies (sometimes by cutting jobs) so they will be able to supply goods (and jobs) in the future? It should be no different as we, and especially our governments, exercise responsibility for the protection of the environment. Transitions have to begin somewhere. Many new jobs can be found in work to improve energy efficiency and to clean up polluted waterways. And almost everyone desires the well-being of their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. The more that global warming and other environmental dangers become apparent, the distance between immediate needs and longer term needs shrinks. The time to act is now, both for short-term health and for long-term sustainability.

These statements that comprise the Center’s Guideline on the environment represent only the beginning of the Center’s efforts to develop policy recommendations and educational materials that can contribute to the environmental health of our planet in the service of our neighbors and in obedience to God. These are not yet specific policy recommendations but a framework for approaching policy design. We hope that those who are interested in the health of the environment will find this Guideline helpful and will offer to help work out its implications in the public policy world.