



## Fact or Fiction?

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### Poverty Is the Worst Carcinogen

"The war on pollution is one that should be waged after the war on poverty."  
—Whitney Young, Urban League President

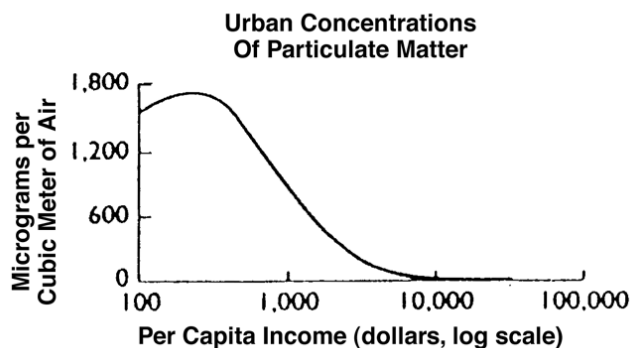
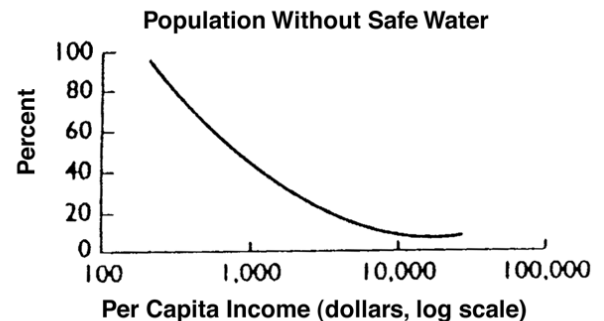
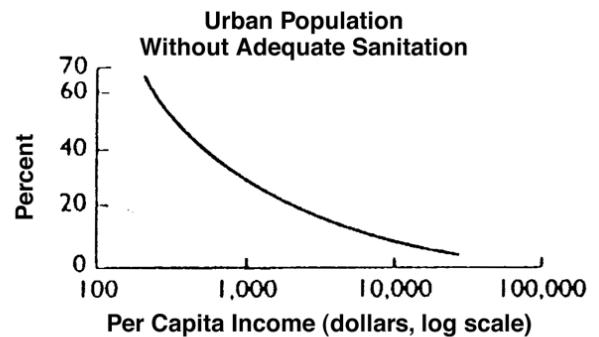
What environmental problems kill human beings in numbers today? It isn't Alar, ozone depletion, dioxins, nuclear wastes, electromagnetic radiation, pesticide residues, PCBs or asbestos. What kills them is dung smoke and diarrhea and this all relates to poverty. Living in poorly ventilated huts where fuel wood, cow dung, or agricultural wastes are used for heating and cooking is responsible for most child deaths. Gurinder Shahi, an official of the United Nations Development Program says: "Smoke inside a hut like this can be unbelievable. Women and children, who spend most time in the home, are most harmed. Today 40 percent of the global population heats and cooks with biomass in raw form."

Sanitation is another issue. According to a report released this past summer by the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF), almost three billion people—about half the world's population—now live without clean toilets. More than two million children die each year from diarrhea-causing diseases, infected by bacteria that could easily have been avoided if they had been flushed down a pipe. According to UNICEF, 3.8 million developing-world children under age five died in 1993 from diarrheal diseases caused by impure drinking water. As Easterbrook points out: "In the First World, death from diarrhea is about as common as comet strikes; in the developing world diarrhea kills far more people than cancer. Most of Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Latin America have no wastewater treatment facilities. Yet Western public consciousness continues to focus on exotic ecological threats while ignoring millions of annual

deaths from basic environmental problems of water and air."

Basic pollution in the Third World is far more significant than all First World ecological problems combined. Eric Chivian, a psychiatrist on the faculty at Harvard Medical School who started an organization called the Project on Global Environmental Change and Health stated: "I've had great difficulty interesting environmental organizations in human health in poor countries. They want to talk about forest loss and species diversity in the developing world, but have much less interest in human health there." Nobody should kid themselves that they are doing Bangladesh a favor when they worry about global warming.

Ray and Guzzo quote Dr. Norman Borlaug, a Nobel prize recipient who is considered one of the fathers of the "Green Revolution" as saying, "I am concerned that the



*Affluence and the environment (adapted from Goklany).*

growing anti-science and anti-technology bias in affluent countries will adversely affect the prospects for agricultural development. In effect, the 'haves' are telling the 'have-nots' that they should stay with current simple lifestyles because great material well-being isn't what it is made out to be. How many people in the First World would be willing to cut their life spans by one-half, see up to half of their children die before reaching the age of 10, often as a result of minor and easily curable illness, live in illiteracy with substandard shelter, clothing and sanitation, and face bleak prospects of no improvement in economic well-being for themselves or their children? Unwittingly, this is the continuing fate that the affluent anti-technology groups are wishing for the Third World's people."

Poverty is already a worse killer than any foreseeable environmental distress. If you're hungry, you aren't very much interested in improving the environment. All evidence indicates that, ultimately richer is cleaner, and affluence and knowledge are the best

antidotes to pollution. Wealthier populations can afford newer technology even if it costs more initially. Poverty is the worst carcinogen. Countries undergo an environmental transition as they become wealthier and reach a point at which they start getting cleaner. Some examples are shown in the accompanying figure. Ambient sulfur dioxide and particulate matter concentrations in the air and fecal coliform in river water drop significantly as a country becomes wealthier.

The reason for the turning point is complex, but essentially the wealthier a nation is, the more it values and the more it can afford to pay for a healthier environment and environmental amenities. The level of affluence at which a pollutant level peaks (or environmental transition occurs) varies. A World Bank analysis concluded that urban particulate matter and SO<sub>2</sub> concentrations peaked at per capita incomes of \$3280 and \$3670, respectively. Fecal coliform in river water increased with affluence until income reached \$1375 per capita.

Chapman *et al.*, studied how different cultural, religious and political contexts interfere with people's perceptions of the environment and how journalists deal with such a reality. They reported that mass media and communication technology is in danger of locking developed countries into a ghetto of environmental self-deception thereby helping to perpetuate poverty in the developing countries. The goal of developing countries remains the attainment of development; developing countries see "environmental problems occurring elsewhere." Whether or not environmentalism becomes a universal cause depends on how and to what extent such sharply contrasting world views can converge.

#### Conclusion

The real killers of people are poverty and not the items that we read about in our daily newspaper or see on television as the latest scare of the month. If we, and all others such as those who proclaim to be environ-

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