

The World This Week

The Hartford Advocate.com

<http://www.ctnow.com/custom/nmm/hartfordadvocate/>

Is it Environmentalism or the Environment that's Dead?

by [Alan Bisbort](#) - October 13, 2005

If you thought the attitude of the present American government, such as it is, toward the environment -- neglect, abuse, pillage, plunder -- was out of step, think again. You are, of course, assuming that the global environment is taken more seriously by governing bodies that supersede the U.S., or any nation. The United Nations, for example. Wrong again.

We're pretty much up Shit Creek without a paddle.

Let me give you an example of just how ass-backwards things are now. At the just-completed World Summit -- also known as The Bill Clinton Show -- the environment was stiff-armed off the premises. This summit was focused on "millennium developmental goals," and the top priorities were terrorism, human rights, democracy and economic development. The environment was down at Goal 7, not even high enough on the list for the delegates who came to New York to be allowed in the hallowed halls.

After the environment got the bum's rush, a parallel event was organized in a building across the street from the UN. Here, environmental ministers from around the world could at least talk to each other, even if they didn't have the ear of Kofi Annan and his inner circle of paper-pushers. One frustrated witness to the debacle in New York was Maria Ivanova, head of Yale's Global Environmental Governance Project and a professor at William & Mary.

"The United Nations was off limits for everybody except official delegations," said Ivanova. "International global governance had only one paragraph in the document that came out of the summit. It had a page in the previous document, now it only has a paragraph. The environment was not on the agenda at all, and it doesn't even figure in as an official discussion point. It's marginalized in one little paragraph that basically states we agree to explore the possibility for a more coherent structure for international environmental governance ... that's it on the

environment."

Never mind that ice caps are melting, Greenland will soon be as small and manageable as Cuba, species are dying off at rates that shock even the most somber predictions of the experts, dead zones have appeared in international waters, coral reefs are being ransacked, well ... why flog a dead horse, eh?

To counter such negativity, Ivanova takes inspiration from Wangari Muta Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner. Maathai, leader of the Greenbelt Movement, has nearly singlehandedly held desertification at bay in central Africa by the simple if exhausting act of planting millions of trees. Last year, Ivanova took her class to stay with Maathai in her Kenyan village.

"Maathai said that millennium developmental goal 7 should be goal number 1, because without it, you can't achieve any of the other goals involving poverty, democracy, peace," said Ivanova. "None of those things are possible if the earth is dead. If anyone should know, she should."

Everybody wants to save the world. It's in our DNA, part of our dream structure as kids, the underpinning of every superhero comic or fable. Even growing up under Soviet repression in her native Bulgaria, Ivanova had these dreams. And yet, very few of us seem to do anything about it once we become adults. We shrink as we get older, grow fearful, resigned and defeated. And just saying the word "environment" can sometimes be mistaken for actually doing something about it. Politicians love to say "environment" because they assume, rightly, that most people are in favor of a clean earth and a natural legacy for our children. But it's a buzzword. It's polite and nice and it evokes green things and panda bears and, ultimately, a false sense of security.

On the other side of the fence, it's fashionable in policy circles these days to embrace the thesis of Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, who've posited that "environmentalism is dead." Those who care about the environment and have tried to do something about it are, presumably, now required to wring hands and gnash teeth and weep in dismay at the brilliance of these two whippersnappers. But Ivanova isn't weeping. She said, "I teach in a political science department about the environment. I teach about the environment in a way that would change people's minds, rather than simply raise awareness on one issue or another. I want my students, and the world, really, to see the environment as something that we're part of, not something that we're disconnected from or independent of."

To paraphrase Mark Twain, the rumors of environmentalism's death have been greatly exaggerated.

We want your feedback. □ Email editor@hartfordadvocate.com