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Undo Bush's voodoo

ENVIRONMENTALISTS increasingly distrust the White House because of its reliance on Gross National Product (GNP) economics. Mr. Bush urges us not to worry as we vacation on beaches littered with trash, breathe poisonous clouds from auto exhaust, and watch sunsets through fields of stumps — now unobstructed by the old growth trees that used to stand from the Atlantic to the Pacific. GNP economics, he assures us, will take care of our problems.

Environmentalists disagree, believing that GNP economics — consume now and let the future worry about itself — caused the problems in the first place. GNP economics is a horse-and-buggy-era concept, which puts short-term profits before national and global environmental health. It justifies quick profits from oil extraction and consumption while ignoring the air pollution and global warming we must suffer in the long term.

Sustainability is the new economics, an approach with a long term vision of environmental and human health. It will maintain a livable globe for future generations by welcoming desirable development and keeping the environment clean and productive. Environmental and economic well-being, we discover, are the same thing.

OTHER DEMOCRATIC countries are already applying sustainability economics. West Germany, the Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands, and Australia are among them. This approach is also appealing to developing nations.

But not the U.S.

Our government is still run by people who, as Ansel Adams once said, know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Economics is the science of pricing scarcity. One study I read recently attempted to quantify what people were willing to pay for breathable air. Estimates ranged from \$2.31 for a day free of minor coughing and sneezing to about \$11 a day to avoid shortness of breath caused by foul air. There was no discussion of stopping the pollution that caused the problem in the first place.

Environmentalists reject such pricing, because we believe that short-term private wealth gained at the expense of long-term public health and environmental quality is not acceptable.

The country will be fortunate if someone is able to persuade Mr. Bush that building a sustainable future is better for the nation and the world than merely boosting the GNP.

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LONG-TERM THINKING was basic to our country's beginnings. Presidents Washington and Jefferson inspired America to honor its obligation to posterity and a thousand future generations. But now, instead of a statesmanship honoring posterity or projecting visions of hope for the future, we have a President who seems to be led by a staff hooked on voodoo economics.

They and the nation were embarrassed recently when Mr. Bush addressed the 18-nation White House Conference on what was supposed to be global warming. Instead he tried more economics.

Prior to his speech, a position paper was distributed, but the conference guests rebelled with disbelief and refused to support such an antiquated position. The paper was hastily withdrawn with the announcement that it had been distributed in error.

Speakers at the global environmental meeting in Norway last week were still rankled and criticized our president's naivete at the White House meeting.

Mr. Bush, you should listen to the nation and world.

Public distrust is deteriorating into conflict as the White House stifles U.S. passion for environmental improvement and ignores global concern about environmental quality. America is ready to move from an outmoded GNP economics to an ethic of sustainability.

Examiner columnist Huey D. Johnson appears on the Op-Ed page every other Wednesday.