

Freedom Matters

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We are a free people in a republic, under a constitution which limits the powers of government to those necessary to secure the unalienable rights of each person to their life, liberty and property. Yet, when a legislature is in session, no one's life, liberty or property is safe. It's the curse of a democracy. That's why we have a republic instead. *Freedom Matters* dedicates itself to the fight to restore our republic. Most of the press and courts fail to do so. They've forgotten that freedom matters.

Sustainable Development Is Unsustainable. Part 10. Beware the Jabberwocky

by Bob Bowman

Lewis Carroll's famous poem, *Jabberwocky*, is a satire on nonsense. Sadly, satire is lost on the humorless puritans and eco-terrorists who drive the environmentalist movement. Their Precautionary Principle in particular is so much Jabberwocky. Despite that, international politics has enacted it into policy.

So Beckerman's *A Poverty of Reason* has to kill it. To start, Beckerman cites the strong definition of the Precautionary Principle adopted by the UN Economic Conference for Europe:

"Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation."

This Principle, he notes, is also in the 1992 Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty), and a slightly weaker version is in the 1992 UNCED Rio Declaration; i.e., it's weakened by adding "cost-effective" in front of "measures." This slightly weaker version is also part of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming.

The Principle is absurd because it creates the fiction of "full scientific certainty." Beckerman notes that we can never have full scientific certainty about anything, so no one waits for it; if we did, we would still be in the stone age.

The Principle is also absurd because its definition offers no metric. It provides no way to assess "threat," or "damage," or "serious" — concepts on which its definition rests. What we cannot measure sensibly, we cannot apply sensibly. But of course, that's the point. Its proponents use it to impose a political agenda so senseless, it will not stand up to sensible measures.

To see some of the absurdity, consider the issue of replacing fossil fuels with other sources of energy. Solutions favored by environmentalists, such as using wind, water or solar power, also have environmental consequences. What do the environmentalists have to say about that? Very little. Only a few have raised concerns about the bird kill, noise, or despoiling of viewsheds associated with large wind turbine farms. Or, look at the outcry over drilling for oil in Alaska. Would not the same outcry occur over proposals to blanket large areas of deserts with solar collectors for the production of electric energy?

If we had practiced the Precautionary Principle over the last century, in response to the repeated predictions of imminent exhaustion of oil, ores, food, etc., we would have stifled most of the scientific and technological progress we have made. Most of us would be living in poverty, and we would be far more helpless before the harsh dangers the cosmos poses to the survival of our civilization, or even of our human species.

For example, we would not likely have discovered that a 5-mile-wide meteor hit in Central America 65 million years ago, causing a world-wide extinction of most life, including dinosaurs. Meteors are still a threat. In 1908, what likely was a rock 100 meters wide exploded high over Siberia, leveling an area bigger than half of Dane County. Because of our technological progress, there is now research to find and map the orbits of all near-earth objects, to try to avoid future asteroid strikes that might again produce mass damage or deaths on earth.

Had we followed the irrational Precautionary Principle in the past, we would have lost the technology that improves our chances of surviving natural disasters, disease, or starvation. The present influence of the Precautionary Principle, from the undue influence of minority pressure groups on politics, is driving us to impose excessive regulations and bureaucracy, to try to forestall every imaginable "serious" consequence. In the name of Precaution, we are crippling our progress and prosperity.

An example of the Precautionary Principle gone berserk is the widespread opposition to genetically modified (GM) crops, cited by Beckerman. This is most vociferous in Europe, where the extreme environmentalists of the Green movement have seized on that Principle to further their anti-industrial agenda. It is also being supported as a tool for old-fashioned Luddite resistance; i.e., protectionism for European agriculture.

Sadly, says Beckerman, it is the poor, and the underdeveloped nations, who are harmed most by the consequences of the non-metric Precautionary Principle. The 1992 UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) requires new environmental bureaucracies to regulate bioresearch, forcing developing countries to divert their scarce resources to enforce GM regulations in order to avoid **imaginary harms**, instead of using those resources to fight **known causes** of human ills. Thus, the same elites who scorn "wicked imperialist capitalists" are themselves guilty of a new imperialism that harms the poor.

Re global warming, Beckerman urges "no-regret" policies (such as stopping subsidy of coal, a dirty fuel), but opposes hasty costly restrictions like the Kyoto Treaty. Consequences are minor, if we delay Kyoto for years, to get clearer data, whereas acting now would be disastrous for society. Beckerman urges a risk-benefit analysis as our sane choice, because a Precautionary Principle, one to serve for all reasons, must have a metric.

Two property rights web sites:

<http://www.fairnessinlaw.org/>
<http://www.takebackwisconsin.com/>

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