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## sustainable rhetoric

A relatively well-known national author—who is very respectful of our mission and process—recently speculated that his sarcastic and lively tone made the complex economic concepts he wanted to convey much easier to understand. I disagreed.

While it does have its place in many venues, sarcasm is really a technique for bypassing the critical faculties of others—and it tends to make people believe they understand things when they really don't. The use of sarcasm is a powerful way to maintain one's own biases, while soothing the emotions of those seeking confirmation of their similar deeply held beliefs. This inclination to hear what we want to hear is a phenomenon that cognitive scientists call *confirmation bias*. A simple example is when people buy a new car and then enthusiastically seek out automobile ads that confirm their purchase is a good one.

The Catch-22 with sarcasm is that it exploits not only confirmation bias in those who agree but also stimulates it in those who don't—a sarcastic argument allows those who disagree strongly to dismiss anything else they read or hear from the perpetrator.

Confirmation bias influences the way we view politicians, how we hear arguments, and what we remember when we read about such emotionally charged issues as global warming, or even what car we buy. Sarcasm also puts people on notice. If you don't see things the author's way, you too might be worthy of ridicule.

The tendency for environmental writers to be political has made our sustainability issue difficult to produce. Many environmental writers and activists feel compelled to direct their comments toward the biases of the already converted. Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* is a good example. The movie uses a clever form of rhetoric often employed when preaching to the choir—truly important “facts” are exaggerated. For instance, climate change is a much slower process than the movie depicts.

When we buy into our biases, we don't have to sweat the details or do the hard work of thinking about our own, or others, opinions. The mission of *Sockeye* requires our authors to respect those who may not readily agree with them by presenting readers with factual information, clear arguments, and thoughtful analysis. We believe that adhering to our mission puts pressure on writers to clearly explain the reasoning behind their conclusions rather than exploit people's biases. At the same time we are aware that confirmation bias usually goes hand in hand with sincerely passionate feelings.

## Breadth and Depth

The breadth and depth of the worldwide discussion currently taking place about sustainability has added to the challenge of producing this issue. We have judiciously pared down. Our Guest Editor Howard Silverman has focused on the big idea of sustainability—and has sought out concrete examples of sustainable interventions as examples.

Because of time and space constraints we have also created a forum with a limited number of alternative views. For instance, Frank Ackerman's insightful argument against using cost benefit analysis for evaluating environmental regulation (CBA) does not mention social discounting—a procedure for taking into account the priceless nature of environmental benefits and lives in a cost benefit analysis. We encourage you to investigate this concept as a useful tool for helping economists create a sustainable economy.

In Michael Shuman's excellent *Tina vs. Lois: The Smallmart Revolution*, he states, “locally-owned businesses selling locally-made goods are inherently better for communities and their ecosystems.” On this point, according to many economists, he makes quite an assumption. One of our economic advisors, Professor Anthony Rufolo, remarks, “There is no evidence that small farmers produce less pollution than large farmers,” which Shuman more than implies in his article.

Regarding Shuman's comments on local businesses that end up paying the infrastructure costs for globally mobile companies such as Wal-Mart, we want to report here briefly that there is an alternative view—one not dedicated to bringing down Wal-Mart. There are external costs that globally mobile companies are avoiding when they pressure local communities to give them tax breaks and/or to make other concessions. An appropriate policy might be to impose these costs on them directly. In other words: Don't subsidize Wal-Mart's box stores (big metal boxes that are cheap for retailers to build) with lower taxes or other favors if they are not pulling their weight in the local community. Instead, make them pay for the external costs they are seeking to avoid (e.g. roads, police, and fire)—if they can pay their fair share of these costs and still provide a valuable service to the community, let them do it.

The most controversial article, from *Sockeye's* point of view, is Elizabeth Sawin's *A Race to the Bottom*, a provocative piece on what she calls commodity traps. In this case, for the sake of balance,

# the view from here

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we decided to take some room to offer alternative arguments. Sawin and Sustainability Institute Director Hal Hamilton responded with a small piece that reflects the depth of their thinking and the spirit of respectful debate.

Herman Daly is an internationally respected environmental economist, who ranks high on the left's list of the most important economists of the last 100 years. He advances at least one controversial argument in his article *Nature and Knowledge* in which he discusses what he calls the *commonwealth of knowledge*—explaining why he believes our patent system is not a productive mechanism for spreading and stimulating new knowledge. Barbara Dudley and Sean P. Fitzgerald discussed the issues of patents in our *International Trade Issue* which you can find on our website.

A number of authors in this issue of *Sockeye*, refer to Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950), the famous Austrian economist always at odds with his free market Austrian colleagues. He is popularly known for his astute and colorful description of the creative destruction wrought by business cycle under capitalism.

Schumpeter also, it turns out, professed that Socialism (with elected officials setting prices and wages for goods) was a viable economic model—something that has, to date, turned out to be not true. This type of governance is very similar to what Sawin proposes in her piece on *commodity traps*.

References to Schumpeter and Sawin's ideas aroused my natural bias toward defending open markets as useful tools. However, in this issue our guest editor has reconciled valuable concepts in economics and ecology. The forum includes examples of how the useful nature of markets for such things as water and carbon sequestration can be utilized to effectively help create a standard of living that is sustainable.

It is accepted by economists that relatively unencumbered markets have created explosive growth in Western economies that have improved the lives of a large population in many countries—free markets are now doing this in China and throughout much of the Pacific Rim. Most economists also acknowledge that without systemic change we will outstrip the ability of the planet to create the same standard of living for the rest of the world that we in the

developed nations have become accustomed to.

Many of these same economists believe markets will solve our problem of scale through innovation. They, along with a cadre of CEO's from multinational corporations, believe we need to take effective and immediate action in the form of carbon markets. Howard Silverman has addressed these issues in the forum by linking human systems with natural systems in a way that can make a difference if the right incentives are created—through governance that is focused on creating sustainable economic systems.

In *Forests and Carbon*, Bettina von Hagen describes a solution to the conflict between environmentalists and the forestland owners in the Northwest who can make a living from their investment by selling on international carbon markets, one of the ecosystem services that their properties provide.

I believe all the authors in this edition of *Sockeye* have written thought provoking articles that provide a glimpse into the thinking of both well-known movers and shakers and those on the ground—all of whom are creating ideas, new language for old ideas, and innovative solutions that demonstrate the complex natural systems of which humans are an integral part.

Conspicuously absent in the forum is a serious discussion of equity between developing nations and first world economies. We touch on this issue briefly at the end of the forum. We intend to continue exploring the social justice issues, practical applications of green building, new energy, and urban and rural planning in future issues of *Sockeye*.

My thanks to all the authors who have contributed to this issue of *Sockeye*. I also want to sincerely thank Howard Silverman. Howard (as do all our guest editors and authors) has endured our rigorous process of editing, which involves getting articles through a gauntlet comprised of multiple experts in various disciplines (with differing views) and what we call our *lay readers*. All the authors have survived both professional and voluntary copy editors—and my bias for creating *Sockeye's* idea of a fair and balanced forum. 

