

Carl Bajema is a professor of biology at Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI.

Tough Lovers vs. Bleeding Hearts

A Book Review by Carl Bajema

LIVING WITHIN LIMITS: ECOLOGY
ECONOMICS, AND POPULATION TABOOS

By Garrett Hardin

New York: Oxford University Press
339 pp., \$25.00

The American economist Kenneth Boulding contends that it is "almost criminal to teach people things they really do not need to know if this prevents them from learning things they do need to know." What are the truly important principles about how humans interact with their environment, and how can we develop the critical thinking skills necessary to apply them? Where should citizens turn to begin the necessary intellectual retooling required for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the world around us and how we can make more humane choices in interacting with other human beings and the rest of the world? The best strategy is to read the works of Garrett Hardin who is internationally recognized for his ability to help people become more critical thinkers and more considerate of future generations.

Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Populations Taboos is full of ideas that we all need to know and use if we are going to succeed in resolving our population/resources/environment problems. The dominant political doctrines asserting that endless material growth is desirable and that there is a technological fix for every environmental problem — including population growth — are examined and demolished by Garrett Hardin.

What critical thinking strategies does Professor Hardin employ in developing his argument that we need to better understand the limits set by the earth's resources and the hard choices we must make to live within the limits of a finite world? Dr. Hardin has identified three classes of questions that must be answered when trying to solve a problem: (1) "The literate question: 'What are the right words?'" (2) "The numerate question: 'What are the relevant numbers?'" and (3) "The ecolate question: 'And then what?'"

Language is used both to promote thought and to prevent it. All too often, words such as "infinite," "inexhaustible," "non-negotiable," and "self-evident" are used to prevent the discussion of problems created by numbers and limits imposed by the environment. Garrett Hardin asks why we always talk about "shortages" rather than about "longages" — of demand or of people. Hardin points out that the only way that literate controversies over conflicting rights can be reconciled is by "making them quantitative —

numerate — and adopting numerate standards of allocation" [p. 14].

We now live in fast-moving societies where quantities, ratios, rates and duration times all matter. In a moment of frustration Mark Twain is reported to have shouted, "There are lies, damned lies, and statistics!" In a world where people are very numerous and can use numbers in an effort to convince others to behave in certain ways, it needs to be emphasized that there are ecological limits to what can be done on the planet Earth.

Ecolate thinking must be nurtured and used in decision making if we are not to fall victim to the forces we unleash and are unwilling or unable to control. Ecolate thinking, asking and answering the question *and then what?* enables us to estimate the effects of the interactions of systems over time in finite environments.

The way we think about cause/effect relationships greatly affects our understanding of the world and the effects of our actions/inactions. All too often we think in terms of a single isolated cause and a single isolated effect. Ecologists have pointed out the fact that everything is related to everything else. While this is technically correct and valuable as a warning, it is virtually useless as a guide to action. While all things in the environment interact, they interact in different ways. This important ecological understanding serves as the basis for what is now widely known as Hardin's Law: *we can never do merely one thing*. Since we cannot do just one thing, we must always ask and attempt to answer the question *and then what?* when we try to estimate the benefits and costs of proposed courses of action/inaction on the individual as well as social levels.

Living Within Limits should be read by all decision makers because it contains one of the best discussions of how past cases of exponential growth can and have led to the collapse of economic and ecological systems. Garrett Hardin does far more than just discuss the ecological limits to exponential growth. He points out how the ecological process of selection favors behaviors that ultimately lead to human tragedy in an unmanaged or poorly managed commons — a political/economic system for distributing the costs and benefits of human actions/inactions.

"This unique but all-too-common

combination of capitalism and socialism must be prevented if we are to achieve a sustainable relationship with our environment."

Professor Hardin warns us against the tragic consequences of the "PP-CC" political game that allows individuals, corporations and/or governments to "privatize profits" while "commonizing costs," such as depletion of resources, pollution and progeny. This unique but all-too-common combination of capitalism and socialism must be prevented if we are to achieve a sustainable relationship with our environment.

Living Within Limits is far more than a "long dissertation on the laws of nature that must be obeyed, namely: the properties of exponential growth; limits generally; the properties of usury, the significance of human unreliability; and the consequences of reproductive competition (including natural selection)" [p. 294]. The world needs more "tough lovers" who take the well-being of future generations into account when making decisions about what to do in the present. Garrett Hardin shows us how to overcome much of the short time span and selfish dimensions of traditional ethics. Professor Hardin has expanded the theologian Martin Buber's classic "I-Thou" frame of reference to "I-Thou and then what?"

Hardin applies his "tough love" ecological logic to decide what courses of action should be taken with respect to controlling population growth and immigration. The "cancer" of overpopulation cannot be cured by feeding it (with foreign aid) or by transporting some of its "cells" elsewhere (via emigration).

We are headed for disaster unless we take account of the ecological consequences of our actions/inactions. *Living Within Limits* provides us with the ecological and ethical logic we will have to use if we are to be successful in resolving our population/resources/environment problems. ■