

Consultation and Compromise in Environment Affairs

by Bill Knight-Weiler

Do golden eagles kill sheep?

A few years ago, *Audubon* magazine printed an article by a Wyoming rancher who “knew for a fact” that golden eagles did not prey upon lambs — until one spring when he began to find his lambs dead, and later witnessed the killing. His first thought was to destroy the eagle for threatening his livelihood; his only other option, it seemed, being to let the depredation continue. After much consideration, however, he arrived at a third solution, a compromise between two extremes. The rancher chose to keep his young flock close to home in a safe enclosure. When the lambs grew to be too large for the eagles to prey on, he again released them onto the open range.

Those of us who care about this planet’s ecology are often eager to “take sides” after hearing, often by way of a biased report, of an environmental problem close to our heart. We rarely take the time to check our sources, look for additional information and, possibly, take a middle position. We are afraid to compromise our beliefs, and find ourselves tossed with others in the murky wave of emotion, instead of trying to ride the wave of a clearer perspective.

A public hearing was held in Oregon some years ago to determine whether to allow off-road vehicles (ORVs) on a popular section of the coast. I went as an observer and noticed problems with both sides of the issue. The packed hearing room was divided in half, the perfect set-up for all the environmentalists to sit on one side and motorcycle enthusiasts on the other. It was hard to believe: one speaker after another would tearfully support his or her position than lambast the opposite viewpoint. Though dozens of people spoke, everyone favored either total closure to ORVs or complete freedom to use the entire beach for off-roaders. Not one person offered a compromise solution. No one thought to suggest closing off a certain portion of the beach or restricting ORV use seasonally or at different times of the day.

I learned a lesson from these proceedings; hopefully the other environmentalists did also. They lost. Clinging to an extreme position on an issue can be like gambling — you may win once in a while but, in the long run, you lose.

How could a compromise have worked for the benefit of the environment in this case? ORV organizations could be an important ally if the beach were threatened by a housing development. By alienating the ORV users, environmentalists created a no-win situation. In a country already plagued by special interest groups, the beach hearing perpetuated the “us vs. them” illusion.

Here’s a hopeful story where consultation and compromise worked. During the 1970s, another Northwest environmental controversy simmered. Should an Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area be designated in the Cascade Mountains of central Washington? On one side of the issue were the usual array of environmentalists, along with some federal and state government officials, hunting and fishing organizations. Their “opponents” were the logging industry, various chambers of commerce and some local government officials. From the start, a positive tone was established. A well-balanced task force was

created: all views were shared equally, and extreme positions were whittled down to more moderate solutions.

Ultimately, a wilderness area was created. Not as large as proponents wanted and not as small as opponents desired. In this case, compromise and consultation were processes which enabled a progressive understanding of two divergent, potentially hostile positions until both viewpoints became essentially the same. In the end, it was a victory for everyone.

How could this process work on a global level? As an example, let's look at acid rain, which has become a major international environmental concern. First observed in Manchester, England in 1972, today it is a world-wide problem reported in Europe, Brazil, China, South Africa, North America and even in the Arctic. When sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide gas combine with oxygen and water in the atmosphere, they are converted into sulfuric and nitric acids, which fall to earth as acid rain.

In North America, there is no point in quibbling over who's to blame. Some acid rain falling in the eastern states has been traced to Canada and vice-versa. The United States government, through the Environmental Protection Agency, is allocating \$55 million for research this year. The Reagan Administration feels that acid rain needs to be studied rather than acted upon, while the Canadian government, whose eastern provinces are bombarded by acid rain from Midwestern U.S. factories, sharply criticizes its southern neighbor for stalling on a top priority environmental issue.

The first step in solving any problem is the talking stage. As all parts of the globe have been or will be affected by acid rain, the first of many multi-national meetings should be set up — perhaps in West Germany, near the Black Forest, close to one half of which has been destroyed by acid rain.

The initial meeting should include governmental, industrial, science, and environmental representatives, and address the basic question: how can sulfur and nitrogen oxide emissions from fossil fuel generators be reduced while protecting jobs and preventing increased utility rates?

Using consultation procedures, the representatives could, at the very least, leave the initial proceedings with a clearer understanding of the nature of the acid rain problem, recognizing the need for international cooperation. At best, they would emerge as partners combating acid rain instead of each other. The goal of the group would be to engage in consultation leading to mutually acceptable legislation.

But is compromise always called for? Aren't there issues which demand a firm stand? The word compromise conjures up images of "giving in," of lowering one's values and ideals. Yet it can also have the meaning of negotiating; not giving in but giving and taking as a process by which one's ideals can be more effectively expressed. It often takes more courage to pass the peace pipe than to pass it up. By hearing out the other side, one's vision for the future and for the fate of the earth is more likely to be realized.

The integrity of our values and viewpoints, whether on environmental or other concerns, should not be compromised. The goal must remain clear. Compromise enters into the process of achieving that goal. Acid rain is killing lakes, forests, even precious architectural relics. There can be no question that our goal is to greatly reduce acid rain. This issue, as well as other environmental matters, warrants social action by Bahá'ís. We are not arsonists, but we do set fires. As Bahá'ís, our uncompromised goal is a world in unity where the earth and its human and non-human passengers are cared for. We must take care not to compromise this vision by wrong action, through intolerance, unbending attachment to our own perspective or downright disdain for those whose aims differ from our own. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá pointed out,

we are not to play the hypocrite and treat our enemies, be they industrialists, anti-conservationists or religious fanatics, as friends. Rather, we should not see them as enemies in the first place.

We can and perhaps should despise the viewpoint, but not its holder. If, through wrong action, we further alienate the “opposition” in the environmental concerns, we may defeat ourselves and the very earth which we are out to defend becomes victim and battleground as the other camp digs in its heels more deeply.

With global environmental concerns, the issues are complex. Simplistic answers or extreme views will rarely solve the problems. Indeed, it is part of attaining maturity as spiritual beings that one learns the lesson that there are many more than two sides to any issue, and that perceiving a problem as a black and white case of one side being right and the other wrong is a condition of childhood. In reality, we each have a shred of the truth and at least a shred of misperception.

Wisdom and maturity are then called for in dealing with these most significant environmental concerns. We need to sharpen our negotiating skills and, as Bahá'ís know from assembly experience, when these are put into action, the chances of consensus, even unanimity, are great.

The alternative to consultation currently appears in the Congressional hearing rooms. A legislative debate on acid rain continues to take place in Congress, and as we have sadly seen on a smaller scale with the dune buggy controversy, the mud-slinging has only alienated the groups involved. It's no wonder that current bills are stalled in Congress and, given the adversary process at work, will probably not be passed until acid rain destroys the White House and the Capitol Building.