

Ecologic

the green hornet

How do We Want to Leave the World?

It has been unbearably hot over the last few weeks and it's times like these where that notion of global warming really seems to resonate with me, and then I remember – oh yeah it's summertime – but still hot – hotter earlier in the year and record breaking hot. I still conduct my little unscientific polls whenever I have the chance as I meet new people and the unscientific polling results among the disinterested suggest they are still disinterested - and that sentiment seems to be gaining ground.

Recently, I've tended to view the whole global warming thing as more of a social movement than anything else. Recognizing the anthropogenic (alleged man made) component and taking steps to 'correct' it have far reaching implications that promise to affect every aspect of our lives; hence a social movement in the sense that the premise may hold notions of facts and figures but there are social calls to action so that everyone feels, well – more social.

As maybe mentioned in the past, I'm inclined to consider the environmental movement in two parts: global warming and everything else. The 'everything else' category is manageable – the global warming part isn't.

There are specialized systems that can handle the 'everything else'; from NOx & SOx scrubbers to water treatment facilities to waste-to-energy facilities to catalytic converters to you name it. These are solutions targeted at specific environmental issues. Global warming though is profoundly invasive – it is attached to every element of human activity and in my view, short of a cataclysm, is uncontrollable – the demons have been let out of Pandora's Box.

There still sits in the House, the Waxman Markey act, which is the Cap and Trade bill and it is still a remote possibility. If you'll recall, Cap and Trade is a system where an artificial scarcity of carbon based fuel is created and that finite supply of 'right to pollute' carbon credits is traded in a market especially created to facilitate this arrangement. The end game is to reduce the use of fossil fuels by providing a distinct and substantial economic penalty for their use.

Other versions of carbon Cap and Trade programs, that have been attempted in other countries, have not faired so well because the caps have been too lenient. By definition, in order for Cap and Trade to work, there has to be an element of pain involved in order to properly discourage the use of fossil fuels. You'll recall that fossil fuels are predominantly gas, oil and coal; everything that is viable when considering energy.

The hope is that by making fossil fuels so economically unfeasible that it will encourage conservation, efficiency, stoicism and force innovation in renewable energy technology

because the innovation obviously isn't occurring substantially enough under 'natural' conditions.

Right now, energy, carbon foot prints, global warming, green house gas emissions and all that jazz are mostly about CFLs, recycling, turning the lights out and the thermostat (up/down) – mostly modest overt actions fostering a 'feel good' sensation. Cap and Trade is a game changer – if pulled off meaningfully, it will foster a feel good about significant sacrifice sensation – not that it isn't warranted if you honestly feel that reducing the use of fossil fuels will save us from ourselves - but know that it won't be business as usual.

The one glaring downside to a meaningful Cap and Trade program is that the US will be alone – we may be considered global leaders but it's tough to lead when no one else is following. We will have succeeded in creating a disadvantage for the US as the rest of the world does continue with business as usual – but many may feel that we deserve that because of our history of flagrant energy use, so in essence self flagellation is actually more the point. I know that environmentalist Osama bin Laden is in that camp as evidenced by his remarks last January where he exhorted the global community to stop trading in US dollars and boycott American goods – thus dampening the US's ability to continue to burn fossil fuels and perpetuate global warming – environmental issues sure do make for some strange bedfellows.

Anyway, it seems as though we have a tiger by the tail and not too many options. We could clamp down on fossil fuel use in the US and hope the rest of the world would want to be equally as masochistic precipitating an all out assault on the heinous fossil fuels, curbing global warming, saving the planet and ultimately ourselves and feeling darn good about it. Or we could continue business as usual, let the chips fall where they may, recognize that maybe humans don't control and can't forecast everything – and see which computer model of our man made hell actually comes to fruition – I like this one.