Green Room: Our writers talk back

Over recent weeks, a number of leading voices in the environmental debate brought you their views on a range of issues in the Green Room.

This week, we have offered the writers an opportunity to respond to your comments.

Jonathon Porritt  
James Mair  
Kevin Smith

JONATHON PORRITT - Sustainable development: Big not boring

Those who continue to deny that climate change is caused by man-made emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are rapidly running out of any residual intellectual credibility.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is recognised as a quite unique scientific process, reflecting the consensus of thousands of climate scientists all around the world.

As we have seen with the Fourth Assessment Report recently, that consensus has to be signed off by all governments - even those that would dearly love to see those findings diluted.

I think it's hardly likely that those governments are being taken in by phoney findings and some kind of mass conspiracy amongst scientists to bring down capitalism itself!

So I just feel very sorry for the deluded and the paranoid that seem to be drawn to organisations like Global Cooling.

'In denial'

Thanks to Maureen Roth for her comments on population. Fair cop, as far as this particular posting in the Green Room was concerned. But as I think the record shows, I am one of the very few environmentalists that has banged on and on about the importance of population for more than 30 years.

It's still startling that governments the world over are in denial about this, even though it's blindingly obvious that one fact more than any other accounts for today's ecological crisis: that six billion additional humans will have arrived on planet Earth between 1950 and 2050.

Jonathon Porritt is founder director of Forum for the Future and chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission

EUGENE LAPOINTE - Hunting for conservation solutions

All respondents shared my passionate desire to conserve wildlife. The fact that so many people have the same objective is surely something to celebrate.

Despite some of the more colourful comments, I don't think anyone is seriously advocating
hunting animals to extinction. Where people differ is over the means to achieve the end of conservation.

To some people, it is always wrong to kill an animal, even for food.

Richard, Ray and Linda took an animal rights view, equating hunting elephants to hunting humans. I think most people will recognise that there is a big difference.

Dieter confirmed that the hunting ban in Africa has been "a total failure" for habitat management. Another Richard affirmed that properly controlled hunting is the best way to conserve all wildlife species, including elephants.

And Heather wrote that urban people should not impose their "rather naive" views on others, voicing a concern that I come across frequently.

Chandra suggested that a choice exists for Africans between hunting and tourism - I don't see any evidence for this. They can go hand in hand, so long as there is careful management and regulation.

Ultimately, as Grahame wrote, the aim should be to attach a value to conservation, and leverage incentives that give local people a reason to manage their wildlife.

I read all the responses and I am grateful for them. They lead me to the view that idealism is competing with realism. Ideally, we wouldn't need incentives because people would always work to conserve species, whatever their circumstances.

**Reality bites**

Wildlife should not be a commodity, according to Michael, while Mark wrote that to think of wildlife "in terms of dollars and cents is disgusting".

They might be right in theory, but until the world reaches this particular ideal, we have to work with reality. The world is far from perfect.

Advocates of sustainable use have not created the market for wildlife; they simply accept that it exists and build conservation mechanisms around it.

_Eugene Lapointe is president of the International Wildlife Management Consortium (IWMC) World Conservation Trust, and was secretary-general of CITES between 1982-1990_

**JAMES MAIR - Eco-tourism: A sustainable trade?**

It was heartening for me to see so many varied responses to my article, especially when comments came from people in numerous tourism-destination countries around the world and those in the tourism trade itself.

Most responses, I am glad to say, agreed with the main issues I raised, although some were vehemently against the idea of controlling tourists' "rights" to travel to which ever place is available.

I would certainly agree with several remarks that ecotourism is not the only activity with potential to threaten some of the world's most sensitive environments.

Conditions of poverty, in which many people around the world live, mean that short-term survival comes quite naturally as a higher priority to them than longer-term environmental degradation. In many cases, development (including the tourism industry) is one way of bringing much-required income to the area.

Several readers (Sarah Terry, Panama, and Friar Balsam, UK) have pointed out that the fundamental problem, in their views, is the growth and overpopulation of humans in a finite,
resource-limited world.

**Costs and benefits**

The likes of Haymanot, Dubai, and Heloise, Ile de La Reunion, feel that some tourism can be very beneficial to a country and I certainly would agree that this may be the case in many places.

Other readers, like me, are sceptical of such labelling of sections of the tourism trade, such as eco- or sustainable tourism. Each case really has to be looked at individually to work out whether the activity is overall beneficial, rather than damaging, to those concerned.

Recent news highlights the tourism pressures, mentioned in my original article, in Galapagos, and also substantiated by the personal observations by one reader - Greg.

The newly elected Ecuadorian president appears to be determined to change many corrupt practices and may introduce a suspension of some tourism permits in Galapagos.

Next week, I travel with research students to Las Perlas Archipelago in Panama.

This group of islands is considered by many as the next "test case" for whether or not mistakes from other places, like Galapagos, will be repeated.

*Dr James Mair is in the Centre for Marine Biodiversity and Biotechnology at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh*

**JONATHAN LASH - Climate irony in the USA**

The response to my recent Green Room has been fascinating and often passionate.

I would like to add: the US is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases both today and on a cumulative historical basis. The United States needs to take action on climate change. The world needs to take action.

The world cannot solve the problem of climate change without the US, and the US, while it must act, cannot solve the problem unilaterally.

There is evidence that political conditions are changing. The new Democratic leadership in Congress is committed to move forward on climate legislation.

In the last few months, there have been hearings almost daily by Senate and House committees on issues related to climate change and renewable energy. The World Resources Institute has testified repeatedly.

**Changing climate**

States across the country are enacting legislation to increase vehicle fuel efficiency standards, promote renewable energy usage and develop carbon trading schemes.

More than 440 mayors from 50 states, representing a total population of more than 61 million citizens, have signed the US Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement, adhering to the goals of the Kyoto Protocol.

Partly in response to the emerging patchwork of local requirements and the high cost of uncertainty, and partly because they believe there will be significant opportunities for new products and services in a carbon-constrained world, major US corporations are stepping up and asking Congress to legislate them.

The US will pass domestic climate legislation. All the forces of change are in place for a climate change agenda to move forward, but it will take some time yet. Once domestic action is in place, the US will pursue an international diplomatic agenda.
Jonathan Lash is president of the World Resources Institute in Washington DC

KEVIN SMITH - 'Obscenity' of carbon trading

Many people commented that it has only been the overly generous allocation of credits that has been the problem, and that if the cap in the "cap and trade" was tighter, the price of carbon would increase and would start to act as an incentive for industry in developed nations to significantly reduce their emissions.

Having been aware of the possibility of genuine action taking place, the business community aggressively lobbied for a "Linking Directive" to be incorporated into the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, whereby credits generated through carbon offset projects in developing countries, under the Kyoto Protocol, can be imported and used in the scheme.

No matter how strict the caps are set, the linking directive ensures that a cheap and theoretically endless supply of project-based credits can be brought into the scheme, keeping supply high and prices down.

Regulation needed

One person responded to my article that "the US's SO2 (sulphur dioxide) trading system reduced SO2 levels to 30% below the required limits; it was a spectacular success".

Not so spectacular when placed in the context of Germany, which managed to cut power plant sulphur emissions by 90% from the first proposal in 1982 to the completion of the programme in 1998; relying on firm regulation and legislation and no trading scheme of any sort.

An evaluation of the US Clean Air Act by Margaret Taylor of the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, concluded that "the weight of evidence of the history of innovation in SO2 control technology does not support the superiority of the 1990 Clean Air Act - as an inducement for environmental technological innovation, as compared with the effects of traditional environmental policy approaches".

Kevin Smith, a researcher with Carbon Trade Watch, recently published The Carbon Neutral Myth: Offset Indulgences for your Climate Sins, a critical report on the voluntary offsets industry

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