

ENVIRONMENT

Our Bay: This week's Take: Current recession a time to rethink growth

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Published January 17, 2009

It says something about our economy that the current recession, bad as it is, also means cleaner air as driving slows, paving open space lessens and nature in general gets breathing room as what we call "progress" grinds to a halt.

Growth is good, or at least inevitable, and must be "accommodated," we say without ever really questioning. We assume we can forever expand the human economy and the population required to support it by slapping on enough technological and regulatory Band-Aids to protect the environment.

Indeed, Chesapeake Bay science and environmental leaders insist we can reduce the per capita impacts of our lifestyles, our individual demands on nature, so smartly that it won't matter how many individuals there are.

But it does, and the sad state of Chesapeake after 25 years of trying to restore it is a case in point.

Of course the current focus on reducing per capita impacts is important, because if the current economy and population never grew again, those of us already here are already overwhelming the bay. But the notion that we can expand the human footprint indefinitely while restoring the rest of nature is belied by every assessment of deteriorating biodiversity, shrinking habitat and degraded water quality.

But when would we even start in questioning growth?

Actually this may be the best of times to start, as every state and county in the region examines its budget and eyes slumping revenues projected well into the future. It's a time to look beyond budget cuts, to examine all the inefficiencies, subsidies and hidden costs of the way we do business, because there is good evidence that growth doesn't pay its way, that any benefits go to a small portion of us, that adding jobs doesn't necessarily reduce the percentage of those who remain unemployed, and that more houses mean higher taxes.

Eben Fodor's book, "Better Not Bigger," provides a start to understanding this. It is an excellent citizens' guide to the true costs of growth. Mr. Fodor, a Maryland native and Oregon-based consultant, explains why in the face of widespread citizen unease about growth, governments encourage it anyhow. It is due to the power of the "growth industry ... an engine powered by the fortunes resulting from land speculation and real estate development ... developers, realtors, contractors, building suppliers ... one of the most powerful political forces in America."

Another insight into "growth is good" comes from Rutgers University economist Paul D. Gottlieb, who has documented metropolitan areas across the nation, such as the Boston metro area, Chattanooga and Milwaukee-Racine, where per capita incomes are rising in the absence of population growth. Too often we just look at the overall size of the economy to measure progress, when the real measure is how each of us is doing.

Then there are the very real economic costs of bulldozing nature as growth marches on. We know now that forests, wetlands, sea grasses, oysters and other natural systems do billions of dollars of valuable work, removing pollutants from air and water. The charge for this? Nothing.

And that's the problem. When we develop a forest, we add the expenditures for construction and paving to economic progress - but subtract little for the loss of the forest's immense values. "Treasure the Chesapeake" on bumper stickers is

nice; but until we assign to nature real dollar value, growth will look a lot better than it is.

It seems heresy to argue against growth - political suicide for any elected official. But assuming an end to growth means ruin is like assuming the alternative to obesity must be starvation.

Eating wisely is the answer; and economically the rational alternative to growth is not depression, but economic development - a power company selling energy efficiency versus more energy, builders rehabbing old cities rather than suburbanizing countryside.

We likewise surrender without any real analysis to myths about halting the population increase that underpins our growth economy. Most assume population stability implies abortion or limits on family size. But 82 per cent of U.S. growth, which will take us from 306 million to 450 million by 2070, is immigration-related, and within our ability to quickly and humanely modify.

We can lower birth rates by reducing poverty, raising educational levels and providing voluntary family planning, all solutions most of us can back.

As for the added cost of work now done by desperate immigrants and of the need to support retirees without a constantly growing workforce, other nations such as Norway, Sweden and Australia are showing the way. These nations are not addicted to growth and have a higher quality of life than ours.

And think what a non-growing U.S. would not need to spend on more roads, more power plants, more sewers, more schools, more prisons, and more Bay Bridges.

Jumpstarting the growth economy may be politically inevitable in the short run, but we need simultaneously to rethink the grow-or-die mentality that ultimately renders all our environmental gains temporary.

Tom Horton covered the bay for 33 years for The Baltimore Sun, and is author of six books about the Chesapeake. His latest book is "The Nanticoke: Portrait of a Chesapeake River" with photographer David W. Harp. Distributed by Bay Journal News Service.