

Driven By Desire

Why The Global Economy Won't Satisfy Us

an interview with George Draffan

DERRICK JENSEN

Every day, George Draffan receives calls requesting information on corporate activity around the globe. On Tuesday, an environmental group in Indonesia might call: Weyerhaeuser is moving into the area, and they want to know the company's history. The next day, it's someone from Washington, D.C., wanting to know which corporations are behind a phony nonprofit. Ask Draffan to trace the connections between oil transnationals and Central American political unrest, and in a few days or weeks, you can expect a full explanation, complete with complex yet readable graphics.

Draffan has had a greater influence on my thinking than any other single person. For more than a decade, he and I have been having long conversations about our culture's destructiveness and what it will take for us to find — or remember — a more sane way to live. And for more than a decade, his stubborn insistence on pursuing these arguments to their logical conclusions has inspired me to move forward, or prodded me when my reasoning is faulty.

George and I met in 1990, when we came together with activist and physician John Osborn to write a book on how timber companies in the Pacific Northwest illegally obtain land that is part of the public domain. I was the lead writer; George, the lead researcher. For several years, we worked together on that slim volume, sometimes churning out thirty pages in a weekend, other times spending several days fighting over a word. The book came out in 1995 and is now the centerpiece of a national effort to take back public land illegally held by timber transnationals. George and I are currently working on two more book projects: one about corporate welfare, and the other on the philosophy that underlies our economic system.

George was born in 1954 and raised in Wisconsin. He discovered activism in the summer of

his fifteenth year, when an uncle in Washington State took him to see a clear-cut. Looking at the ravaged, treeless mountainside, George knew what he had to do with his life. Around the same time, he first learned about Buddhism, which helped him make sense of the chaos of his teenage years. He studied Buddhism and history at the University of Wisconsin and received a master's in librarianship from the University of Washington. In the early 1980s, George joined Earth First! and helped found that organization's first Washington State chapter. He is still a practicing Buddhist, and that spiritual tradition informs his understanding of the economic and political realities in today's world.

These days, George runs the Public Information Network, an organization providing research services and training to citizens working for corporate and governmental accountability (P.O. Box 95316, Seattle, WA 98145-2316, (206)723-4276). The Network's website, www.endgame.org, is one of the best activism sites I've seen, full of useful, shocking, enlightening, and entertaining information. My favorite feature is the quotes from famous people criticizing our economic system, like this one from Abraham Lincoln:



George Draffan

I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. . . . Corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed.

In a sense, I've been interviewing George for ten years, but this particular discussion took

place on a beautiful afternoon in May in the sunny dining room of his home in south Seattle, where he lives with his partner, Julene Schlack. We were sitting downwind of a Boeing manufacturing plant, and although we could not see the plant's toxic emissions, we were absorbing them into our bodies as surely as we took in the air, the sunlight, and each other's conversation.

Jensen: We keep hearing that international trade is good, but you've said that, if you could do just one thing to slow environmental destruction, you'd stop international trade. Why?

Draffan: The people who tell you that an economy dependent on international trade is good are the people who benefit from it, and they're a very small minority. Most people in the world don't benefit. The people at the top of the pyramid claim that, if trade is expanded, everyone will enjoy the same advantages, but what the rest of the world gets is a lot of sacrifice and deprivation and destruction.

Jensen: Isn't international trade good for the "development" of non-industrialized nations? The only way they can "join us," we're told, is if we "liberalize" trade.

Draffan: That's what we hear, but the more international trade there is, the higher the Third World debt becomes. The poorer nations have been paying off hundreds of billions of dollars in debt over the last couple of generations, yet the wealth gap between the industrialized North and the poor nations of the South is growing. Wherever there's been economic "restructuring" to enable poor nations to join the "new world order," unemployment and income disparity within that country have increased. Once again, it's good for the elites at the top — if you consider consuming more than your share a good thing.

In the current system, "development" is a euphemism, much like "efficiency." Efficiency is really a measure of how fast you can turn forests and mountains into wastepaper and soda-pop cans. If the purpose of life is to consume and destroy, then international trade and industrial civilization are definitely proven ways to speed up that process. International trade is the ultimate institutional and economic tool for increasing our ability to consume, destroy, and work our will on the world.

Jensen: Were human beings always this destructive?

Draffan: It wasn't until we began to see ourselves as separate from the world that we started to see every other

being as a mere thing, and to believe that we could get away with working our will upon them — without consequences.

But our power to impose our will has far outstripped our ability to discern what's sustainable. The international-trade system is clearly beyond our capacity to control or use in a sustainable, democratic way. In fact, any economy that extends beyond the face-to-face community level is going to cause problems. How can I be a responsible citizen while participating in an international market? Even if my intent is to do good, I can have only the slightest knowledge of the impacts of my consumption. I can't know what injustice or ecological destruction the manufacture and purchase of my computer, for example, has wreaked. I've had no contact

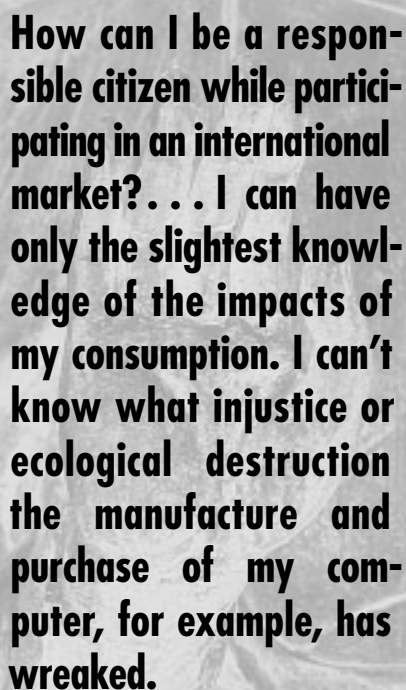
with the women in Thailand who will get cancer from putting hard drives together. It is impossible to understand all the social and environmental impacts of a computer made in a dozen different countries. That's why both consumers and industries are so enamored of the idea of certifying that certain products are environmentally friendly, so that the consumer can just walk into the store and buy the computer with the green star on the box: no thinking, just confident consuming.

Jensen: Buying a computer provides a good example of something you've described to me before: how our economy fragments us into many parts — in this case, consumer and citizen — and that these fragments are often pitted against each other.

Draffan: Exactly. It's clearly in my best interest as a consumer to have my computer made by a woman who is thousands of miles away, doesn't get paid enough, and isn't protected by health and safety regulations. That's how I get the

cheapest products. As a citizen, on the other hand, I'm appalled by the injustice of this system.

But no matter how clear my perception or how pure my intent, as a consumer in the global economy, I'm still drawn into situations that, as a human being, I find abhorrent. I have spent the majority of my working life examining the impacts of the global economy and trying to change the system, but I still drive a car and buy computers assembled by underpaid people in the Third World. I live a mile downwind of a Boeing airplane factory that produces toxic waste. All that I know about toxins wasn't enough to keep me from living here. I can live with these contradictions, though I may well die from cancer because of them. Polls indicate that most Americans consider themselves environmentalists



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— yet we're killing ourselves and destroying our ecosystem's ability to function.

It's too simplistic, though, to say that if we could stop international trade, then ecological sustainability would be possible. International trade, nuclear energy, the World Bank: these things are just tools; they're not the cause of the problem. The cause has to do with human fear and greed and aggression. We're not capable of having a global economy because we can't trust ourselves with a tool of such power.

Jensen: This talk about the hidden impacts of consumption reminds me of a dinner you and I once had at which we tried to trace the origin of everything we ate.

Draffan: I remember. It was at that great Vietnamese restaurant in Spokane. You had lemongrass chicken with chile, and I had stir-fried vegetables. The scenario we concocted went something like this: The chicken was raised on an Arkansas factory farm owned by Tyson Foods, which supplies one-quarter of America's chickens and ships its products as far away as Japan. The chicken was fed corn from Nebraska and grain from Kansas, and was one of about 17 million chickens processed by Tyson that week. Once frozen, the bird was put onto a truck made from plastics manufactured in Texas, steel milled in Japan from ore mined in Australia, chromium mined in South Africa, and aluminum processed in the United States from bauxite mined in Jamaica. The truck's parts were assembled in Mexico. As the truck brought the frozen chickens to Spokane, it burned fuel refined in Texas, Oklahoma, California, and Washington from oil originating beneath Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Mexico, Texas, and Alaska.

As for my dish: The broccoli was grown in Mexico in a field fertilized with, among other things, ammonium nitrate from the U.S., phosphorus mined and processed by Freeport McMoRan from deposits in Florida, and potassium from potash deposits in Saskatchewan. The potash was processed by a multinational mining, oil, and chemical company such as Texasgulf or Noranda. The pesticides we ingested were equally cosmopolitan.

Another company associated with nearly every facet of that meal was Akzo Nobel, a chemical company with 350 facilities in fifty countries. It makes the chicken vaccines that allow Tyson to keep its operations relatively disease-free, as well as automobile coatings and chemicals used at many stages in the agricultural and manufacturing processes.

And that's only two ingredients in our meal. The point

is that, within the global economy, the simple pleasure of eating a fine meal in a local restaurant is tied inescapably to pernicious activities around the globe: monopoly practices and union-busting, the cruelty and debasement of factory farming and water pollution in Arkansas; loss of topsoil and the depletion of the Oglala Aquifer in Nebraska and Kansas; air pollution in Japan; toxic mining wastes in Australia, South Africa, and Jamaica; chemical pollution from refineries; degradation from oil exploration and extraction in four countries; soil toxification, labor exploitation, and the poisoning of agricultural workers in Mexico; air, water, and ground pollution in the U.S. and Canada — the list goes on and on.

We could perform the same exercise for the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, or any other activity that calls for participation in the global economy. The consumer products, the cruelty, the pollution, the exploitation, the debasement — all are tied together in this complex web.

Jensen: The global economy seems a parody of Indra's web, the ancient metaphor for the interdependence of all things.

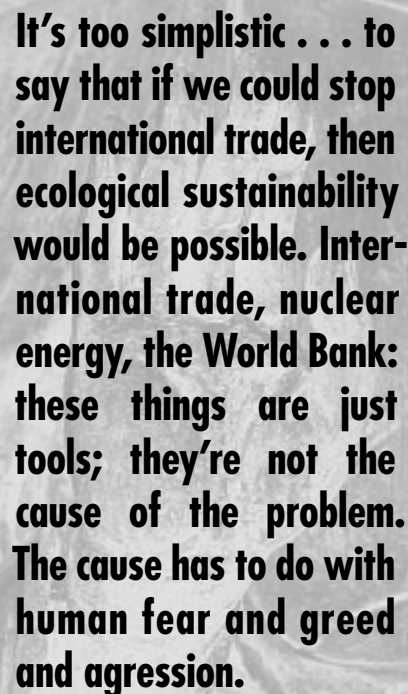
Draffan: A Buddhist teacher once created a model of Indra's web for a Chinese emperor. The web he made was a net with a jewel in each knot, such that, in the sunlight, each jewel reflected all the other jewels. If you touched one part of the web, the entire web shimmered. The model illustrated how each person and thing in the universe exists in relation to everything else: everything is completely interdependent.

Indra's web is not intended to be a description of a staggeringly beautiful ecosystem. The knots include greed and violence and wanton destruction, as well as sunlight and love and cooperation. So the global

economy is not a parody of Indra's web — it *is* Indra's web. And it's in sorry shape.

The idea that you can't touch one part of the web without affecting the whole thing is simple to grasp intellectually, but if you try to live as if everything you do has infinite repercussions, the implications are enormous: no more denial — or, at least, no more excuses for it. Denial, we see, has consequences, too.

The root of the problem is the belief that I'm a separate unit, independent of the web. But, despite my denial, I'm smack in the middle of the web, and I'm going to get cancer from the toxic waste, and the laborers who put my consumer goods together are going to get cancer, and to believe otherwise is delusion.



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Jensen: Speaking of delusions, let's talk about subsidies.

Draffan: A subsidy was originally understood to be a public expenditure for a social good. Nowadays, though, it's usually aimed at giving an unfair advantage to a corporation or an industry. Subsidies are a prime example of privatization and externalization, the two sides of the modern global economic coin. Corporations privatize the commonwealth — the water, the forests, the labor — for profit and externalize as many of the costs as possible, passing them on to communities, workers, and nonhuman species.

Nuclear power is a good example of how subsidies are used to externalize costs. It's an incredibly inefficient and expensive way of producing energy — so inefficient that, once you've built a nuclear plant, the most efficient thing you can do is shut it down. From almost any perspective, be it economic, environmental, or engineering, these power plants should never be built. And they wouldn't be built without massive influxes of public money in the form of subsidies. After World War II, Bechtel and Westinghouse and the other energy and engineering corporations went to the government and said they couldn't build the plants unless the government took care of uranium enrichment and liability insurance and other costs. Being the subsidizing wing of the corporate-state economy, the government obliged, passing financial, health-related, and environmental costs on to the public.

The entire economy depends on externalizing costs. Total U.S. corporate profits are about \$500 billion a year. Corporate accountant Ralph Estes' conservative estimate of the externalized costs of the American economy — pollution, health and safety, acid rain, crime, and so on — comes to about \$3 trillion a year. So profits amount to about a sixth of the costs. Clearly, we're mining the earth, expending "human resources," and foisting the huge costs onto the environment and future generations.

The public's forests are sold for below cost to multinational corporations like Boise Cascade and Louisiana Pacific. Electricity is sold at a discount to the aluminum industry in the Pacific Northwest — electricity that comes from dams that were built at the public's expense, dams that wiped out the salmon and destroyed Native American cultures. Manufacturers dump toxic waste into the drinking water and leave it for the taxpayer to clean up. Across the country, there are thousands of "brownfields" — abandoned, toxic manufacturing sites that are being cleaned up one by one at

the public's expense.

Billions of dollars are spent taking care of people made sick by automobile pollution. That's a subsidy not only to the automobile industry, but to our entire car culture. We might think a car costs twenty thousand dollars, but it's subsidized thousands of dollars each year by publicly maintained streets and highways, health care, and disposal of wastes.

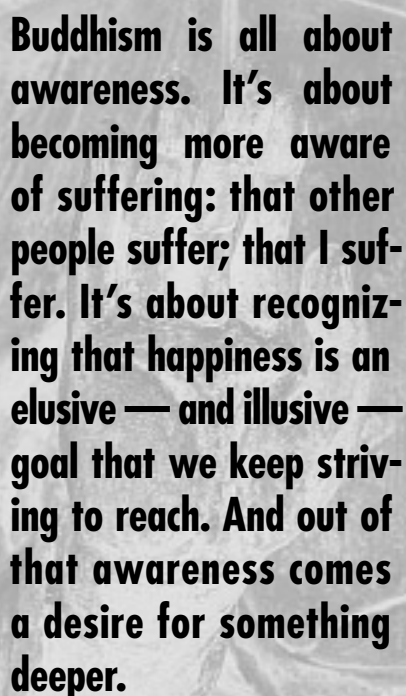
Jensen: The military is a giant subsidy, with the government making direct cash payments to Rockwell and Boeing.

Draffan: And corporations are also subsidized through the use of military force to create "favorable business climates." As former secretary of defense William Cohen said to a group of Fortune 500 leaders, "Business follows the flag. . . . We provide the security. You provide the investment." I'd say that the public provides the subsidy not only for the security, but for the investment, as well.

Our corporate culture has institutionalized these subsidies, which include oil-company tax breaks, below-cost grazing on public lands for ranchers, free access to public airwaves for the media, and public money for pharmaceutical research and development. When a corporation dumps toxic waste, we not only subsidize it with human lives, but if the affected community sues, the corporation gets to deduct the cost of its legal defense from its taxes. The taxes corporations do pay are nowhere near enough to mitigate their social and ecological impacts.

These are only the direct subsidies; the indirect subsidies shimmer out across the web. Our whole political process has been warped to the point where it serves primarily as a legal and economic tool to facilitate the externalization of costs and the privatization of profits. For example, the costs of lobbying, whereby corporations influence the political process, are also tax-deductible — which means taxpayers actually subsidize corporate interference with the political process. It's completely counterproductive for everyone except the few people at the top. Yet we operate under the delusion that we all benefit from it. Because I can "afford" to buy a car or a computer, I think I'm getting away with something. We're buying ourselves off temporarily, but in the end, we don't get away with anything.

(end of excerpt)



Buddhism is all about awareness. It's about becoming more aware of suffering; that other people suffer; that I suffer. It's about recognizing that happiness is an elusive — and illusive — goal that we keep striving to reach. And out of that awareness comes a desire for something deeper.