Environmental crisis, democracy and morality

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The world will celebrate World Environmental Day on June 5. This day highlights the importance of conserving our environment for the future of this planet. The increased awareness of global environmental challenges is a positive signal toward better action to prevent environmental damage.

Do we really care about the environment? And are we responding adequately to environmental problems including climate change and natural disasters?

Climate change has undeniably become a major environmental issue today. After the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, it took people more than a decade to wake up to the certainty of climate change. Global campaigns on climate change and its possible impacts have increased people's awareness of the issue. Today, more people believe that severe droughts in many parts of the world are the direct impact of the climate changes.

Alterations to climate patterns has led to many natural catastrophes. Australia, for example, is aware of the need to react adequately to climate change given the future of the country's water supply is threatened.

"Climate change is the most severe problem we face today, more serious than the threat of terrorism", said David King, a leading UK scientist.

About 2,300 scientists, in the first section of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which was released in February 2007, agreed that there had been severe changes to the environment compared to the report in 2001 and that the world must respond immediately. However, this is not the only problem. A lack of disaster management in many countries, including Indonesia, has made us unable to prevent huge devastation caused by natural disasters. The condition is worsened still by politics.

Why politics? Recently, the Myanmar military junta failed to anticipate Cyclone Nargis' impact. It is believed that the Myanmar authority was in a state of denial and, therefore, did not take any preemptive actions before the cyclone hit. The junta then rejected international hands offering help. The death toll increased because the post-disaster response was inadequate. It shows that dictatorships fail to save its citizens from tragedies.

Authoritarian governments also have suffered environmental abuses. The Chernobyl disaster is a leading example of environmental abuse by the ambitious agenda of an authoritarian government, the Soviet Union. Indonesia's repressive New Order regime also had a bad record of environmental management, some of which are still problems now.

David Shearman and Joseph Wayne Smith, however, in Climate Challenges and the Failure of Democracy (2007), insist that liberal democracy has also failed to conserve and nurture better
future environments. Liberal democracy even triggers worse environmental conditions than caused by dictatorships. Is this true?

Democracy has two fundamental values: Individual freedom and liberalism. Each person is free to choose to do whatever they want. These values are then reflected by the market and capitalism. The development of the market and capitalism has caused the world to grow rapidly.

The market has turned into market fundamentalism, says Johan Galtung. With capitalism, the market is only for capitalists. The market is only aimed to feed most people in democratic welfare societies. Hence, there is no global justice. A lack of access to the market has caused millions of people to live in poverty and around 100,000 people to die every day due to famine.

Democracy offers freedom, but what is missing is collective responsibility, argues SheARMAN and Smith. This freedom has to be defended. Threats to the individual freedoms and welfare enjoyed by democratic states, even though they are sometimes ambiguous, should be dismissed. Things that are good for the rest of the world, but not good enough for developed democratic countries must be refused.

This is the reason why the United States declines to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Democracy is also manipulated as mechanism for powerful nations to control the world. Building a democratic Iraq was used as an excuse to invade that country, which has caused huge devastation including environmental damage. We then see liberal democracy metamorphoses, slowly but surely, to authoritarianism, which potentially abuses power and the environment.

It is true that poverty has led to environmental destruction. This is the story of the third world. Poor people, for example, cut down the forest and cause forest degradation. The wealthy, nevertheless, causes more problems to the environment. More resources are needed to supply the demand of wealthy people.

The ecological footprints of people in welfare democratic societies need more resources than they have. These ecological deficits are filled from outside their countries, that is, from developing countries. More reserves are exploited in the third world just to meet this demand.

If poverty causes localised environmental destruction, wealth has global impacts. Consequently, poor countries are in a dilemmatic position. They face environmental destruction due to poverty on the one hand and they suffer from the indirect impacts of supplying the developed countries’ demand on the other hand.

This condition is not getting better as consumption becomes higher. People consume more than they need.

In short, this global imbalance is not only causing global poverty, but also environmental degradation. Therefore, we need a new morality toward the environment.

We have to build collective responsibility to save our earth. We have to nurture global consciousness and encourage global justice. We have to reassert control over the market and capitalism. Politics should not be viewed as who gets what share of the pie, but about how and what the power is to be used. Politics and power have to be used to foster global justice.

Finally, we have to ask ourselves: are we really ready to think more about our future? This must begin with the individual. Without collective consciousness and responsibility, our hope for a better future for the earth will remain a dream. Are you ready?

The writer is a lecturer at the School of Forestry, University of Bengkulu, and a doctoral...
candidate at James Cook University, Australia. He can be reached at yansen.yansen@jcu.edu.au

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