Earl L. Butz's Viewpoint

Our Greatest Risk

The Real Danger Is That We May Quit Risking

Americans live in a risk filled world.

We have always been daring adventurers and big risk takers. From the western-bound prairie schooner of two centuries ago to the heaven-bound rocket Challenger of our day, Americans have risked their lives and their fortunes to conquer new frontiers.

In these adventures, some Americans did lose their lives, some their fortunes . . . some lost both. Yet all of these people were driven to risk, always by the dream of something better than what they already had, and/or by the dream of greater reward if the risk paid off.

Advances Involve Cost

These material advances have not been without their cost. As a growing population presses against a limited resource base, we are properly concerned about soil loss and water depletion; we appropriate tremendous sums behind the banners of clean air and pure water; we are told that chemicals poison the food we eat and that antibiotics fed to livestock endanger the health of meat eaters. Animal rightists protest the way we produce our meat and milk, and raid biological laboratories to "free" research animals being used to advance human health.

The explosion of product liability suits that clog our courts discourages research and new product development in the area of both animal and human health.

The growing risk of risk-taking, and the drive for a "safe" environment, may easily slow the level of opulence for all of us.

Today, with the world's population, heavily concentrated in urban areas, at over 5 billion people and pushing toward 6 billion by the end of this century, there is little opportunity to expand horizontally. We must expand vertically, into the realm of science. And this means more chemicals—not less; more growth stimulants—not less; more bio-engineering—not less; more antibiotics—not less; more pesticides—not less; in short, more risk-taking—not less.

Agriculture must gear up to feed 20 percent more people in this world by the year 2000, and 60 percent more by another third of a century. And do it on less land.

As we face the prospect of producing more and better food on a shrinking resource base, we must come face-to-face with the troublesome question of using more non-land inputs to get the job done. Caution must be exercised that we don't go overboard in our hysteria to clean up the environment and make everything *absolutely* safe.

We must decide how much we are willing to pay for a better quality of life.

We Always Take Risks

This is a world in which we constantly offset risk against benefit. We never completely insure our car against all hazards, our dwelling against total loss, our life for what it is *really* worth, or our health against every sickness. In practically every phase of our activity we take some chance. We are constantly trying to evolve a risk-benefit ratio which satisfies each of us, and which each of us can afford. If we completely insure against every risk, we may end up with nothing left with which to enjoy our new-found *safe* position.

Modern agriculture cannot continue to produce adequate amounts of safe and wholesome food without substantial use of chemicals and antibiotics. If we were seriously to curtail their use on farms and in the food industry, we would immediately experience a decline in the quantity and overall quality of our food supply.

Our problem today is that two-thirds of living Americans never had the experience of biting into a wormy apple, seeing the wormhole, and wondering "Did I eat that worm or is he still in the apple?" They think that God and nature made all apples good.

Ecology Is Severe On Man

The plain truth is that the ecology of nature is really severe on man, and man is constantly trying to modify it.

Let's be honest about it: God put the worm in the apple; man took it out. God put the worm in the apple; man took it out. Man used poison to get it out—deadly poison. But the good part is that you can't buy a bad apple in your town today.

How far back to nature do our ecologists want to go? Or, if they are honest with themselves, do they really want to go at all?

We must decide how much we are willing to pay for a better quality of life beyond that which is truly necessary. This nation can move forward with great effectiveness toward the achievement of a better quality of life for all.

The agricultural economist is uniquely qualified to assess the benefits that will flow from revolutionary new discoveries that await us, and then to balance benefits against the attendant risk, real or imagined.

It is completely unacceptable to believe that there is no way out of the problems we have created. Unquestionably, there are risks involved, but none so great as the risk that we may quit risking, try vainly to set the clock back, and abjectly surrender the goal of a better world in the mistaken belief that this one is as good as can be. C

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