

The values of an hour for Earth and Human Achievement

To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction: this venerable scientific principle on the motion of objects seems equally applicable to the generation and transmission of ideas.

It certainly seems to apply to the Earth Hour initiative which encourages people to switch off their lights for one hour each year as a demonstration of popular commitment to reducing energy consumption and hence Greenhouse gas emission contributions to Global Warming. The WWF initiative began in Sydney in 2007 and involved an estimated 2.2 million people and 2,100 businesses in that first year. It has now spread internationally, with an estimated 4,300 cities and towns in 126 countries celebrating the 2010 event in March this year. One of the key messages of Earth Hour is that from millions of small actions "taken as one" each individual action can be "part of something that is now a worldwide call for action on protecting our environment. A now-global call for a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature." (Earth Hour 2010)

Human Achievement Hour, on the other hand, is an initiative launched in the USA in 2009 and which runs in the same timeslot as Earth Hour but, which in contrast, is set up to "salute the people who keep the lights on and produce the energy that helps make human achievement possible. So far as Human Achievement Hour proponents are concerned it seems that Earth Hour "isn't pro-earth, it is anti-man and anti-innovation" (Competitive Enterprise Institute, 2010).

Given the reactionary nature of much human thinking it is not totally surprising that Earth Hour has started to attract its critics. And I think it is instructive to look at the differing beliefs and values or 'Worldviews' underlying the criticisms being made in order to understand the different human-environment relationships that are being represented by Earth and Human Achievement Hour.

The public can be often confused by the great complexity and overwhelming amount of information that is generated by concerns for the environment. Just below the surface of this surfeit of scientific and technical information, however, often lie some quite simplistic beliefs about human-environment problems and their solutions. If we better understand these sometimes hidden assumptions, we may be more able to open up the examination of environmental problems such as Global Warming or Deforestation to balanced and sensible scrutiny. This will then contrast to the polarised, claim and counter-claim, process that characterises much of the so-called environmental debate at present.

So, viewing it in this way, to me Earth Hour's underlying Worldview reflects the notion that all human beings are, to some extent, responsible for the impact they create on the Planet by the nature of their lifestyles. Responsibility, in turn, implies the awareness and acceptance of consequences for one's actions, both good and bad. It also influences principles such as fair dealing in our lives and 'doing the right thing' where possible. In fact, acceptance of appropriate responsibility could be argued to form the basis for living a good and ethical life. I believe Earth Hour appeals to an underlying sense of ethics, fairness and responsibility that many of us possess to lesser or greater degree. These are our personal compass points that guide how we deal with other people, species, and the wider environment about us. The very large number of people

involved in Earth Hour after only a few years, I believe, testifies to this desire to 'do the right thing' by the environment by signalling a powerful desire for change. I think the appeal must also lie in feeling oneself a part of such a tangible, mass action, of people seeking change from the community scale upwards. And this at a time when many have lost faith in their governments and representative bodies to take serious and effective action on environmental problems such as human induced Climate Change or Global Warming.

Then contrast the personal responsibility and environmentally ethical themes associated with Earth Hour with the unashamedly and technology-centred perspective of Human Achievement Hour. Have a look at the Website of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) in the USA, the free-market think tank that initiated Human Achievement Hour. It appears to advocate for the power of technology and minimal environmental controls to solve our problems, including Global Warming. The CEI developed and launched Human Achievement Hour, seemingly as a direct reaction to Earth Hour and based upon the beliefs that "environmental challenges will not be solved by turning off our lights and symbolically hiding in the dark. If anything, we should be looking to technology and innovation to help solve environmental problems" (CEI 2010).

In Australia, the cause of Human Achievement Hour seems to have been taken up by a number of climate change sceptics and at least one right-wing think tank, the Conservative Leadership Foundation, which carried the following recent quote on their Website "Millions of people around the world will be showing their support for Human Achievement Hour by simply going about their daily lives. While Earth Hour activists will be left in the dark, Human Achievement Hour participants will be going to the cinema, enjoying a hot meal, driving their car or watching television" (Conservative Leadership Foundation 2010).

I think that such comments derive from a value and belief system that puts almost absolute faith on the power of a 'business as usual' economy, coupled with 'technological fixes' to get us out of any mess we encounter; human induced or otherwise. This Worldview appears in particularly uncompromising form within Human Achievement Hour because of the deliberately reactionary nature of the initiative. But echoes of the same mantras of 'the market will provide' and 'we have the technology' can also be heard in areas as diverse as recent debate on Australian national and regional population strategies, the development of so called 'clean' fossil fuel use, and the more wildly inventive proposals for tackling Global Warming: from fertilising oceanic plankton, to setting up giant, heat reflective, mirror arrays in planetary orbit.

The belief and value systems underlying the Earth and Human Achievement Hour initiatives come from two, competing, Worldviews on the nature of human relationship with the environment of Planet Earth. The environment that ultimately sustains us all. Or do they? Does it have to be either/or? Can we not both accept personal responsibility for those contributions we can reasonably make towards the ecological health of the Planet while looking to our leaders and Governments to show strong and responsible decision making towards the same goal? Do we have

to be branded into two camps? Greenies, literally living in the dark to save energy? Or wilfully ignorant free marketeers, with an unlimited faith in the latest, shiny technology to fix a nasty environmental problem? I would argue we need elements of both Worldviews. For example, can we not all see the vital potential of the contribution of genuinely innovative and environmentally-friendly technologies to move us toward a sustainable future?

Above all, we need social and ethical, not just scientific, consensus on how to deal with Global Warming and environmental problems generally. We need to develop ways of generating respectful awareness and debate regarding our different value and belief systems as they apply to environmental problems. What we don't need is further reactionary point scoring. The true human achievement in this area will be the ability to move beyond petty and partisan perspectives to develop consensual, well-designed, sets of balanced strategies that take the international community, both human and non-human, into an ecologically sustainable future on this very small and fragile blue Planet.

by Andrew Nicholson

Earth Hour (2010) Website <http://www.earthhour.org.au/> accessed 06/04/2010

*Competitive Enterprise Institute (2010) Website <http://cei.org/human-achievement-hour>
Accessed 06/04/2010*

Conservative Leadership Foundation (2010) Website <http://www.conservative.org.au/human-achievement-hour.html> accessed 06/04/2010