

Conventional Wisdom in the Balance

*Peter Huber has written a book, **Hard Green**, that many have described as a conservative alternative to Vice President Al Gore's **Earth in the Balance**. Huber's book outlines a conservative manifesto that challenges many traditional theories that self-styled environmentalists have long presented as undeniable facts.*

To get a flavor of Huber's *Hard Green* philosophy, you need only read a few excerpts on the jacket of his book. For example:

- There is no inherent scarcity of food, fuel, metal, mineral or space to bury our trash. When we exhaust economic goods, we grow, find or invent others to replace them.

- The one real growing scarcity is scarcity of wilderness. We should maintain and extend protected forests, lakes, shores, wetlands and wilderness.

- Fertilizers, pesticides, growth hormones and genetic engineering allow us to transform earth, sun, corn and wheat, chicken and cow, into edible calories more efficiently. Soft alternatives are less green because they use more land.

Huber is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a columnist for *Forbes Magazine*. An MIT-trained engineer and a Harvard law graduate, Huber taught engineering at MIT, and served as a law clerk to then-appellate judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Huber visited Florida in April to speak to a leadership program sponsored by the Agricultural Institute of Florida. Florida Agriculture Editor Ed Albanesi and Florida Farm Bureau Public Relations Manager Rod Hemphill worked around Huber's tight schedule by volunteering to pick him up at Orlando International Airport for the 70-minute ride to the FFA Training Center in Haines City.

Albanesi warned Huber that they would be playing devil's advocate by

asking him some tough questions. Huber smiled and invited a no-holds-barred line of questioning.

Florida Agriculture: You are in favor of conserving what you call "uneconomical things" such as forests, lakes, wetlands, etc. Does this conflict with your philosophy of unleashing markets? For example, much of South Florida was drained and filled for agricultural and residential development. Was this a good thing?

Huber: You have to view it in context. First, agriculture is our main use of the environment. A lot more real estate is used by agriculture than is used by highways, homes or factories. The second really striking fact about U. S. agriculture is that over the course of two centuries, we have steadily shrunk our footprint on the wilderness. We've been getting more and more food out of less and less land. In the course of this century we've moved our agriculture to the most productive places and then used the transportation and distribution systems to get the food to where it was needed. Florida doesn't just feed people in this state. It feeds the country and other parts of the world. In that context, using real estate in Florida efficiently has been a very positive development. Viewed in isolation, there's no question if you take a wetland which could be wilderness and have a farm there, of course you have less wilderness. But the trade-off for the environment as a whole has been positive.

Florida Agriculture: Government controls many of the markets it regulates: for example, municipal-owned utilities. Given this, are things like government-mandated water conservation worth the effort?

Huber: I think agriculture has got to find efficient means to allocate water when it is scarce. Clearly, on the downstream end, you have to think about pollution and I address those aspects of water in my book. But when government gets down to the point where they're dictating size of our toilet cisterns, this is government meddling for the sake of meddling. Those

kinds of things never fit realistically with real needs and real opportunities.

Florida Agriculture: Some may see a conflict between your support of conservation of land and water and water resources and your less-than-enthusiastic view of the value of recycling. Is there a conflict there?

Huber: What worries me most about recycling is that it gives people the fake illusion that they are doing something really good for the environment. Real conservation isn't about trash. Real conservation is taking wilderness spaces that we treasure, whether it's the Grand Canyon or the Everglades, and making intelligent choices about how much we want to develop or not develop them. The notion that you can duck those hard problems, or sidestep them by sifting through what's in your trash bag is a distraction.

Florida Agriculture: You make the point that hard power is greener than

soft power because it is more efficient and consumes less material and land. But doesn't it also produce more pollution?

Huber: First, there is absolutely no question that if you dig up your fuels rather than trying to harvest them across the surface, in most places that means using very much less land at the front end, per unit of energy used. It is certainly the case that (using underground fuel sources) doesn't cause more pollution. If you tried fueling the vehicles in Florida from the farmland in Florida, you'd be talking about a massive expansion in usage of real estate and a massive expansion in your transportation system to move all that biomass around.

Florida Agriculture: You say nature has a great power to cleanse. You also say that the best way to purify water is to maintain unspoiled watersheds. Should man or nature be in charge of maintaining unspoiled watersheds?

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Huber: Some combination of both... nature begins with what we would define as unspoiled watersheds. That sure doesn't mean you can drink every drop of water in a mangrove swamp. And clearly there is an important objective of wide open spaces and wilderness areas. Nature will not leave those areas untouched on its own. Those are choices we will make and we have made. Wealth and high technology and agricultural efficiency are what have let us conserve large areas of wilderness and, better still, return large areas to the wilderness.

Florida Agriculture: Governments get involved in markets because other governments make the playing field uneven. Can the U.S. government actually serve the best interests of its commerce and economy by ignoring economic goods while foreign governments are not?

Huber: Much as I favor free trade, other countries can do ruinous things and simultaneously ruin themselves and other people as well. A coherent case can be made to say to not let (another country's) economic insanity become a plague in our country as well. But don't quote me as saying I'm for protection on everything or your favorite product. Those things have got to be studied on a case-by-case basis and you've got to know the facts.

Florida Agriculture: What do you think of EPA's implementation of the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA)?

Huber: There's no doubt that it's possible to take pesticides and other chemicals and use them badly and, if you're stupid enough, to toxic effect. We

know that these studies that have predicted every cancer and every mortality from these things 10 or 20 times over. You just add up all the ill effects they have predicted and we're all dead not once, but 20 times over; which tells you from the get-go these models are very easy to create, and most of them are wrong. Intelligent use of pesticides has one clear effect and that is they stop pests from eating your produce in the fields or during transportation. That means more food from fewer acres. And more food from fewer acres means a smaller footprint for agriculture. The real ecological catastrophes are occurring in countries that don't use these technologies, not those that do. The best thing that we could do for ecology worldwide is get a lot of these technologies in the hands of (Third World) farmers who are not using them.

Florida Agriculture: What's your take on biotechnology?

Huber: I'm vaguely heartened by the fact that despite their (biotech opponents) most desperate PR, they don't seem to have made much of a dent. I'm hoping that it will stay that way but I'm sure not sanguine. And of course in Europe, they've gone way over the top and we all know why. Europe is doing pure agricultural protectionism. There's not the slightest doubt about it. I'm heartened because, for Americans, biotech means more and better food for lower prices. For Third World it can mean more nutrition. In this country, intelligent genetic engineering can be a direct substitute for pesticides. Serious people

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in this country are not opposed to biotechnology. As far as I can tell, there is a certain kind of mindset that says if large corporate agriculture, backed by large Monsanto-like companies has any hand in it, then it has to be bad and we're against it. There's no logic to it.

Hard Green by Peter Huber is available at most bookstores and can also be ordered through Amazon.com

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Editor's note: I attended Peter Huber's presentation to the Ag Institute in Haines City last April. While many of his comments are directed at agricultural concerns, his macro thinking may have a bearing on how the turf industry might view its footprint on the environment.

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