

Search for the common ground

Robert Redford

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Search for the common ground

Robert Redford

"Concern for the quality of life is our common ground."

How we as a nation develop and use our natural resources has become an issue of such critical proportions that it may well be the largest problem before us as we move toward the next millenium. Business and environmental leaders need to recognize that although strong measures and extreme points of view are sometimes necessary to create action, *real* advances can't be made if both sides stubbornly hold on to those extremes.

Strong positions can be bargaining tools to be used by each side to get the other to move toward the center and create a workable blend—but most people don't recognize these positions as bargaining stances. They cling to them with childish notions, hoping desperately to be right—so they can be better, bigger, and, hence, more powerful. But the battles we have been fighting for years can't be won or lost. When we are all in the ring and can't get out, there are no winners or losers. And we *are* all in the ring.

There is an inherent loss of humanity when super stances are taken—when two opposing sides push to be right rather than work toward a blend of common interests. One thing is certain, concern for the quality of life is our common ground. This we all share.

Over the years, I have at times been labeled an environmentalist, a radical. This has not been entirely untrue. I do have radical feelings about preservation and conservation of our national resources. I have very strong feelings about the need to preserve portions of land for our spiritual selves. What we pass on to our children should be of major concern to us all. If we don't give future generations some space to be alone, to be at one with nature, "to invite our souls," as Whitman said, then we will have robbed them of their heritage. But in recognizing that we are also a develop-

ment-oriented society, it becomes a matter of finding the balance between what we preserve for our survival and what we develop for our survival.

The fact is, environmentally we're not in great shape. Most of the propaganda that we have been hearing for the last few years about our strength and our progress is beginning to look like a myth. The view that the single-minded quest for profit can thrive at the expense of humanistic and environmental values is backing up on us. For example, the rush to develop pesticides without an understanding of the side effects, or an exploration of the alternatives, led to the toxic waste dilemma. When environmentalists warned this might happen, they were called extremists. The fact is, they were correct in their concerns and their warnings. The safe disposal of toxic and hazardous wastes is now a problem nearly too great to handle.

On the other hand, environmentalists are often more intransigent than businesspeople. Most environmental organizations are trying to either restore or maintain the natural balance of life. But sometimes we have to take down trees, drill for oil, and mine for coal. Sometimes we have to control the population of certain animals which the predator-prey cycle should naturally take care of. Humankind has been the greatest erosion source in modern geological history, and we have to accept some responsibility for this.

Robert Redford is the founder of the Institute for Resource Management. Since the early 1970s, Mr. Redford has been involved with environmental and energy-related issues. He is the author of The Outlaw Trail (Grossett & Dunlap, 1977), which explores the history and future of the American West. Best known for his work as an actor and film director, Redford is also the founder of the Sundance Institute in Utah, a nonprofit center for development and experimentation in the arts.

Middle management is the cause of much of industry's recalcitrance. Because top management was not coming to the arena and overseeing what was going on, they relied on the judgment of staff management. Middle managers were making many of the decisions regarding resources and the environment. Heads of companies had a bottom-line position about profit that they passed on to middle management to accomplish. Consequently, middle managers made decisions using their own knowledge, training, and dispositions, which very often didn't include information about the local people, the environment, the air, the water, the wildlife. What they knew was how to please the boss.

It would be helpful if those mid-level resource managers had a broad knowledge of the issues so they could go back to the boss and say, "We don't think you should mine the coal in that area," or "We don't think you should use that process, and we will tell you why. In the end, you are not going to make the profit you think you will and it's going to be a big headache for us because we'll be the bad guys."

For the most part, top management has been getting a mid-level manager view, a very dry, cautious, fact-filled picture. Chief executives have their eyes opened when they hear the people who live on the land talk, hear their inner needs and fears, and feel their hearts beat. When a person hears an Indian talk about his religious beliefs, why he feels the way he does about the Earth, that it's sacred, that he worships it, it can alter a view about going in and developing the hell out of a piece of land. It makes you stop and think. We can all learn from the Indians' humility.

By the end of the Crownpoint conference, after hearing the tribe speak out so eloquently about its needs for business, the heads of the environmental groups offered to review the plans for the Dineh power project and give the tribe specific analyses of their concerns. That is information the tribe couldn't have gotten so readily before. John Adams, executive director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, offered to provide introduction to the council's contacts to help the tribe broaden its base and open up business opportunities on the reservation.

The environmental leaders saw that they couldn't just say no; they had to work to find alternatives. And it isn't the people in the middle of organizations who can do that; it's the people at the top.

When people get together, their need to be accepted as people is more important to them than their fixed positions. When people get to know one another as names, faces, and histories rather than as proponents of viewpoints, they communicate their humanity. They can't help it. In the long run, it's human nature to want to be with, not against. To want to jump in rather than stand out. Of course we are all disposed otherwise at times. Because we're human, we have

fears and become angry and defensive. That's where the rub is.

We can't reach the future successfully by taking shut-off positions. The planet is too small, too fragile. If the people who have the power to make choices don't start working together, the only place they'll end up is in the courts on a devastated planet. I might feel very strongly about a particular project, but the process of people learning to work together to come to a resolution is more important than whether or not any one plant gets built.

"The process we go through is nothing to be afraid of once you accept that everyone is trying to help. If you can see the other guy as just a guy trying to get to the center as hard as you are, it becomes easier to let out some slack. At the very least we can prevent some problems coming up down the road that can really give environmentalists as well as developers a lot to resolve later."

John H. Adams
Executive Director
Natural Resources Defense
Council

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National security. That's a phrase we're hearing a lot these days. I propose that we think of the environment and our concern for the air, land, water, and resources as "national security." I am amazed when I hear that national security is across the ocean or up there somewhere in another realm. To me, our domestic security, in terms of our own resources, our human resources, is just as much a part of our national security as Star Wars.

I sense in this country a strong anxiety about approaching the year 2000. I think it has something to do with the fact that we have had such accelerated growth and unlimited reach for so long that we are at the point now where we're not so much reaping the benefits of what we've done but becoming the victims of it.

The world has become too small to allow us to maintain old stances, old-fashioned notions that there is all that space out there – manifest destiny. It's antiquated thinking that we have limitless resources and we don't have to worry – technology will somehow solve all our problems. We are at a point now where we can't afford that attitude any longer. We have to be more thoughtful about our actions. If not, we will be stealing from future generations rather than giving to them. To begin, let us search for the common ground. ☺