

PROFILE

A fire-side chat with a leading figure in Ecological Economics about life, the universe, and everything

Clive Spash was born in Reading, England, and grew up in the southern English areas of Berkshire/Oxfordshire and Isle of Wight. During his career he was a Research Assistant at UBC, Canada, and an RA/TA at Wyoming, USA; Lecturer, Economics, Stirling, UK; Lecturer Land Economics, Cambridge, UK; Research Professor, Aberdeen, UK; Senior Research Fellow/Science Leader, CSIRO, Australia. Research groups as manager: Stirling Environmental Economics Research Group; Cambridge Research for the Environment; Aberdeen Socio-Economic Research Programme. He has been ESEE Vice President and President, both for 2 terms. He currently lives in Canberra, Australia. Personal website: <http://www.clivespash.org>.

What was your impression of your local environment when you were a child?

Contrasts. Woodlands, rolling hills, old villages, farms and manor houses, on one side of the Thames, and a decaying Victorian industrial town on the other, with modern re-development slowly making it into a concrete jungle for the car and shoppers. Then there was the Isle of Wight which was more of the former and none of the latter: sea, wind, beaches, cliffs, forests, hills, wildlife, sailing and sunny days, storms and the lifeboat launching and a sense of history and times gone by.

Can you identify a point when you realised you wanted to work on environmental problems?

No point, just a gradual awaking, growing concern and disbelief at mankind's stupidity and destructive power. I was especially concerned by wildlife loss as a child, seemed a big issue at the time, did a fund raiser for "Save the Tiger" around '72, I guess that's an early milestone.

Who were the most influential writers for you when you were a student?

Still studying, learning, looking for influential thinking, but not people. I'm very disenchanted by academic guru stuff; smacks of desperation, egos with answers, hero worship and even individual cults. All seems very divisive and cliquy. People write good and bad stuff, they write one thing and do another; so, as people, they can be disappointing, but ideas should stand or fall on their own. Indeed criticism of ideas is too often confused with people.

I could cite works/contributions that made me think, in specific subject areas, at certain times, in a process of on-going thought, but I'd rather avoid naming people out of context of work, time or place. There really isn't the space to explain here. If we were talking art that's a different matter, far more egotistical, individual expression.

Have your research interests changed since you first started working on environmental issues?

I've changed interests considerably over time. In my formal work I've moved from environmental and resource economics, through natural science studies, such as atmospheric and plant science, in order to understand air pollution problems, into intergenerational ethics and so applied philosophy, and then environmental values and human behaviour and so social psychology. Throw in some political science, history, methodology. My basic drive is the same: how to tread lightly on the planet, live in harmony with and show respect for Nature and others.

Which environmental problems concern you the most at the moment?

Human behaviour, it's the most fundamental there is. Whatever the most recent environmental issue the behavioural cause is the problem. In my professional career we've moved from single point source pollution as "the problem" to acidic deposition to stratospheric ozone depletion to global climate change and biodiversity loss, and who knows what's round the corner? None of these "problems" has been "solved", despite the rhetoric. Too many people, consuming too much and getting very little of anything from it while being told they should want more, the latest, the greatest...; a load of people, consuming very little and getting nowhere fast.

If you had a year off to do whatever you wanted, what would you spend it doing?

I think I'd move to somewhere warm and sunny and do some reading and writing. Y'know, somethin' like being a research fellow in Australia.

Are you generally optimistic or pessimistic about the future? Has your view changed over time?

I try avoiding such generalisations; none too keen on dichotomies either. So take a couple of issues, I thought we'd internalise the externalities of coal fired power generation twenty years ago and now have cleaner technologies in place through capital turnover, it didn't happen; I believe we could've banned all ozone depleting gases globally by now but we haven't, indeed they've

kept on increasing. On most issues I see a way forward, but I despair at the consistent failure of governments to take decisive action and individual humans to act more responsibly. I do what I do because I believe we can change the world, and anyway we'd better try. Of course the continued presence of wars, violence, torture, violation of human rights, trading in humans, absolute poverty and so on ... that's hardly a good record of human conduct or progress now is it?

When you come to modern political economy I think there's a psychological problem. Carl Jung put it something like this: We strive for technologies which generally fail to increase contentment or happiness, but rather, like speedier communications, unpleasantly accelerate the tempo of life and leave us with less time than before. We live more in the future and its chimerical promises of a golden age than in the present, with which our past has not yet caught up; we rush impetuously into novelty, driven by a mounting sense of insufficiency, dissatisfaction, and restlessness; we no longer live on what we have, but on promises, no longer in the light of the present day but in the darkness of the future, which, we expect, will at last bring the proper sunrise.

What sort of local environmental problems are you faced with where you live now?

A "drought", fear of summer fires destroying houses, a suspicion of climate change. Still people use mini-irrigation systems to spray potable water to get green lawns of an imagined England. Living on the driest continent on Earth, in an arid zone, you might expect lifestyles more in touch with environmental boundaries, like growing plants adjusted to the climate. While some strive for just that, many Australians, I get the impression, they're in Boulding's cowboy economy not spaceship earth.

What places (cities, regions, companies) have impressed you with their quality of their environmental management?

I'd like to see an environment which didn't have to be "managed" to maintain its quality, that

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would impress me.

Which figures from the past do you most admire (not just in the environmental field), and why?

The figure zero, because its always perplexed me how to conceptualise nothing. The figure 33 trillion, because it exemplifies scientists' ability to conceptualise something based on nothing.

Do religious beliefs influence your life and work?

They influence my life because there's so many

"religious" people trying to kill each other and succeeding in creating considerable human and environmental misery in the process, let alone paranoia.

Do you think of yourself as a rural or as a city person?

Not really.

How do you relax at the weekend?

I don't.

Do you have a favourite motto or saying

about the environment?

More like anti-mottos. Engineers saying: "dilution is the solution to pollution"; well done boys that was a good one! Or even better, from North America "shoot it if it runs and cut it if it stands".

What is the best piece of advice you've been given?

Some advice from a Mr Thomas of Llandeilo, Wales:

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light, do not go gently into that good night."