

# Classroom Discussion Questions for

## Red Sky at Morning

by James Gustave Speth

### **Prologue: 1980**

1. The Prologue briefly tells the story of how the global warming issue first moved into the national policy arena. How did this happen? How often are inter-agency squabbles involved in such policy discussions? Can you imagine some of the things going on that were not reported in the Prologue?
2. What did we know about climate change in 1980? Are you surprised? By what?
3. What might have happened on Global 2000 issues had President Carter been reelected?
4. Did the Global 2000 effort make a mistake by focusing only on a “base case” or business-as-usual scenario, rather than presenting alternative possibilities?

### **Chapter 1**

1. How serious is global-scale environmental deterioration? What material presented in Chapter 1 do you find most troubling?
2. The title of the book refers to “the crisis of the global environment.” What does the author mean by “crisis?” Do you agree that there is a crisis?
3. Have we seen the “end of nature?” How does this relate to the author’s concept of entering an “endgame in our traditional, historical relationship with the natural world”?
4. The Nobel scientists quoted in this chapter refer to “limits” and “finite” capacities. Are there limits to growth?
5. The author mentions second-order consequences of environmental decay such as “loss of livelihoods, social tensions and conflict, and huge economic costs.” How might these occur? How likely are they?

## **Chapter 2**

1. What are the core reasons for sustaining species and ecosystems as well as their diversity? Which reasons do you find more persuasive (This seems a little redundant.) Which are persuasive with the general public? Can ecosystems provide the same kinds of services with a lower level/index of genetic and species diversity? Why or why not?
2. Can E. O. Wilson possibly be correct when he says that “limited nuclear war” is a smaller matter than “loss of genetic and species diversity”?
3. Do you accept Aldo Leopold’s basic proposition that humans owe ethical duties to other species and their communities? Why or why not?
4. What do you think of the biophilia hypothesis?
5. Is the author’s list of reasons for the decline of biodiversity complete? Can you add to it?
6. Given the politics and poverty in many of the countries rich in tropical forests, what are the prospects for tropical forest conservation without international cooperation and support? Can international assistance make a difference?

## **Chapter 3**

1. Of the three megatrends in environmental deterioration — biotic impoverishment, toxification, and climate disruption — which do you think is the most serious, and why?
2. How would you rank pollution issues — the various types of pollution — in importance? What criteria should be used in doing this ranking?
3. Are you surprised by the degree of pollution in the developing world? What are the various trends at work here?
4. The author devotes over half of this chapter to energy and climate. Why?
5. In this chapter and elsewhere, the author uses many facts and figures drawn from the scientific literature. Why does he do this, especially when it might be easier reading without them?

6. What might the author have to say about the climate disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow*?

7. The author discusses the idea of “equalization of national per capita emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.” What do you think of this as an international goal? Who is likely to be most concerned about it? Who is likely to be most in favor?

8. Should nuclear power be part of the solution to climate change? If you could, with the stroke of a pen, shift America from heavy reliance on coal to heavy reliance on nuclear, would you do it? Are these the only options?

9. Why do you suppose the nitrogen issue does not get more attention?

#### **Chapter 4**

1. The chapter focuses on the development and emergence of two agendas. In what ways were the two processes similar? Different?

2. Of the ten principal global-scale concerns discussed in the chapter, is there one that is out-of-place on the list? Which one, and why?

3. Why do you suspect there is no international convention on our forests or deforestation?

4. Has the Kyoto Protocol been ratified? Explain.

5. Why did governments opt for international environmental law as the principal way to tackle global-scale environmental challenges?

6. Is the author unduly harsh in his treatment of environmental treaties? If so, how and why?

#### **Chapter 5**

1. The author says that global-scale environmental challenges are inherently difficult. Why? Compared to what? If these challenges are more difficult to manage but also more threatening, shouldn't the two balance out?

2. Do you think the author is right in his reference to the Peter Principle?
  
3. The chapter argues that, in retrospect, numerous mistakes were made in deciding how to address global-scale environmental challenges. How would you list them and explain their significance? Was the path selected inevitable?
  
4. What reasons does the chapter offer for “toothless treaties”?
  
5. How did the US move from global environmental champion (with ozone layer protection) to lead footdragger?
  
6. What do you think of the Barber thesis? To what extent do larger political and social issues buffet environmental issues?
  
7. Bjorn Lomborg has developed a significant following. Can you imagine why?

## **Chapter 6**

1. What do you think of the author’s list of ten underlying drivers of deterioration? How would you rank them? What would you add or subtract? Should growing corporate power be on the list?
  
2. Why are the many religious injunctions against wealth, consumption, and the things of this world so often ignored?
  
3. If environmentally honest prices are so important in promoting the right technological change and spurring sustainable consumption patterns, why do we hear so little about it?
  
4. What do you think of the historian J.R. McNeill’s conclusion that “the overarching priority of economic growth was easily the most important idea of the twentieth century”? Consider this statement in light of some of the other ideas of the twentieth century: relativity, totalitarianism, and nuclear deterrence.
  
5. Do you agree with Scholte’s proposition?

## **Chapter 7**

1. How would you describe globalization? What is driving it?
2. What do you see as the pros and cons of globalization for the environment?
3. Is the author pro- or anti-globalization?
4. The author concludes by calling for “an international polity equal to the challenge of governing [the] newly global economy.” How might this be accomplished?

## **Chapter 8**

1. The author sees the solution in terms of eight megatrends. What are they? Is the list complete? How does the list of transitions compare with the list of drivers in Chapter 6?
2. Is it realistic to expect that the world will be free of mass poverty by the middle of this century?
3. What do you think of the McDonough-Braungart design assignment?
4. How would you fix “economic signals” so that they promote environmental protection? Is this “government interference”?
5. Of the six transitions discussed in this chapter, which will likely prove the easiest? The most difficult? The most expensive?

## **Chapter 9**

1. What does the author propose for revising the treaty-making process and reforming international environmental institutions? Are these proposals realistic or unrealistic?

2. Do we need a World Environment Organization? What would it do?

3. What do you think of the green jazz concept? Do you agree that it is working? What can be done to promote it, and “take it to scale”?

4. What is motivating major corporations to “play jazz”?

5. Is there a more limited agenda? A more focused path to sustainability? Or do we have to try everything?

## **Chapter 10**

1. Do you find the Earth Charter attractive and convincing?

2. What might drive the transition in human values from Mars to Venus? Are there long-term, underlying forces moving our values and consciousness in the right directions? Is there a role for major public education campaigns like those against drunk driving and smoking?

3. Do you think the author may be right when he states that we are seeing major value change occurring in the growth of student activism, green consumers and investors, and in other ways?

4. Is the hopefulness expressed by the author in the second half of the chapter justified? Why or why not?