

## GUEST COMMENT

### A View From Grand-Saconnex

Demand has long exceeded supply when it comes to building sites in Geneva — the unique, and increasingly crowded, international centre that is home to seemingly everything from the Red Cross and International Labour Office to the World Intellectual Properties Organization and something like 50 environmental or allied concerns. It is thus no surprise that an open multi-hectare tract, surrounded by an imposing complex of apartment blocks in this once-rural suburb (Grand-Saconnex translates to 'Big Farm'), is coveted by developers.

But this is no ordinary vacant lot. It is a tree-dotted rolling meadow that, normally two or three times a year, becomes an *ad hoc* sheep-ranch. While the nightingales that once nested here seem to have been crowded out by adjacent development, though they did return briefly in early June 1992, the ecology of Grand-Saconnex still suits the woolly ruminants. They are brought in to take part in a cost-effective Swiss approach to green urban management. The sheep find much to munch upon, and the unruly grass, bushes, and weeds, that cover the meadow are trimmed, while the ground is well fertilized and periodically cut for hay.

#### *Satisfying Result Achieved*

An ecologically and economically satisfying result is achieved. The landowners avoid the cost of exhaust-spewing machines to tend the field, the sheep get fat, and residents are treated to the non-stop entertainment of some five hundred frolicking lambs, ewes, and rams, herded by at least one superbly trained sheepdog.

As idyllic as the scheme may appear, though, not everyone sees grazing as the best use of this choice parcel. Proposals to 'develop' it are inevitable, as are negative responses to the proposals. Not long ago, a developer is said to have journeyed to the large house on the far end of the meadow, and knocked on the door. It was opened by one of the three elderly sisters who own the land. The caller was wondering if the tract could be available for development. 'Oh', answered the voice on the other side of the door, 'You'll have to ask the shepherd.'

That poetically simple response articulated the basic challenge of environmental management for the coming decades: With diminishing available resources, and increasing demands for their exploitation, how can the needs of the disparate interest-groups that are party to the resources be satisfied?

A shepherd needs a field. A family needs housing. A jobs-producing enterprise needs an office. Everyone needs open space. A consumer, similarly, wants products — and also clean air and water.

#### *Conflicting Needs*

As populations grow in physical and economic terms, their push for greater resource-exploitation grows. But so, too, does the need for preserving and maintaining the environment that is directly affected by such exploitation. How can these conflicting needs be satisfied? How can exploitation be minimized and benefits maximized? Achieving resource optimization may seem like an impossible task, perhaps, but one which must be addressed in some systematic fashion if we are to move even close to that elusive goal known as sustainability.

Minimizing resource-waste and preventing pollution are clearly keys to the optimization equation. The more efficiently resources can be used, the greater will be the potential for reducing pressure to exploit them. Life-cycle analysis (LCA) will be likely to prove a powerful tool in helping to determine humanity's modes of optimization. Life-cycle analyses, in principle, can provide, quantitative indices for comparing the many apples and oranges which we come across in resource and environmental decision-making. And minimization and prevention can reduce the amounts of apples and oranges needed.

This is why it will be so important to develop (a) widely-accepted protocols for measuring minimization and prevention, and (b) environmentally and resource-sensitive LCAs. With such development, common bases of understanding can be generated on resource issues. Hence, while not everyone may be in agreement on what resources, and how much of them, should be utilized for given economic activities, future resource-optimization efforts could at least receive firm guidance from recognized approaches.

It is not clear, however, that such approaches can resolve the dilemma of Grand-Saconnex. Assessing trade-offs between apples and oranges is one thing. Deciding whether the calm of a pasture is better or worse than the security of a hearth is another. Perhaps, after all, it is best to 'ask the shepherd'.

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