

## Global Trends by Martin Khor

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### The passing of an environment giant

**On 21 August the pioneering environmentalist Edward Goldsmith passed away, leaving a rich legacy of knowledge and campaigns on a wide range of subjects.**

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Last week saw the passing away of a giant of environmental science and the ecological movement. Edward Goldsmith, an Englishman who was the founder and editor of *The Ecologist* magazine, died at the age of 80 in his house in Italy.

He pioneered a consciousness on the importance of the environment with his book, *A Blueprint for Survival*, in 1972. It was one of the two path-breaking books that came out at the same time, the other being the *Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome.

The two books launched the beginnings of international awareness in the early 1970s about the depletion of natural resources, and the dangers to the economy that this poses.

It should be mentioned that at this same time the Consumers' Association of Penang also organized a seminar and started its work on the Malaysian environment, making it one of the pioneering groups in the developing world on what is now recognized as a top-priority issue.

I was a student in Cambridge University in the early 1970s, and the *Blueprint for Survival* had a major impact on the academic discourse of that time. I remember an essay we were asked to write, with the title: "Ecology is in, Economics is out: Discuss." Goldsmith's book was the main reference given to us.

In the decades since, Teddy Goldsmith was to author many more pioneering books, including *The Great U--Turn* (arguing that the world must turn around from the environmentally destructive way of production and lifestyles if it is to survive) and *The Way*, in which he wrote on how the economics and ecology must be integrated in the future world.

When CAP under the chairmanship of S.M. Mohamed Idris organized its many meetings on the environment, health and economic issues, we had the privilege of inviting Goldsmith many times to Penang in the 1980s and 1990s.

He always brought to the meetings his immense knowledge on the whole range of environment issues. He liked the meetings and Penang and its environment so much that he would often suggest forming an association of key people in the world to fight for the environment, to be called The Club of Penang.

While his equally famous brother James Goldsmith went on to become one of the richest businessmen in Europe, Teddy Goldsmith stayed in the countryside in Cornwall and founded the then small magazine *The Ecologist*.

It was to become the most important and famous environmental journal of its time, providing new information and analysis. It helped to make the environment a fashionable and important subject.

One of his greatest achievements was to produce the “special issues” of *The Ecologist*. Each special issue would focus on a specific topic, including the World Bank and the environment; Free Trade and the GATT/WTO; the world food system; the dangers of big dams; and Climate Change.

They opened up a whole new world of ideas, facts and proposals. Each of the issues was far ahead of the curve and indeed helped determine the curve, as it spurred on new thinking, campaigns and even institutions or networks.

For example, the issues on the World Bank exposed how many of its projects destroyed the forests and damaged indigenous people’s lives. This contributed to research and campaigns by many groups that led to reforms in the World Bank.

The issue on the ecological and social effects of big dams, followed up by a well-researched big book, led to a re-examination of policies on dams, an international commission on dams, and to numerous campaigns.

The special issues on climate change analysed its many aspects and shone light on why the problem was more catastrophic than then thought. It was way ahead of its time, and many of its warnings, then thought alarmist, are now vindicated.

Goldsmith was also taken up by the idea that the modern global economy not only undermined the environment but was also inherently unstable. Years ago he prophetically told me: “Either the collapse of the financial system will save the Earth, or the collapse of the ecological system will to a financial and economic crisis.”

Many of his ideas were not well received and he remained a controversial figure even as his predictions about the environment were borne out.

He was happiest when he was working on a special issue of the *Ecologist*. Once he invited me to his house in Richmond. When I arrived, he had just arrived from the airport himself. He had a huge bag with him, bulging with documents that he had carried to work on for the next *Ecologist*.

He had no key to his house. He usually left his key in some part of the garden. So we scraped around the earth in various parts of the garden in a vain attempt to find the key. Eventually someone came along with a key and we could finally get into the house.

And all the time he was whistling some tune, totally oblivious to the ridiculous situation of the owner of a grand house being locked out because he did not remember which part of the garden he had buried his key in.

He knew where his priority lay, and in this case it was the ideas that would go into the next issue of the Ecologist. So what did it matter if he could not get into his own house!

His death will deprive the environmental movement of a giant, but in a way his work was done. The environment is now at or near the top of the global agenda, especially with the current concerns on climate change.