Philosophies of Resolution 2

Developing countries ought to prioritize economic growth over environmental protection

Levi Gulliver

This resolution presents a clear clash of concepts: growth vs. protection. Since it is a value resolution, the specified agent of developing countries is somewhat odd and deserves some thought.

# What are Developing Countries?

Some debaters will use the term “Developing countries” to differentiate the right actions of a developed country from the right actions of a developing country; i.e., a developing country’s ethics may be different from a developed country’s. There’s an evangelistic proverb that opposes this view: “What you win them with is what you win them to.” If that’s not clear, maybe an analogy will help. Imagine a building built of steel—a steel building—now imagine a building built of wood—a wooden building. In both cases, the material and means of building defined the kind of building. Likewise, how a country develops will define the kind of country it becomes. A country’s priorities, therefore, should not differ in respect to its development. That would be expecting a steel building that was made out of wood.

# Thinkers for the Affirmative

## Adam Smith

Adam Smith essentially founded modern economics; his seminal work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,* is the first book to articulate a comprehensive, modern free-market economic theory. If you’re really serious about understanding the capitalist theory of economic growth, get a copy from the library and plough in.

One of Smith’s key ideas was that global wealth could increase—that people, through work, ingenuity, and resources, could create wealth where none had been before. Essentially, people create wealth by making Earth’s resources go farther for everybody; e.g., when a man in a farming community opens a tractor dealership, he enables all the other farmers to acquire and maintain farming equipment more easily. Because they do not have to travel as far, the farmers can be more productive, meaning more food is available, either allowing for a larger population or a decrease in food prices. In a word, people are the engine of an economy. This is the idea of the division of labor; it is the free market’s key to growth and more human flourishing.

While not directly addressing the conflict of growth with environmental protection, Smith established free-market principles that, according to free-market theory, distribute resources with minimal waste; i.e., a free-market, through maximally efficient distribution, keeps as much of the environment protected as possible.

## Wayne Grudem (theologian) & Barry Asmus (economist)

While not historically ‘great philosophers,’ these modern authors in their book *The Poverty of Nations* present some cultural beliefs about the earth that should be held by any countries that wish to grow economically.

“Human beings are more important than all other creatures on earth.”[[1]](#footnote-1) If true, then economic growth at the expense of an endangered species is justified, if it brings people out of poverty; however, if those endangered species critically support the environment in which people live, those species should be preserved.

“The earth is here for the use and benefit of human beings.” On this view, the earth is only extrinsically valuable; i.e., the earth is good only insofar as it benefits people.

“Economic development is a good thing and shows the excellence of the earth” Basically, the earth’s purpose is fulfilled when humans thrive on it. Thus, the notion of ‘environmental protection’ from humans is an oxymoron; the environment exists for human development, like in Minecraft.

“The earth’s resources will never be exhausted.” This is controversial. The authors think that whenever a resource becomes scarce, human ingenuity will create an alternative out of a more plentiful resource; thus, we will never run out of oil even though we may be using it quickly.

## PovertyCure

This advocacy group of international thinkers and organizations, in the pursuit of poverty eradication, balances growth and environmental protection in these two statements. “Good economic development is sustainable and should be environmentally sensitive.” This idea is reflective of a holistic view of development; i.e., people are part of the environment and depend on it, so to do damage to it is to do damage to others. “Economic progress is the fastest path to an economically and environmentally sustainable future.”[[2]](#footnote-2) A common argument for affirmatives will be that rich developed countries have the most potential to protect the environment—but, to become wealthy, developing countries must use their natural resources so that, later, they will have the money to invest in protecting the environment.

# Thinkers for the Negative

## Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry is a farmer, fiction author, environmentalist, and essayist. His book *Our Only World: Ten Essays* is extremely relevant for the resolution, particularly the essay “Less Energy, More Life.” Mr. Berry’s central contention here is that we do harm to the environment and ourselves by polluting for the sake of economic growth. Also, he thinks we don’t need more energy at the expense of our collective health. The real advantage of using Berry in your cases is his well-worded quotes; e.g., “The long-term or permanent damage inflicted upon all life by the extraction, transportation, and use of fossil fuels is certainly one of the most urgent public issues of our time, and, of course, it must be addressed politically.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Theodore Roosevelt

An avid naturalist and outdoorsman himself, Theodore Roosevelt as president established many conservation lands. This is a sort of “separate but equal” method of balancing economic growth and environmental protection: setting apart the most environmentally rich areas from development, while allowing economic growth in the rest of the land. By dividing the land, a developing country could value both sides of the resolution approximately equally.

## Henry David Thoreau

A quintessential Transcendentalist, Thoreau believed people were better off with simple, uncomplicated lives. He thought modern economies provided a lot of unnecessary goods and services in return for a lot of dehumanizing work. This idea comes through in this quote from *Walden*, Thoreau’s most notable work: “There is some of the same fitness in a man’s building his own house that there is a bird’s building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they’re so engaged? But alas! we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built in cheer no traveler with their chattering and unmusical notes…Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another *may* also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

## Clarence B. Carson and Paul A. Cleveland

Contrary to most free market economists, these modern thinkers believe that the use of natural resources does not play a critical role in determining a nation’s wealth and prosperity. In their words, “The notion of natural resources has been mischievously applied to account for the wealth of nations, and, in their absence, for the poverty of some nations. Many American historians, for example, have attributed the wealth of America to the abundant natural resources. It is true, of course, that various sorts of natural materials are unevenly distributed among the nations of the earth…. But the larger truth is that any extensive country has a considerable variety of natural materials. The great difference lies in how well a people use their ingenuity, inventiveness, and industry to turn natural materials into usable gods. Britain was the most prosperous nation in the world for much of the19th century, yet the tight little isle is not now thought to be especially blessed with what are called ‘natural resources.’ The prosperity of the Japanese from the 1960s through the 1980s is legendary, yet Japan has few ‘natural resources.’ Moreover, Hong Kong is built on nothing more than a large rock and yet became one of the wealthiest places on planet earth. By contrast, the vast natural resources of the former Soviet Union and of Africa in general have not resulted in widespread prosperity for the inhabitants of those places. Nations do have different degrees of natural advantages, but we must look elsewhere to explain wealth and poverty.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This quote serves both sides well. Affirmatives can use this to show that economic growth does not have to come at the expense of the environment. On the other hand, negatives can argue that, since growth is possible without large-scale land development, developing countries should give priority to environmental protection whenever conflicts arise.

# Conclusion

I’d like to encourage you to delve deeper into the philosophy of the resolutions this year—because it’s good for you, but also because it’s good for the debate community. If you are blessed with the opportunity to participate in an intellectually demanding and honest debate community, take full advantage of it (I know a student whose area/league is so focused on the rules of the debate that rounds often devolve into accusation matches). While doing so, be a camper and leave the place better than you found it. If you, in your dozen, two dozen, three dozen, or more debate rounds this year, demonstrate to everyone else in the debate that it is possible to read original texts and understand philosophies of education and economy yourself, you have provided the most persuasive argument possible in favor of studying well. If your opponents know that you have done your homework, they will do theirs, and debate becomes better for everyone. Don’t underestimate the power you have to affect a community. You are leaving a legacy for good or for ill—make sure it’s good.

1. 1. Grudem, Wayne A., and Barry Asmus. "Beliefs about the Earth." The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013. 335-41. Print.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1. "PovertyCure Statement of Principles - PovertyCure." Statement of Principles - PovertyCure. PovertyCure, n.d. Web. 11 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1. Berry, Wendell. "Less Energy, More Life." Our Only World: Ten Essays. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015. 70-71. Print.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1. Thoreau, Henry David. "Economy." Walden. New York: Fall River, 2008. 41-42. Print.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1. Carson, Clarence B., and Paul A. Cleveland. "The Elements of Production." Basic Economics. Birmingham: Boundary Stone, 2010. 247. Print.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)