

Better Yet, a Global Perspective? Reflections and Commentary on John Kurien's Essay

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John Kurien serves up a banquet of food for thought regarding future agendas for fisheries science, development, and management in this new millennium. Making his observations from mainly a 'tropical majority' perspective, he offers a noteworthy counterpoint to the hegemonic 'temperate minority' perspectives that are so prevalent nowadays in fisheries science, development, and management-policy discourse. As such, nearly all his food is palatable, well prepared, and well laid out.

A Problematical Dichotomy

On the other hand, I have some problems with his 'tropical majority' versus 'temperate minority' dichotomy. In many respects, his essay does not articulate these into a whole that might be perceived as being greater than the sum of its two parts. As such, this analogy becomes rather overdrawn, leading us away from a new aspect of the contemporary world: that globalization is proving to be an interactive process that in many ways is blurring the old dichotomies of North/South, Rich/Poor, First-World/Third-World - or even Temperate/Tropical.

To some extent this is not his fault, since, as he says in his Introduction, the organizers of the conference where his essay was to be the keynote invited him to 'talk about the lessons that the North can learn from the South'. This was his charge and in addressing it he acquitted himself splendidly. Yet, by the end a reader is still left with his dichotomous perspective, one which I feel is an over-simplification of the contemporary global reality, because ultimately it describes only a subset - albeit a very large one - of this larger, more complex, and dynamically-changing reality.

Not that we should reject his dichotomy, because indeed what he has striven to do is *add nature* to the discourse about the traditional dichotomies. Thus he has underscored that North/South, Rich/Poor, First-/Third, et cetera, are situated in very different physical environments, that these differences have important implications for their subsequent development and overall social, cultural, and economic attributes, and ultimately the majority of humanity that is involved in fishing is situated in tropical regions.

Being situated in a particular type of ecosystem, he stresses, prompts the development of certain solutions to problems of social and economic organization, as well as decisions regarding fishing methods, fishing technology, and processing and marketing arrangements. Over time, he implies, these solutions become instituted in fishing societies after considerable experimentation, becoming their successful adaptations - the ones that are 'appropriate' in and for their milieu. Tragically for many in the 'tropical majority', he then notes, these solutions have often been ignored and disrupted by science, development, and management efforts originating among the

‘temperate minority’. His lesson here may be an old one, one that many have articulated previously in various forms beginning nearly five decades ago. But it still merits repeating, especially in view of the seeming heedlessness of it in so many fisheries science, development, and management-policy making contexts these days.

A Necessary Correction

Putting aside my reservations about this dichotomy, I feel there is another more serious flaw in his presentation that requires more decisive correction. It has to do with the implicit idea that among much of the ‘tropical majority’ there is an inherent wisdom in their approaches to fishing and fisheries management - again, which is distilled from long experience - suggesting they might institute wiser approaches to the conservation and sustainability of the marine resources they depend upon if only the ‘temperate minority’ would leave them to do so. Thus, I feel he turns a blind eye to the historical record going back for several millennia. It shows how fishing people from *both* the ‘temperate minority’ and ‘tropical majority’ regions have single-handedly depleted the marine resources they depended upon. This is something I went to great lengths to document in my book, *Crisis in the World’s Fisheries*, by providing numerous illustrations of how various people at various times *in all regions of the world* have made this fundamental mistake, and still continue to do so (see McGoodwin 1990, especially chapter 3).

Contrary to what I think Kurien is implying, I concluded that sustained marine-resource availability among many pre-industrial and pre-modern people was often not attributable to any conscious intention or design, and neither to any virtue inherent in their traditional societies *per se*. Rather where marine resources seemed to have been sustained over long periods of time it was often merely the result of low human population levels, correspondingly low demands placed on marine resources relative to their availability, and the possession of only rudimentary harvesting technologies. Indeed, when any of the foregoing factors changed, depletion often quickly followed.

Thus, the ‘tropical majority’ - both in antiquity and up through the present - cannot be exempted from responsibility for marine-resource depletions. To hold otherwise is to perpetuate an unwarranted and romanticized view of traditional fishing communities, a view that unfortunately has reached nearly mythical proportions in some of the social-science literature, and ultimately a view that is at odds with the historical facts. Moreover, perpetuating this myth can do a disservice to the creation of more effective fisheries science, development, and management policies - for all fishing people, wherever they are to be found.

Another Matter Meriting Some Underscoring

Another problem not found on Kurien’s banquet table, yet which has great potential impact on all the world’s fishing people, also merits underscoring. It is the rapid global environmental change - in addition to the increasing pollution of marine ecosystems - that is being increasingly seen in various fisheries in recent years. True, the ‘temperate minority’ may be implicated in causing an undue share of these problems, but otherwise

hardly any nation can disqualify itself as a contributor to them these days. Thus, the global character of these problems must be acknowledged, and a global community must work together in concert to address its members' mutual concerns.

Globalization, for Worse and for Better

I also think Kurien's essay falls short on coming to terms with some of the more positive aspects of the current globalization phenomenon and its corresponding dynamics. Why? Because however vogue it is to think of globalization as mainly a process of cultural and economic imperialism, and as one that is initiated mainly by the North and correspondingly suffered by the South - which in many respects it surely is - it is also an interactive phenomenon which is increasingly blurring the distinctions that have heretofore accrued to the North-South dichotomy. On that view, it is a cross-cultural and cross-influencing phenomenon, one in which practically every inter-connected entity is influencing nearly every other in ways that are both subtle and profound (see Friedman 2000). And, as this process proceeds apace, it is becoming increasingly difficult to clearly delineate the various dichotomies that have heretofore so profoundly oriented our thinking.

Perhaps the old distinctions could have been more clearly drawn, and had firmer basis in reality, a little over half a century ago in the dawning light of the Post War era, the early days of post-war reconstruction, foreign aid, and country-by-country development projects. But today these distinctions would be harder to make. Nowadays many nations that formerly, and perhaps more clearly, fit on one side or the other of this great conceptual divide would be seen to share much in common - cultural and material similarities, similarities in the organization of their economies, societies, and systems of governance, and even similarities in how their members view the world and phrase their aspirations. This blurring of the old distinctions and the greater and more widespread sharing of similar problems and potentials - indeed sharing of certain fundamental human aspirations - has to be seen as cause for hope. Indeed, for humanity to be increasingly linked in this manner, and to be so increasingly aware of the breadth, similarities, and diversity of the whole of humankind, is unprecedented in all of human history.

Of course, there are still the indisputably pejorative aspects of globalization: the cultural imperialism or neocolonialism of the West, the North, or the 'temperate minority', for example, however you prefer to term them, whose cultural, symbolic, and economic systems are introduced or imposed on others unlike them, with all the accompanying cultural and societal strains this promotes. Yet even this perspective can become overdrawn, since on the ground these problems often only entail and mainly impact minority populaces at both ends of the linked spectrum.

Even economic imperialism, which many feel is the easiest aspect of the globalization phenomenon to understand - and condemn - can be over-simplified and painted in the wrong colors. The 'temperate minority's' rapid mobilization of large amounts of capital, for example, whereby capital is suddenly moved in, and then just as suddenly moved out of capital-deficient countries, certainly poses serious problems in the countries which are suddenly colonized in this way, and then just as suddenly abandoned.

But this has led some to overlook another aspect of this phenomenon, and it is that those who move capital around so freely and rapidly - wherever they are found - are usually economic competitors with many others having that same capability, and through their collective actions they can seriously destabilize the very capital and currency markets that they draw their sustenance from. Moreover, if only these were hurt by their participation in this game, we might say they got their just deserts, but collectively their actions can also work serious hardships on a wider network and greater number of people, including their employees, their suppliers and customers, their investors, and the many others who are economically articulated with them. And this can be just as true among the 'temperate minority' as the 'tropical majority'. Yes, when the North gets a 'cold' the South often gets 'pneumonia'. But take a longer view of the rise and fall of civilizations and it is not farfetched to see that ultimately neither is immune from the occasional decimating 'plague'.

Moreover, not all of the economic problems that are suffered by the 'tropical majority' can be attributed solely to their global links with the 'temperate minority'. Internal colonialism, for example, which entails the political and economic dominance and exploitation of the 'tropical majority' *internally* by people hailing from the same communities or states, is an all-too widespread reality throughout much of the tropical world. To be sure it is often just a link in a larger global economic chain, but just as surely it also often exists without having any links beyond the tropical nation where it is so prevalent.

Additionally, notwithstanding globalization's darker side, it has some very bright ones as well. Prime examples include today's rapid, dependable, and relatively less expensive travel and transport systems, which have enabled many heretofore 'localized' people, including multitudes from the 'tropical majority', to visit and in some cases resettle in parts of the world that are situated far from their home regions and communities. Moreover, an even larger number of 'tropical majority' people, even if they have not physically traveled far from their home communities, now know a great deal more about the rest of the world than their parents and their ancestors before them did, thanks to the dynamic and explosive proliferation of communications on a global scale. Thus, while their local cultures have often demonstrated tremendous persistence and resilience, at the same time such people have also gained new perspectives for living their lives that were unknown among their immediate predecessors.

Similarly, today's larger and more responsive communications networks - especially those associated with the internet and email capabilities - are essentially egalitarian, spanning heretofore un-crossable chasms of cultural and historical differences, and are increasingly accessible to even the poorest and most isolated people in the world. As a result there are fewer truly 'isolated' or 'localized' people in the world today. People who would be so categorized only a few decades ago now know a great deal more about the world beyond them, and are increasingly communicating and interacting with people who are situated at considerable distances from them. The result is a blurring of the differences, both real and perceived, that heretofore existed between them.

The foregoing innovations in communications have thus led to a greater global commerce in *non-material things*, such as ideas about ethics, morality, and what is desirable in political and economic systems and systems of governance. This has come

about through an increasingly widespread and global-scale ‘chat’ about how to meet human desires and promote higher levels of human well being, while at the same time sustaining the natural resources that humans depend upon. These innovations in communications, which were unseen little more than a decade ago, now hold great potential for bringing about greater intra-human understanding and empathy worldwide. The old barriers to human unity - cultural and geographical distance and isolation - are breaking down, while a new collective consciousness may be emerging *on a global level*.

Recent and Blurring Experiences of My Own

In his essay, Kurien quotes several communications he has recently had with colleagues via email, and this prompts me to share some of my own recent experiences in that same regard. For example, only a few weeks ago, while conducting fisheries research on a tiny island off the south coast of Iceland, I visited the community’s small public library and there passed the major part of an afternoon in ‘chat’ via email with a small-scale fisherman living in the state of Tamil Nadu in Southeast India. A colleague who was doing field research there ‘introduced’ me to him over the web, after inviting him to accompany him to a ‘cyber café’ that had been recently opened in his small coastal community.

At first we traded pleasantries, comparing weather conditions in our respective places. While he was experiencing oven-like, 35°C, sun-splashed days, I was experiencing chilly-damp, 8°C, overcast days with misting rain. Surely we were ‘chatting’ with each from the vantage points of our respectively ‘tropical’ and ‘temperate’ settings. But these distinctions quickly faded into the background as we got down to talking about the things that more importantly concerned us at the time.

With me he shared his concerns over access to the fisheries that he and fellow community members had long plied, especially their fears that governmental officials might not in good faith enforce a near-shore trawler ban that had been recently instituted. He also expressed concern for the prices that his future catches might fetch in both the regional and export-oriented markets that he sold them into, as well as concerns about not having sufficient funds to replace some fishing gear that he owned which had recently been damaged. He also worried about whether he would be able to afford some necessary maintenance on his 5-meter fiberglass boat and its moderate-power outboard motor. With him, on the other hand, I shared my uncertainties about how I was going about doing my research in Iceland, and corresponding uncertainties about what I was actually learning there.

To me this fisherman qualifies as a member of Kurien’s ‘tropical majority’. Not only is his life greatly influenced by events taking place far from his sphere of existence, at the same time he also mentioned his membership, and immersion, in a rich web of household, community, and societal relations. Thus, he also wondered whether his local fishing cooperative, with its joint partners who were his kinsmen and neighbors, would be able to loan him funds for purchasing his damaged gear. Regarding his household, he wondered whether his wife’s care for an ailing parent and his children’s increasing involvements in their schools would take away from their work as the main processors and marketers of his catches. In sum, he struck me as both a ‘global’ man *and* as a ‘local’

man, yet at the same time also as a member of Kurien's 'tropical majority'. And from my great distance, these two aspects of him seemed almost seamlessly integrated.

I am also sure that he and his peers in Southeast India have much in common with the small-scale fishermen I was working with in Iceland, who, I cannot resist pointing out here, would otherwise have to be pigeonholed among the 'temperate minority' if we were to take Kurien's dichotomy to its logical conclusion. Why I feel that the fisherman I chatted with in India and the fishermen I was working with in Iceland are so similar is because the problems and dilemmas each emphasizes are so similar. In essence, I feel they are members of a rapidly emerging 'global community', which may become even more intensely articulated and convergent in coming years.

Milling Humanity Does Worry Me

Kurien states: 'Coming from the "majority" world, large human populations as such do not worry me. In the "tropical world", milling humanity is an integral part of any ecosystem there. What gives me the shivers ... is the "emptiness" of the "temperate" world along with the sense of loneliness felt even when people are around.' About the latter part of the foregoing statement I am somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the isolating and alienating aspects of Western Civilization have been dominant themes in its *belles-lettres*, cultural descriptions, and cultural critiques all through the past century, so there must be something to it. Yet, on the other hand - and no doubt I am expressing a very Northern bias here - I also think feelings of loneliness and emptiness can be merely a state of mind, and thus things within the power of the perceiver to remedy or at least to mitigate.

Indeed, as Marcuse reminds us in his *Essay on Liberation* (1969), or as Maslow notes in his *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971), and as multitudes of others, including myriad spiritual and religious thinkers have reminded us, development is not just about improving the material and economic circumstances in which humans live, it should also entail improving their spiritual circumstances as well, that is, it should be about facilitating the fullest possible realization of a people's potential as persons, while also facilitating the best-possible organization and functioning of the societal and political contexts in which they live out their lives. Thus, when we lament the materialism and disaffection it prompts among people living the North, we may be led to forget the possibilities that still exist there for finding happiness and fulfillment.

On the other hand, I am far less ambivalent regarding Kurien's stating that large populations do not worry him. Here I must emphatically state that - *past a certain point* - large human populations worry me a great deal.

Why?

In the social sciences it has been fashionable lately to discredit Malthusian writers such as Garrett Hardin (1968 and 1993), indeed to discredit Malthus himself (1992 [1806]). These writers are frequently accused of purveying a misanthropic view of humanity, one that assumes that humans are everywhere motivated by pervasive greed, and as such are unable to avoid the eventual degradation and depletion of the natural resources that they depend upon. On this view, the many recorded instances of human societies that have instead emphasized cooperation, mutual interdependence, and the

subordination of individual self interest to the community's best interest are held up as mere exceptions to this 'tragic' view of humanity.

And I agree, but only up to a point, because ultimately there is only a finite and fixed supply of natural resources to go around, regardless of the scientific and technological innovations that occasionally come along to seemingly increase them, and it is therefore illusory to believe that natural resources will continue to increase indefinitely in response to human needs. Call that a Northern perspective if you will - although, frankly, many capitalistic entrepreneurs in the North would take exception to it - but to me it just seems a matter of obvious common sense. I am back in the realm of materialism now, and within that realm it seems clear that there are only a finite amount of resources available to humanity on planet Earth.

Thus, I remain far more influenced by the thinking that was asserted in various popular books arising in the late 1960s and early 1970s, those by Ehrlich (1972), for example, as well as other more systematic studies emanating from the Club of Rome. All of these persuasively argued that there were limits to the possible growth of human populations and human economies that utilize natural resources (see also Meadows *et al.*, 1972, or more recently, United Nations 1991).

Human populations make significant demands on natural resources, and fundamentally speaking larger human populations make greater demands. Yes, the North makes demands on energy resources that are disproportionate to the number of people it contains, but this observation must still take second place to the fact that food is, and will remain, humanity's most crucially important resource.

Thus, however difficult it may be to calculate such things as 'maximum sustainable yield' or 'carrying capacity', we still need to acknowledge the obvious and commonsense reality of these concepts. Indeed, we easily allow that they apply to birds and whales, so why not to humans as well?

There *are* limits to the growth of future human populations, serious ones, not only in terms of natural and food resources, but also in terms of space limitations and the infrastructures needed to support them. Indeed, in many world regions these limits have already been surpassed - in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, which is witness to some of the most widespread food shortages in the world. To be sure an unfair distribution of human food is an exacerbating factor in such regions, a problem that must be addressed, in part what Kurien is calling for when he suggests 'sustainable international trade'. But even in the unlikely event of resolving international-trade inequalities once and for all, there would still be vast regions having insufficient resources to meet their people's food needs.

Indeed, at some level I think Kurien believes this too. For example, in his essay where he discusses transitions and contemporary problems in Kerala fisheries, he first cites a colleague, Rolf Willmann: 'Currently, there appears to be a strong convergence about the lessons one can learn from the fisheries and fishing communities in both the North and the South: fishing is getting harder; there is less fish, there are many more who also claim some part of the coastal resources and marine ecosystem, there is water pollution and habitat destruction, and the costs of fishing skyrocket. The only solace of fishers is that fish prices, by and large, also go up...' (Willmann, e-mail communication). Kurien follows that foregoing statement with this one of his own: 'The picture I have painted of what happened in Kerala is certainly applicable to a vast number of small-scale

fisheries in the “tropical-majority” world today. In a context of higher population pressures and shrinking opportunities for people outside the fishery, the choices of livelihood are increasingly limited.’

By presenting the two discussions appearing immediately above, Kurien seems to be saying that he is indeed concerned about growing human populations, including those in Kerala - however much he feels their problems have been caused or exacerbated by various Northern initiatives that impacted them.

An Agenda for Future Fisheries Research, Social Science, Development, and Management Policy

In his essay, Kurien provides a comprehensive agenda for future fisheries research, social science, development, and management policy. As such, I am in full agreement with his stress on the importance of bringing to forefront of that agenda ways of resolving, or at least mitigating, multiple-use conflicts and property rights disputes in small-scale fisheries. He is also right on track when calls for the development and implementation of new forms of community-based management, changing the principal units of analysis to what he describes as the ‘community-market-state triad’, and focusing on the linkages between producers and consumers in hopes of forging more sustainable approaches to international trade that do not jeopardize basic food security. To this I would add that meeting the food security and income needs of the people living in closest proximity to fisheries resources should in most cases - and especially in food-deficient regions - be the first tier and fixed socio-economic overhead of any fisheries allocation policies, before any other harvesting for any other reasons is permitted.

On the other hand, regarding his suggestion to forge a more sustainable international trade, I would add a cautionary note, and it is that sustainability, however appealing it may seem, is also a rather ambiguous concept which can be interpreted in various, even opposite, ways by various entities who wish to appropriate it to serve their particular interests. Hence, as Escobar (1995:192-199) forcefully argues, the concept has recently been the linchpin of a hegemonic discourse purveyed by the powerful nations regarding their role in the development of less powerful nations. These powerful nations, that Escobar refers to as a global ‘ecocracy’, in his view manipulate the sustainability concept to serve their own interests, and to the detriment of many less powerful nations. Thus, any discourse about sustainability in fisheries research, development, and management-policy must always be preceded by the question: ‘sustainability of *what*, sustainability *how*, and sustainability *for whom*?’

Regarding governance, Kurien’s agenda is also rich in noting that ‘governance of the ... seas [and their living resources] ... must necessarily be nested - multi-tiered and overlapping. It is at the mezzo level - at the realm of nation and state - that the governance structures and the relevant institutional arrangements are well laid out.’ After all, the world is still very much an assemblage of nation states, and as such the various formal institutions, agencies, and even NGOs arising from these will remain crucial for addressing the foregoing future challenges.

As for Kurien’s suggestions regarding international research cooperation, I wholeheartedly agree with his stress on making ‘recipients’ partners in such endeavors. I

am also intrigued with his proposing the implementation of ‘research contribution parity’ in such endeavors, such that the ‘time and services of all persons in an international research project can be factored on the same basis for commensurate services and expertise’. Indeed, this may be an effective antidote to the paternalism that still pervades fisheries science, research, development, and policy-making in so many contexts.

On the other hand, I feel less certain about Kurien’s call to understand ‘actual social reality’ before moving to levels of abstraction. On my view people are real and measurable things that have real and measurable needs, whereas ‘society’ ever remains elusive and somewhat of an abstraction. Yes society is real, and just as certainly there are social realities. But just what the ‘realities’ are remains debatable, reflecting diverse rather than convergent opinions, and as such ever vulnerable to infection by ideologues and other opportunists having agendas of their own for human societies.

To Kurien’s agenda for future fisheries science, development, and management, I would only add a few, perhaps more prosaic, items of my own. First, we need to *remember our priorities*, as we are reminded by Johannes (1994:xi) who states, ‘Implicit in the arguments of fisheries social scientists is the assumption that the ultimate objective of fisheries management should be to sustain human societies in general and fishers in particular.’ Furthermore, we must never forget that fisheries are not aquatic regions holding certain living resources, nor regions where certain fishing methods are utilized, but rather the articulation of natural marine ecosystems with human activities. In other words, *the fisheries are a human phenomenon*.

Secondly, I would urge that we *redouble our efforts to understand fishers’ ‘folk management’ and ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ (TEK)*. From the mid 1980s through the 1990s many social scientists who were interested in the fisheries held out great hope that a greater understanding of the ‘folk management’ practices and ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ of localized fishing peoples would virtually revolutionize, humanize, and render considerably more effective the science and craft of fisheries management (for example, Berkes 1987; Cordell 1989; Dyer and McGoodwin 1994; Johannes 1977, 1978; McGoodwin 1984, 1990; Ruddle and Akimichi 1984). Now, however, one of the main lessons learned is that this localized knowledge is difficult to uncover, and, moreover, because it is rarely written down or articulated in any systematic fashion, is extremely difficult to incorporate in a formal way into contemporary fisheries-management policies.

Yet, we should not give up because ‘folk management’ and ‘TEK’ are still the truest expressions of a fishing people’s past experience, cultural identity, and thinking about how the fisheries they rely upon should be utilized. Just because these proved more difficult to elicit and formalize than we initially anticipated is no reason for abandoning our explorations into them now. Indeed, they still hold great promise for resolving, if not mitigating, most of the problems that Kurien has so thoroughly described. Otherwise, until a lot more is known about fishing people and fishing communities, fisheries science, development, and management will continue to go forth only dimly and partially illuminated.

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