

Bettering the Befouled

A collaborative approach can eliminate the pollution that threatens the lives of millions in developing nations.

By Richard Fuller

I WAS ALREADY A RISING STAR with IBM in Australia by my late 20s. I had broken sales records and was in line for a fast-track management program that would carry me to company headquarters in New York, then to Hong Kong and back to Melbourne in five years. Then I gave it up.

I had bitten hard on the wisdom that life is most worth living when one is doing good -works. At 29, I decided to invest a chunk of my time and energy in just this. Fifteen years later, I'm still doing it. I have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars—and what feels like an equal number of hours—crafting a unique strategy to help the Earth and its most vulnerable people.

While at IBM in 1989, I had started a small nonprofit tree-planting organization. I was riding a rising tide of environmentalism. Green causes were de rigueur, and in them I found my passion. I quit IBM and Melbourne for the United States, where I flung myself into a networking frenzy. I focused on rainforest destruction in South America. The press wove tales of doom and gloom, but when I looked more closely, I saw only a few poorly researched facts in the stories, and always the same ones. What was really going on, and why?

Using my newfound connections and my savings, I went to Brazil and spent a year working with local groups deep in the forest. We partnered with the federal government and the United Nations to set up a type of national park called an extractive reserve, creating a bulwark of protected land around those areas most threatened by deforestation.

With my savings running low, I started an environmental and energy consulting firm called Great Forest. Over the past 15 years, it has grown to manage about 60 percent of the recycling in offices and hotels in New York. I have been thrilled to shepherd my staff and clients into environmentally responsible programs. But I am a pragmatist, and it has been hard to measure the results of what we are achieving; moreover, our impact has seemed too distant to me.

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So I gathered together some of the best minds in the environmental arena, and we grouped the issues into four categories: brown (pollution) and green (conservation), north (developed) and south (undeveloped). We concluded that people are addressing the brown and green issues in the north. Green issues in the south are quite popular, although they need more attention. But brown issues in the south are ignored. Pollution in poorer countries is affecting millions, and little is done about it.

In 1999, with earnings from my consulting business and some grant money, I started the nonprofit Blacksmith Institute and began to work on these issues. The first step was to visit the areas with the biggest problems. I traveled to Cambodia and Thailand, and quickly realized that we needed to support local groups to be effective. The only successful way to effect change is to empower the people facing a problem to act on their own behalf. I found intelligent, committed and capable people everywhere I visited, and quickly hired an international team in each location to clean up polluted sites.

Through Blacksmith, I connect local teams with the international community, including the World Bank, USAID and the Asian Development Bank. One lead pollution project in Zambia recently garnered \$15 million from the World Bank. Today we are starting to see tangible successes. We recently got leaded gas banned in Mozambique and cleaned up 8 tons of DDT in Siberia.

The average project costs only \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year for a few years, and employs four or five people. I contribute about \$100,000 annually to Blacksmith, and serve as volunteer executive director—and I could not be happier. We now run 30 projects in 12 countries.

Blacksmith estimates that there are only 100 to 200 sites around the world where pollution actually threatens the lives of residents. This is a finite problem. We will either deal with each of the sites, or learn that we are unable to fix some of them. But at least we will have identified the problems. ■

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