

**J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON**

**Technology can't fix damage people have done to planet**



*"All the evidence suggests that we have consistently exaggerated the contributions of technological genius and underestimated the contributions of natural resources.... We need ... something we lost in our haste to re-make the world: a sense of limits, an awareness of the importance of earth's resources."*

— Steward Udall

A popular misconception is that technology can help us evade the stark realities of continuing environmental degradation and rapid population growth. Fantasies persist that a source of "unlimited power," such as nuclear fusion, will be developed in the nick of time as our supply of fossil fuels is exhausted. One delusional futurist wrote "by the successive substitution of technologies ... real output can go on increasing without limit."

Unfortunately, there is no perpetual motion machine. For centuries, our main energy sources have been wood and fossil fuels, such as oil and coal. Although technology has increased both our ability to exploit these resources and the efficiency of machines that convert these fuels to heat, electricity and work, the basic technology — fire — is the same.

Nuclear power, which promised

electricity "too cheap to meter," was envisioned by its proponents as a panacea for our energy needs. Today, nuclear power does fulfill many of our energy needs, but at a high economic and environmental cost.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of the idea that the way to meet our increasing demands for land and food is to colonize space with orbiting greenhouses. In 1980, William Catton wrote, "Believers in extraterrestrial emigration as a solution to irrupting population never seem to do the simple arithmetic to estimate the prodigious tonnage of space vehicles and impossible quantities of fuel it would take to boost up the earth's yearly increment of population, plus the supplies they would need on their long journey.... It would take more than 60,000 Apollo-type launchings every day to do it!"

In October, representatives of the science academies of more than 15 nations, including the United States, attended a summit to consider the role of science and technology in solving problems related to resource depletion and population growth. In their report, the scientists concluded, "It is our collective judgment that continuing population growth poses a great risk to humanity. Further-

more, it is not prudent to rely on science and technology to solve problems created by rapid population growth, wasteful resources consumption and poverty.... Science and technology can only provide tools and blueprints for action and social change."

"The issues of poverty, environmental degradation and population growth seem insurmountable. And it appears that much of the world is looking to science to find solutions," said Bruce Alberts, president of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

"Certainly, we believe that science can make important contributions and that technology can solve many problems. But ... the key message is that we need to foster social change, including ensuring equal opportunity for women in all aspects of society, developing more environmentally benign lifestyles and encouraging economic growth."

Technology is a valuable tool, but the problems of wasteful consumption and population pressure are not technical. Rather, solutions lie within our ability to understand the limits of our planet, the limits of nature and the limits of growth.

There is no technological salvation.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.