

Understanding and Anticipating Environmental Change in North America: Building Blocks for Better Public Policy

Summary

Is the environment we have now better than it was in the past, or have things gotten worse? Are we better off than our parents? Why have things changed? Do we really know? Can we know? What will the future look like? Will present trends continue? What will be the quality of air, water, sea, land and the biosphere as a whole for our children and grandchildren? Will the biodiversity of this continent be richer or poorer? Will our climate be the same or will it change?

Most North Americans would incline towards a pessimistic answer to these questions, as evidenced by the 475 responses to a survey posted on the CEC website between September 8th and October 31st 2000. Two-thirds of the respondents believed that the state of the environment would worsen over the next 20 years, even though 81% expressed the view that public commitment to environmental protection and values was growing.

This report provides partial answers, not all of them pessimistic, to some of these questions raised above and makes some recommendations to assist policy-makers and future research in this area. If the goal is modest, its importance cannot be denied. NAFTA ministers face an avalanche of environmental and economic data and analyses of the future on which they are expected to base environmental policies. The challenge is not an absence of data, but arranging the available data to be informative and encourage proactive policies reflecting the non-linearity of some aspects of environmental change.

To this end, the report looks at a variety of methods for answering such questions and applies several of these techniques to Canada, Mexico and the United States, the three signatories to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Two broad categories of approaches are examined:

- ❑ data-intensive methods for gaining a more fine-grained and easier-to-communicate understanding of past and present environmental trends and the factors underlying them, and
- ❑ techniques for diagnosing and anticipating future environmental problems

The report draws on four background trends reports produced by the CEC Secretariat and five analyses commissioned to assess methods for foreseeing North American environmental problems.