

Review by Dr. David C. Korten* of
The Paper Trail – Connecting Economic and Natural Systems

Modern industrial production systems render invisible most of the environmental consequences of our day-to-day consumption choices. While most anyone who is paying attention is well aware that human economic activity is placing intolerable stress on the environmental systems of the planet, most of us still have difficulty linking the destruction to our personal behavior. A few years ago John Ryan and Alan Durning, in their book Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things, demonstrated how the practical mapping of everyday resource flows can be a powerful tool for helping us all to see that link with shocking clarity.

The Paper Trail – Connecting Economic and Natural Systems, a twenty session curriculum unit for Secondary School and Advanced Placement Level courses of economics and the environment, builds from this powerful idea to give students a firm grounding in the tools and principles of ecological economics. The unit was produced as a joint project of The Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education (Formerly The Sustainability Education Center, Inc.) and the American Form for Global Education under the direction of Jaimie Cloud. Winifred Armstrong and Margaret Mansfield authored the individual units.

The exercise begins with students mapping the paper usage of their school, working back through the supply chain to identify its source and following the waste flow to its ultimate destination. Resource materials guide students in their mapping efforts with descriptions of differing forest management and disposal practices and assessments of their longer-term environmental implications. Students are then introduced to basic concepts such as positive and negative feedback loops to build their understanding of the internal dynamics of the systems by which humans exploit and dispose of natural resources.

After students consider the implications of making resource management decisions based on conventional corporate logic, they are introduced to alternative approaches like full cost accounting that internalize costs otherwise disregarded. They go on, however, to look at how even these more sophisticated methods do not adequately account for the costs that current generations are bequeathing to future generations. Step-by-step, students come to understand the realities of economic life on a finite living planet and the grievous deficiencies of conventional economic analysis as a guide to action.

Students who complete this course unit are likely to be terribly upset when they arrive in college and find themselves sitting through conventional economics courses that take no account of the living world realities this unit so effectively brings into focus. On the other hand, perhaps their displeasure will encourage college economics professors still locked into obsolete economic models to get real. That alone would make this unit worth the considerable work that has gone into its development.

***Dr. David C. Korten** is the author of the international best-seller *When Corporations Rule the World* [released in an expanded and updated second edition in April 2001]; *The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism*, *Globalizing Civil Society*, and *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*, among others; co-founder and board chair of the Positive Futures Network, which publishes *YES! A Journal of Positive Futures*; founder and president of the People-Centered Development Forum; board member of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies; an associate of the International Forum on Globalization; a member of the Social Ventures Network; and a member of The Club of Rome. Dr. Korten holds MBA and Ph.D. degrees from the Stanford Business School and has thirty years experience as a development worker in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He has been a Harvard Business School professor, US Air Force captain, Ford Foundation Project Specialist in Manila, and Asia regional advisor to the US Agency for International Development.