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Solutions Beget More Problems

I read Alan Marshall's "Solving Problems, or Creating More?" [Dec. 16-22, 1996, page 13] with great interest, only to be disappointed by an all too common conclusion: Marshall would have us believe that the symphony of human space activity will be composed of merely negative behavior and consequences. I could not disagree more.

Just look at history and it is clear that all human existence is composed of both good and bad actions and results. We continue to strive to improve our lives by solving problems. Then, the solutions we devise create new problems inadvertently.

Marshall asks, "Can space expansion into the solar system really contribute to the amelioration of humanity's resource and environmental ills?" Of course it can, although he then concludes, "I think not." Consider what life would be like if early humans never migrated from the plains of Africa or Eurasia, or, much later, if Europeans had never expanded across the Atlantic Ocean to discover the new land and resources.

Each of those indigenous populations would now be suffering from various social and economic

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problems due to overcrowding, degradation of natural resources, and the exhaustion of agriculturally viable land.

Marshall then discounts the notion that extraterrestrial resources are required for human survival, stating that "The amount of resources being used on Earth is not directly proportional to the absolute population of humans." Of course it is, and he tells us why in his next sentence: "The resource problems we witness on Earth have not come about because of massive population numbers but are due to the unrestricted and unwarranted consumption by a minority of humans on Earth; mainly the wealthy classes of developed countries."

Basically, this is correct, but consider these comments together. As the global population grows, so does the number and population of developed nations. Show me anyone living in an undeveloped nation who does not want to consume more and live better. Show me an economic system that does not require increased resource consumption to expand and provide for its people.

Marshall continues: "There are more than enough resources to feed, house and employ everybody on the planet if only those resources were equitably redistributed." True enough, but who is

going to be in charge of equal distribution? What form of government do we trust to decide who receives what? Feudalism? Communism? Socialism-capitalism? Fascism? Democracy-capitalism?

I agree that we must improve the means of equitable distribution, but the Soviet experiment failed miserably. While we work toward this end, that does not mean we no longer need additional resources. Who will tell 1 billion Chinese, "Sorry, you cannot build a 21st-century transportation and telecommunications infrastructure"? Who shall inform India and the developing nations of the Pacific Rim, "Sorry, there just are not enough energy resources for you to continue your progress"?

Our world is poised on the edge of rapid economic expansion as technology developments quickly multiply upon themselves. Are you willing to restrict your life so others may improve theirs? Would you rather continuously re-slice the same pie as more people clamor for smaller pieces, or would you prefer a larger pie with larger pieces from which we all may choose? Which scenario is more likely to lead to war?

I understand Marshall's concern that human expansion into the space will widen the gap between rich and poor and degrade the pristine environments of stellar

bodies. Regarding his first concern, will not migrating into space narrow the gap? Regarding his second, will not migrating into space prevent the further degradation of Earth's environment?

Although I certainly do not wish to damage or destroy stellar environment, that is ultimately preferable to the destruction of my own home's environment. Furthermore, it is the economically developed nations that work harder to preserve their environments, not the poor farmer who must slash and burn tropical forests to survive.

When humanity settles in space, we will certainly bring both our grandest noble behaviors and our worst selfish activities. Will not settling space change this behavior on Earth? Are you more likely to care about your neighbor and your local forest, either here or on another planet, if your needs are fulfilled or unfulfilled? Whether we remain at home or venture into our stellar neighborhood, humanity has much to learn about caring for each other.

Remember, our existence extends back for millions of years, but our rules for civilized behavior are far younger. To assume that our actions in space will be only negative or only positive ignores human history. To believe it is more likely to be negative ignores recent history. What economic-political system created the environmental movement, frequently demonstrates no desire for war, and provides a means to continuously renew itself as its citizens

improve their lives and increasingly reach out to help others? It is capitalism-democracy, a system that is only a few hundred years old. And it is not by mere coincidence that these same few hundred years have seen the greatest economic, educational and moral development of humanity. Each feeds and thrives on the other because, after many thousands of years of effort, humans finally created a system that encourages such growth.

This is the legacy of humanity, and we will carry it with us and continue to evolve it as we settle space. Will we make mistakes along the way, creating the "mining-scarred and ecologically disastrous hell-planets" so feared by Marshall? Unfortunately, we probably will. Again I say, better there, on a lifeless and barren celestial body, than here. But more importantly, we will also create everything else we have created here. Should we not also expect to see protected stellar areas — like national forests — clean stellar towns, vacation resorts and on and on and on?

None of the problems discussed by Marshall will be resolved by staying home. More likely, they will be exacerbated. Thus, there is only one way out, and it is the way humans have chosen since the beginning: keep moving, keep working, keep trying and continue learning how we can both prosper and live in harmony among ourselves and our universe. The lesson of history is that harmony requires prosperity.