



GUEST OPINION

Going Green in the United Arab Emirates

By Charles Kestenbaum

“Environmental awareness should become part of our lives and behavior. We have to incorporate it in our educational curricula, and modify all specifications and standards of tools, equipment and means of transportation to become environment-friendly.”

– H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum
UAE Vice President and Prime Minister

One of the world’s smallest, newest and richest nations is positioning itself to play an unusually large role in the development of renewable energy technology. For most of the first 36 years of existence, the UAE paid little attention to environmental issues. This was due to a general popular lack of awareness of environmental issues related to industrial pollution and global warming, as well as the government’s all-out effort (incredibly successful) to catch up to the rest of the world in terms of providing basic health care, education, housing, and overall quality of life for its citizens.

Many Emiratis still remember experiencing poverty – lacking basic education and health care as recently as the early 1970s. The world has watched in awe as the UAE has climbed from that low rung of poverty into one of the richest and fastest developing countries in the world. *Fortune* magazine, for example, recently described Abu Dhabi as the richest city in the world. And who in the world has not marveled at the wonders of Dubai, from ocean front skyscrapers to international golf tournaments to indoor snow ski slopes.

The UAE’s rapid development has come at an environmental cost, one that few are fully aware of and one that has not had a direct effect on most Emiratis. Significant damage has occurred to the Gulf’s frail reefs and coastal fisheries from the combined effect of oil industry activities, port and shipping activities, desalination of hundreds of millions of gallons of water each day, and especially the expansive coastal resort developments such as the Palm Islands – where millions of tons of seabed has been dredged and pumped onto rock foundations for these newest man made marvels of engineering.

Environmental experts who have studied the lower Gulf express concern of damage on a wide scale. While less visible than the drying

up of the entire Aral Sea in Russia, or the disappearance of the snow cap on Mt. Kilimanjaro in Kenya, the entire lower Gulf is in some ways suffering environmental degradation on a significant scale.

With awareness comes action, and as the Emirates rapidly become more aware of the impact of industrial and civil developments, there is a growing movement, among ordinary citizens and at the highest levels of the government, that what appeared to be endless, indestructible deserts and seas in fact hosts fragile and precious ecosystems that need protection.



The UAE started with what was easiest to see – protection and restoration of endangered species such as the Arabian Oryx and the Houbara Bustard. Especially in Abu Dhabi under the enlightened leadership of the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, extensive tree planting programs were enacted. Today, there are tens of millions of trees throughout the country, including some major green belts in strategic regions.

Sheikh Zayed’s vision – well before its time – helped Emiratis to understand the essential role that trees and green plants play in sustaining our environment and helping to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and damage. Today, there

is a federal Ministry of Environment, and a number of active environmental groups engaged in protecting the deserts, the coasts and seas, as well as the general health and welfare of the population.

While it is a truism that knowing the problem is halfway to the solution, in fact, the harder half comes after the problem is identified; solutions are not easy, and they often entail enormous costs. There is still widespread scientific disagreement over what is the actual nature and degree of the environmental problem (witness the “heated” U.S. discussion over global warming).

There is an ongoing debate the world over about how much the pace of development should be restrained because of long-term environmental consequences, and especially over who should pay the costs. These disagreements have involved global participation, such as whether 800 new coal-fired power plants should be built in China and India or how to set automobile emission regulations and carbon credits in Europe. The debate rages on. So it should be no surprise that similar debate is becoming part of the UAE social, economic and political landscape.

One example of the growing environmental awareness by the new generation of young UAE leaders is the recent creation of Masdar. This wholly owned subsidiary of Mubadala, an Abu Dhabi Government-owned development corporation, is the centerpiece of UAE efforts to remedy global warming effects and create renewable energies for the future.

Masdar, inspired by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed al Nahyan, is entirely dedicated to renewable energy developments, from R&D in solar and biomass energy to local carbon dioxide gathering and use in oilfield reinjection programs to venture capital funds investing in renewable energy technologies around the globe.

Masdar has an entire division set up to develop some of the world’s largest solar energy farms and will invest heavily with leading global venture capital groups in developing leading edge renewable energy technologies from Silicon Valley in California to solar energy research parks in China. Masdar will also establish a state-of-the-art research center on a large dedicated site near Abu Dhabi

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International Airport and will sponsor advanced degrees in energy research with leading international universities.

Areas of future leadership in environmental development include smart and energy conscious buildings, construction of artificial reefs meant to encourage revitalization of coral and subsea marine life, expanded greenbelts of trees, and massive solar farms using uninhabited desert areas for the kind of large solar energy generation that is only being developed today with massive subsidies from European governments.

The UAE has come a long way from the days – only a few short years ago – when solid and liquid wastes were simply dumped into the sea and plowed over in the desert; when artificial landfills and entire islands were created using rubble from demolished buildings.

Is the UAE halfway there? Yes, but it is the easy half, the first steps of environmental awareness, the steps requiring minimum economic impact. All of us applaud long-term initiatives like Masdar and the creation of an environment ministry, and few doubt the sincerity of the young UAE leaders in their commitment to bring their new nation into a more mature and confident position in the international community, including global environmental issues.

The United States would do well to support these efforts and to encourage this “next generation” of enlightened leaders. They are under intense pressure to cut corners in the name of economic development – typically at the expense of the environment. More than any other country in the world, perhaps, the U.S. is well positioned to help the UAE leadership to grapple with the complex public policy aspects of coping with the trade-offs of environmental policies that may carry a real price in terms of economic development.

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