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View from the North

Free trade, environmental responsibility – can the two ever meet?

Trade, trade and more trade – it has to be good for the nations doing the trading, and for the world in general, right?

Not so fast, cautioned one Canadian expert on international trade and its effects on the environment. In their headlong rush to drop barriers to trade, she said, countries including Canada and the United States are risking the “environmental capital” – the natural resources – that enable them to be productive in the first place.

The speaker was Michelle Swenarchuk, executive director of the Canadian Environmental Law Association. Her remarks came in a presentation at Buffalo’s International Institute, sponsored by UB Law School’s Canada-U.S. Legal Studies Centre.

An attorney whose practice ranges as widely as aboriginal rights, labor, administrative and aviation law as well as in issues of environmental protection and trade, Swenarchuk argued convincingly that international trade must be conducted with the understanding that each nation’s resources must be sustained – that the raw materials must come from the “interest” on the “environmental capital,” rather than depleting these limited resources.

For example, she said, a nation can commit to harvesting forests and fisheries only as quickly as they can regenerate; an industry can commit to discharging pollutants only in such volume as the environment can render them

harmless. “Part of what I find refreshing about this approach,” Swenarchuk said, “is that it reminds us that we are part of nature and dependent on nature to sustain us. I think it’s very useful, especially to us urban types, to be reminded of that.

“Trade can be environmentally benign,” she said, “or it can be a source of environmental degradation.”

There has been an explosion and expansion of international trade agreements in recent years, including the North American Free Trade Agreement, the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the rise of the World Trade Organization. The problem, Swenarchuk said, is that such agreements tend to undermine citizens’ and communities’ access to the power structure in addressing problems close to home.

“As citizen activists,” she said, “we have a lot of concerns about the rise of international organizations that are inaccessible to citizens. Those institutions actually remove what has been the focus of citizen action – access to deal with local problems. The overall effect of these institutions is to limit the ability to control the exploitation of resources.”

And even such environmental standards that have been built into free-trade agreements, she said – standards on the use of pesticides, or on the health of plants and animals – are under attack by the Canadian government in the name of reducing “red tape” that stands in the way of unfettered trade.

“Suddenly,” she said, “what we used to think of as environmental standards are seen collectively as a barrier to trade.” As well, she said, recent streamlining in the Canadian federal government hit hardest in the Ministry of the

Environment and the Ministry of Natural Resources, both in personnel and in budget.

“Environmental deregulation, the loss of environmental law, is to most of us the most serious problem facing environmentalists today,” Swenarchuk said. “We think we’re on the wrong path.”

One useful way to think of the problem, she said, is in terms of an “environmental footprint” – how much land area is required to sustain the lifestyle of an individual in a certain country. The concept was developed by a professor in Vancouver. In Canada, for example, she said, the footprint for the average individual is about 10.7 acres, about equal to three city blocks. “But there’s only 3.7 acres available to each of us,” Swenarchuk said. “We’re using three times our share.” The mismatch is worse in the United States, she said, and far worse overseas. The Netherlands, for example, requires 10 acres per person – 15 times the amount of land in the entire nation. Japan’s “environmental footprint” is more than eight times the size of the country’s productive land base. London uses so many resources that its footprint is 120 times the size of the city itself.

“The environmental problem is less a technical problem and more a problem of human behavior,” Swenarchuk said, citing overconsumption that is depleting the world’s resources at an unsustainable rate. “I think we’re faced with a situation of real urgency.” ■



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Professor Robert S. Berger, director of the Canada U.S. Legal Studies Centre, and Michelle Swenarchuk, executive director of the Canadian Environmental Law Association.

