



The responsibility to do no harm

IN MY OPINION

As much as I dislike it, when recently grocery shopping I wore a mask to protect myself and others from getting COVID-19 and stayed at least 6 feet away from other people. At the checkout line two people without masks walked right up next to me talking loudly. After backing away, I asked why they were not wearing masks and practicing physical distancing. They gruffly replied that they did not want to.

Being young, the couple might have felt safe from the coronavirus and been unaware that, even if they felt well, they could still be carrying the virus and give it to others. But I sensed something different: They believed no one had the right to tell them what to do.

This pushback against wearing masks and physical distancing to protect others reveals the distorted view many in our society have about what freedom involves.

Many right-wingers and libertarians, for instance, claim the only responsibility one has is to one's self. This ethos has created a culture in which many individuals and organizations care little about the moral, ethical or physical consequences of their actions on other people or the natural environment. Their "freedom" to do what they want is the only thing that matter.

Given how pervasive this norm is in our culture, it should come as no surprise that we now have a president who epitomizes this mefirst- and-only perspective. In his private life, and now as president, Donald Trump claims the inalienable right to do whatever he wants. He employs a constant bevvy of lies, miss-directions and lawyers to achieve his desires and evade responsibility for the harm he causes.

This is not just an individual belief.

Many corporate interests hold the same ideology. The timber industry, for example, believes it has the right to keep clear-cutting forests. In local TV ads, newspaper columns and proposals to Congress, it justifies this by cranking out endless balderdash about how benign or even "regenerative" its practices are, how increased timber harvest and wood consumption are part of the solution to climate disruption, how logging and forest-road building help reduce wildfires and other propaganda.

Last week 200 top forest and climate scientists sent a letter to Congress emphatically refuting these claims. To the contrary, said the scientists, substantially increased forest protections, allowing trees to grow larger, and consuming less wood, are necessary to sequester more carbon and protect the earth's climate.

The Oregon Global Warming Commission found that the wood-products sector is by far the largest greenhouse gas emitter in the state. The industry is accelerating the climate emergency which, far more than the pandemic, will impair millions of people.

Like the fossil-fuel industry and other sectors, Big Timber's belief that it is free to do as it wants undermines the inalienable right of people now and all future generations to live in freedom and safety.

The couple who potentially put me at risk, and many other individuals and organizations, must understand that, first and foremost, they have an inalienable responsibility to do no harm to others and nature. Only after this responsibility is fully met do they have the right to do as they please. *Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change-related issues.*

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