

From the RVC:

One of my favorite concepts is something called the Law of Unintended Consequences, which basically states that anything we do will have unforeseen results, regardless of whether or not it achieves whatever we set out to do.

I was reminded of that concept recently, after the National Office sent out an appeal for early membership renewal, suggesting that it was the “green” thing to do, as early renewals “save trees” by eliminating the need for follow-up mailings. The response to this appeal was extremely encouraging, as it generated numerous renewals and quite a few new membership applications as well. Previous appeals for early renewal in order to save the expense of the follow-up mailings were usually widely ignored, but apparently saving trees is much more popular than saving money.

One member, however, objected strenuously. He sent me an e-mail pointing out, correctly, that “saving” trees can actually harm the environment, as mature trees, if not harvested and replaced, will eventually die, increasing the danger of forest fires, and decay, degrading air quality. Cutting of fast-growing softwood trees for paper-making, on the other hand, insures a continuing supply of young, healthy trees that are better for the environment. Now, that’s not to say that logging companies aren’t frequently guilty of a number of abuses, but simply “saving paper” is, in and of itself, not a particularly earth-friendly thing to do.

Our government frequently falls victim to this same error. When Congress banned the manufacture of incandescent light bulbs a few years ago, they intended to reduce electricity consumption. They achieved that, by all accounts, but they also achieved some things that aren’t so popular: the Compact Fluorescent Lamps that replaced the old light bulbs contain substantial amounts of poisonous mercury, which will end up in our landfills and leach into our water supplies, and due to the hazards of handling mercury in a manufacturing process, no domestic company is willing to make CFLs, so hundreds of American jobs were exported to China.

My point is that the Law of Unintended Consequences is as inescapable as gravity, because, as Tolkien’s wizard Gandalf put it, “even the wise cannot see all ends.” A solution that seems obvious to me may have ramifications that somehow escaped my attention. Nonetheless, decisions must be made, and actions must be taken, and all we can do is hope that we have foreseen the most important of the unintended consequences that are sure to follow.

So, whether or not you want to save a tree, please renew your Mensa membership early. Every dollar we can save by not mailing dues reminders is another dollar available for other programs. Thanks!

Roger Durham