

A Future We Can Live With

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Recent reports issuing from the academic communities of our finest educational institutions indicate that we have put our future at risk. Atmospheric chemists report steady rises in greenhouse gases; soil scientists report that our soils are eroding in many places more rapidly than they are forming; human physiologists tell us of increases in foreign, perhaps disease-causing, chemicals in our bodies; ecologists register the impoverishment of ecosystems and the extinction of species; sociologists observe the breakdown of families and the deterioration of communities; and theologians discuss the erosion of moral principles and the alienation of humans from the natural world.

It is clear that we face the urgent challenge of learning how to live in a manner which does not jeopardize the future. But even as we teach our young people that the vital signs of the planet are in decline, our graduates continue to leave college as well-trained consumers who generally contribute to, rather than mitigate, the growing array of environmental and social problems now facing the planet.

The time has come for the concept of sustainability--meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations meet their needs--to become a central organizing idea for society. Indeed, many concerned individuals are now summoning the courage to say "no" to unlimited growth and consumption and "yes" to a more prudent set of values. Examples: new companies that offer solar technologies; farmers committed to minimizing the use of agricultural chemicals; builders who create highly efficient structures that require little energy to heat and cool; cities that shun car transport in favor of bike and rail, and businesses that are more concerned with treating their employees justly and producing high quality goods than with profit maximization.

Sustainability may be best understood by referring to a set of five core principles:

- Respect all life: Sustainability commits us to explicitly considering the effects of our decisions and actions on the health and well-being of the entire community of life.
- Live within limits: Sustainability involves a keen awareness that the natural resources upon which life depends--forests, fertile soils, fisheries, pure water and clean air--are finite endowments to be used with care and prudence at a rate consonant with their capacity for regeneration.
- Value the local: Sustainability commits us to respect the land and natural features of our neighborhoods and bioregions; to preserve, restore and use local knowledge; and to create strong, self-reliant local economies.

- Account for full costs: Sustainability requires that we become aware of the big picture; that we consider the life history of all products from "source to sink"; and that product prices reflect full costs.

- Share power: Sustainability calls us to recognize that we are all interconnected--people, biota and physical elements. Problems are solved by each individual assuming a share of the responsibility.

Remarkably, our present consumer-based, growth culture violates each of these sustainability principles: it fails to respect life--rather it regards all of creation as raw material for human ends; it fails to live within limits--instead it emphasizes ever-increasing consumption and assumes that resource supplies are infinite. It fails to account for full costs--instead it sells things cheaply and in the process often violates the rights of factory workers, the environment and future generations; it fails, also, to value the local--often crushing local economies, traditions, and cultures in the rush for global competitiveness and short-term profits. And finally this culture fails to share power in any meaningful way--regarding citizens as mere "consumers" while increasing the centralization of information and capital.

Though the concept of sustainability is relatively new, it is clear that the substance of its principles is already deeply embedded in our national character and values. What is *respect for life*, but our appreciation for the complexity and magnificence of the biosphere? *Living within limits* embodies the traditional values of frugality and thrift. *Respect for what is local* honors our history and traditions. *Full-cost accounting* simply calls us to remember the value of honesty and complete disclosure, and *sharing power* should be what democracy is all about.

Next time: Designing a sustainable community.

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