

Working Toward Sustainable Development

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The power of the individual to shape the course of history may be one of the most underdeveloped of all natural resources. It is only by the agreement of individuals that the complex relations between government, business, and people have produced the benefits of a developed, multicultural society. Credit for achievements must also include responsibility for failures like environmental problems. Although discussions and programs to clean up or avoid environmental decline are underway, the extent of individual power is yet to be applied. By taking a closer look at what is going on and being done, clues how individual power can be used to help may be revealed.

Population growth increases demand for goods and services and is a major driving force behind economic development. The result increases pressure on natural systems and resources. While the economy continues to expand, the ecosystem on which it depends does not. Furthermore, there are natural indicators that show damage. For example, “Forests are shrinking, water tables are falling, soils are eroding, wetlands are disappearing, fisheries are collapsing, range lands are deteriorating, rivers are running dry, temperatures are rising, coral reefs are dying, and plant and animal species are disappearing”¹ and waste that does not break down is accumulating. These natural indicators help to identify thresholds for sustainable yields and mark loss or dematerialization of natural resources. In other words, natural indicators monitor the carrying capacity of Earth and the impact of economic development on natural resources and ecosystems.

Regardless of cause, the threshold of deterioration or collapse of natural systems has been reached. Individual power must now be called upon and applied to help work toward sustainable development. With an increase in understanding of relations between economics and nature, individual power grows.

For example, B. C. Field in *The Economy and the Environment*, describes relations between economics and nature in terms of human activity and impact on ecosystems. Terms of study like “natural resource economics” or the withdrawing and processing of natural resources is differentiated from “environmental economics” as a study of what remains, the waste or ‘residuals’² (21). Nature and humans are shown as both producer and consumer in the economy and the environment. Nature produces renewable and non-renewable resources and consumes the waste flow of human activity. On the other hand, human activity produces products for consumers from natural resources laying its waste upon nature. These inputs and outputs are the links that describe the interface of economics and environment.

Field uses economic and environmental input-output links to describe the relations in economics and nature to help find equilibrium. Whether specific or non-specific, the impact of waste flow and the residual stream is shifting the emphasis of study to waste management. Since we have the knowledge and technology to produce whatever is needed for survival, what’s left is to recognize the importance of our partner, nature, in the supply of natural resources and the elimination of waste.

While the effect of global impact is clear, the connection to individual activity is not. For example, the packages that nature produces to store or deliver its goods are reusable, breaking down quickly as compost or food for new growth. Industrial goods come in packages that are thrown away, break down very slowly, and offer little or no use to anything else. A lot of energy, raw material, and hidden costs like the trees for paper and skids, petroleum by-products for plastics and ink, and the hidden costs to extract, manufacture, transport, and dispose of production waste should all be part of the purchase price. Buying in bulk and packaging in reused or reusable glass containers will help to reduce the trend toward loss of natural resources.

Looking at economic and natural indicators separately obscures the real costs of products. While convenience helps to drive demand in unsustainable ways, separation of the problem from the cause hides options and compounds problems. For example, it is convenient to buy things all wrapped up in cardboard and plastic. Once the contents are taken out, the package is thrown away. Not much thought is given to the cost of packaging mainly because it's the contents that are purchased. The cost of packaging includes extracting raw material and manufacturing the different parts. Energy is used and waste produced in the process. The package is disposed of and instead of breaking down in a helpful way; it accumulates in a garbage dump to become another kind of environmental problem. The main economic value of a package is convenience, and any connection to the impact on nature is hidden. By connecting or reconnecting economics to environment, the individual can change the basis for demand from convenience to sustainability. The cost to go against the flow of convenient consumerism may rise, but the net result will be to help offset problems accumulating in nature.

In Ecological Economics and Environmental Policy, Joan M. Alier compares neo-classic with environmental economics. The author shows how environmental policy is formed from contrasting methodologies. Policy defines the instruments, limits, and indicators of valuation that separate the static neo-classical and dynamic environmental economic approaches. Unfortunately, while debate on valuation of natural resources continues, the incongruous fact that “the economy is moving towards dematerialization”³ remains.

What then do tax dollars purchase? The general idea is to hire problem solvers and civil servants to promote the quality of life. Instead, the ongoing discussions about policy produce paralysis by analysis. The politicians create special interest policies and budgets that are delivered through a network of ‘civil servants’ that conduct themselves like civil masters. Individuals have the power of choice to replace greed with need. It starts at the polls by demanding both fiscal and social accountability. If taxes or tax grabs go up, and services go down, what indeed is the tax dollar purchasing? While the focus on fiscal responsibility is at the expense of social programs, money is diverted to the wrong pocket, and taxes are in effect being paid to harm instead of help society. If sustainable development is to somehow be realized, the driver of the economic vehicle must be able and willing to steer where the community is pointing; otherwise common sense isn't, revolution is the turn of a wheel, and progressive conservative is still a contradiction in terms.

Per Brink in Our Common Future and Beyond: Interpretations of Sustainable Development abstracts many useful concepts from the Brundtland report to increase understanding of what sustainable development is and to emphasize the need to implement sustainability jointly in economic and ecological terms.

The underlying assumption of economic theory is that natural resources are free; otherwise, developers would pay nature for resources 'purchased' with the currency of sustainable impact. This is not the case. The results of waste accumulation, non-renewable resource depletion, loss of renewable resources through desertification, deforestation, and erosion, speak volumes for the cost of 'progress'. Brink's stated assumption that natural resources "are not free"⁴, leads to questions like who will pay, with what, and when?

Sustainable development is achievable, but at what price? Economic valuation is stated in terms of natural resource development and management. Ecological valuation is implied in terms of sustainability or the extent to which it can recover on its own from development and management. Economic theory promotes continuous growth, but nature clearly states "Eventually, a limit is reached."⁶ An underlying assumption is that nature on its own is self-sustaining, while human development is not. The characteristics of economic theory are changing from boon to bane while nature, oblivious to human ego-systems, conducts the business of life as usual.

In order to reconcile economic growth with nature's capacity to sustain life, conceptual tools are identified as an essential mediator. "The problem is what we know and understand is inadequate" (12). So, how much information do we need to act? While economic development continues with or without regard of impact to natural resources, measures for sustainability remain dominated or obscured by policy and debate. Although there is sufficient understanding to substantially moderate impacts of development, cost-benefit in economic terms continues to exploit both natural and human resources. While human resources are paid for in economic terms, nature's are not.

In the past there may have been a surplus of natural resources and the interest provided by natural recovery mechanisms did in fact support human growth and technology. This has now changed. The opposite is true. Withdrawal of capital from the bank of natural resource exceeds the deposits of sustainable income from nature's resources and any interest nature can pay. All nature is saying is that the free ride is over and humans must now pay to play. The payment nature asks is to consume natural resources at a sustainable rate.

Conceptual tools are needed to transform greed-driven and careless economic development into careful, life promoting alternatives. The individual's power of choice enables careful selection of products and services that will help to reduce or eliminate problems associated with unsustainable development and waste accumulation. Pro-life choices consciously recognize and break away from hypnotic forces of business and media that continue to enthrall people with convenience and propaganda.

The test for wise choices, as opposed to poor ones, separates the two basic parts of any product into package and content. If the package cannot be eaten, worn, or used in any other durable way, and when discarded does not break down to help other forms of life, stay away — choose not to pay. Content can be compared with what is similar in volume, quality, and price. However, representation and its variants tend to be deceptive. Still, research, trial-and-error, or a combination of both are used to know the content. Although the process of elimination takes time and may be inconvenient, it is a small price to pay to help move toward a sustainable future. Individual choices can help drive

business toward more sustainable development and improve the quality of life by making better choices.

In Green and Competitive, Porter and Van der Linde explain environmental and economic basis for sustainable resource and waste management practice. The authors argue that contrary to a static view of pollution prevention or regulation, “enhanced resource productivity makes companies more competitive not less”⁵. Using examples of success, the authors imply that if large corporations like Dow, 3M, Dupont, and Ciba-Geigy can do it, others can as well. The assumption is tempered stating “These examples and many others like them do not prove companies can always innovate to reduce environmental impact at low cost”(8). The important part of the message is that “today a new frame of reference for thinking about environmental improvement is urgently needed”(8).

Adversarial positions are identified and defused by differentiating between good and bad regulation. The authors conclude, “Environmental impact must be embedded in the overall process of improving productivity and competitiveness. The resource productivity model, rather than the pollution control model must govern decision making”(15). The assumption is that resource productivity and supportive innovation is more economical, therefore more profitable, than opposing it. An underlying assumption is that reason prevails in economic decision making. If so, then what causes the unreasonable resistance to profit from sustainable development?

One explanation the authors offer is that we are in transition and inexperienced therefore unaware of the costs of resource inefficiency and pollution. Another is the adversarial role of a static mind set. Underlying these factors is the assumption that for the most part humans are unable or unwilling to move toward change as a society despite the efforts of innovative companies, environmental lobbyists, and credible data.

However, another explanation is present in the claim that there is enough data to support trends to change. The underlying assumption is that appropriate information is actually delivered. Ideally, information delivery to decision makers will promote agreement and help move toward profit from sustainable development. Unfortunately, constructive information tends to be the exception rather than the rule because a main source of delivery, public media, thrives on controversy. Reports that single out negative information while ignoring the positive or possible, tends to stir the pot rather than serve the content.

For example, the article by Dianne Francis, Legacy of ‘Green’ Lunacy Strips us of Bounty of Capitalism⁶ appeared in the Financial Post. The title itself promotes controversy and assumes conflict. While an adversarial mindset is fostered in the public domain, the net result is a trickle down effect rather than a concerted effort towards profit from sustainable initiative. The importance of information and its delivery is stressed. Where media continues to serve its own interest of profit by controversy and conflict, it can be identified as harmful instead of helpful while the promotion of service to social and economic sustainability remains withheld.

Paul Hawken in A Declaration of Sustainability makes a very staid summary. “Despite their dedicated good work, if we examine all or any of the business that deservedly earn high marks for social and environmental responsibility, we are faced with a sobering irony: If every company on the planet were to adopt the environmental

and social practices of the best companies—of, say, the Body Shop, Patagonia, and Ben & Jerry's—the world would still be moving toward environmental degradation and collapse. In other words, if we analyze environmental effects and create an input-output model of resources and energy, the results do not even approximate a tolerable or sustainable future. If a tiny fraction of the world's most intelligent companies cannot model a sustainable world, then that tells us that being socially responsible is only one part of an overall solution, and that what we have is not a management problem but a design problem.”⁷

In terms of design or redesign of sustainable activity, the interest and responsibility of all parties cannot be denied. The awesome power of the individual is actually found in the simple daily choices that can make a difference regardless of scale. The power of choice can change the course of history. Choose to live long and prosper.

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