

We need to enhance the local

During a period when our national economy is in a tailspin and with more difficult times on the horizon, might we benefit from focusing our local resources (both human and nonhuman) on making our community healthy, happy and sustainable? Based on many environmental indicators, we should rapidly slow down (and reverse) our expansion and dependence on global products and markets. Many potential benefits await us if we reconnect at a local level. It isn't that an "all local" arrangement will solve all of our problems immediately, but the bulk of our resources and commodities will need to start coming from closer to home if we hope to flourish as a community in the future.

Currently, the world is becoming more and more globalized. Many of us enjoy the materialistic benefits of this. We can eat brie cheese from France, drink wine made of Andean grapes, or partake in winter watermelon from Central America. We can buy cheap products of all types at "big box" stores. We can watch foreign films in different languages or subtitles. We can burn gasoline derived from petroleum located in far off lands to propel our cars or planes. An inspection at our clothing labels, dinnerware, toys, or tools affirms that so much of what we consume is manufactured elsewhere; we usually have no idea where the raw materials came from. We have all become accustomed to this type of living. It is hard for most of us to imagine any other way.

All this convenience and access to products comes at a pretty high price, however. More than a billion of our fellow Homo Sapiens live in abject poverty—lacking sufficient nutrients, clean water, immunizations, etc. Many others suffer from diseases (such as, cancer, asthma, birth defects, and learning disorders) which are largely a function of an industrialized system that treats humans as cogs in a wheel—breakable, expendable, and replaceable. How else do you explain why it seems perfectly reasonable for us—to pick just three of hundreds of poignant examples: (a) to send our damaged or discarded electronic equipment—which is highly toxic—to countries known for their human rights abuses; (b) to fill our gas tanks with fuel that may have come from pipelines built with slave labor (as was shown to have occurred in Burma); or, (c) to give "blood" diamonds to our mates as a sign of a lifelong commitment to them? For the sake of current and future human generations, we need to imagine another way, and fast. Fortunately there exists another way and not only is it doable, its future lies in our (and our neighbor's) hands and minds.

One new way focuses on our local areas as the primary source for both our goods and services. It recognizes that there is great opportunity in becoming less dependent on outside forces for resources and solutions. For example, there are some tremendous environmental benefits stemming from looking locally. Obviously, tons of energy can be saved (i.e., conserved). Every mile travelled by our food, our clothing, etc. means fossil fuel burned. Currently, most of our food travels 1,500 or so miles before it makes it to our plates. This is an extremely wasteful way to feed the world's people. All this shipping not only requires fuel, but an extensive infrastructure including highways, train tracks, airports, and shipping ports. All of these things destroy natural habitat and diminish biological productivity immensely. And, since it is nearly impossible to inspect every package or compartment, we also open ourselves up to security risks on a grand scale when we consume products

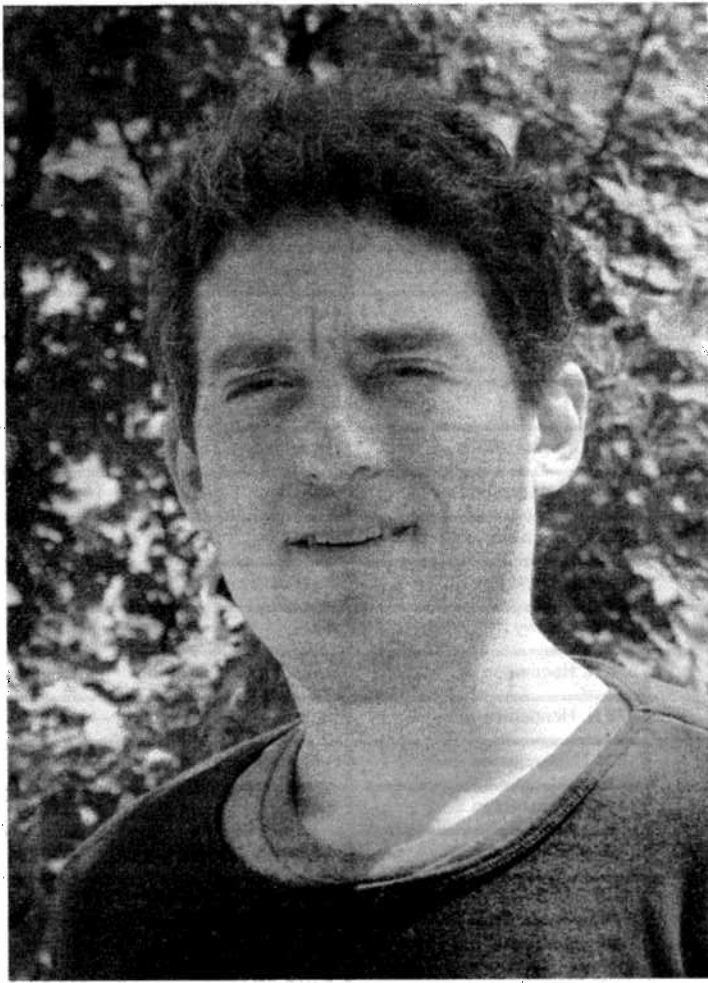
from so far away. Local production requires only a fraction of the fuels and materials and avoids the unnecessary risks as well.

Greatly limiting global transport of goods will undoubtedly diminish the impact of invasive species, one of the more vexing environmental problems facing ecosystems today. Some non-native species (such as, zebra mussels, soybean rust, kudzu, and leafy spurge) wreak havoc on the environment and agriculture. Nationally, these species are projected to produce damage and losses on the order of \$120 billion; globally, the costs are over \$1.4 trillion (currently about 5 percent of the global economy) (Pimentel et al., 2001 & Pimentel et al., 2005).

Energy conserved will also allow us to reduce CO₂ emissions, something more and more people realize we need to do as soon as possible. Just this April, Dr. Hansen from NASA passionately argued that we need to reduce atmospheric concentrations of this greenhouse gas to 350 parts per million (ppm) in order for "humanity . . . to preserve a planet similar to that which civilization developed." (It's currently at 390 ppm and the European Union is shooting for stabilization at 550 ppm, way above Hansen's tipping point.) Despite the voluntary reduction mandate which began during the Clinton administration, the U.S. CO₂ emission totals are up over 20 percent since 1990! Clearly, what we are doing doesn't work.

There are three basic ways to reduce CO₂ emissions to levels that are in keeping with stabilizing planetary climates: (a) a complete shift over to renewable energies (and, in particular, solar, wind, and geothermal); (b) a great reduction in consumption of other goods (which are fossil fuel dependent); and, (c) a significant shortening of the average distance between the production and consumption of products. The first way, i.e., renewable, does not require (and may seem in opposition to) local structures, but actually, a great deal of energy savings can happen locally through energy conservation measures and redesigning of infrastructures (such as public transportation and south-facing windows).

The second and third ways succeed mightily in a local environment. Local emphasis clearly reduces the distance of transport but it also lends itself to a society that reduces consumption and adopts other good habits. It does this by forcing us to develop stronger connections with our neighbors and our surroundings. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to look at a hypothetical situation. Consider that the people of Galesburg and Knox County had to survive solely on the food and materials found within the confines of Knox County. What would happen? Well, I'm not sure, but I would hope that we would find ways to coexist peacefully while at the same time getting the nourishment and intangibles necessary for a healthy and fulfilling life. With limited access to external resources, we would have to become more selective in what we consume and, as a result, we would reduce consumption. Since we would not be able to depend on outside help, we would have to work together to solve problems. This new way of thinking would undoubtedly force us to be more knowledgeable about what can and cannot grow in our climate



and what can and cannot be eaten that does grow. (The term "weed" would undergo a massive reworking as salads with dandelion leaves would fill many bowls.) More people would likely decide to have a home food garden, rather than a green lawn (which often serves no purpose but mowing). We would begin to recognize that nature has limits in the abundance it can produce sustainably (over long periods) and what it can endure (in terms of synthetic chemicals, fertilizers, tilling, etc.). It would move us to develop a dependable and accessible public transportation system to take people from their homes to key areas of employment, commerce, and recreation. It would also motivate us to beautify our neighborhoods, parks, and schools, making them places we could be proud of as well as places where we find fulfillment, enjoyment and leisure.

It is understood that one of the major reasons why we don't live in greater harmony with nature is because we don't have a sense of place. Living locally, in all it entails, will breed respect for place and an obligation to protect it among its citizens. We do have local spirit but it is often relegated to playing fields or school yards. These venues often create tension and animosity among neighbors due to arbitrary fraternities and associations. (For example, it is completely irrational how much some members of the Knox College and Monmouth College communities despise each other.) We need to expand the locations/spaces where all local residents can learn, play and work. We also need more places where children can also find security, respect and opportunities to explore, wonder and engage with the natural world.

Most importantly, in this hypothetical situation, we would necessarily have to respect our neighbors and see them, and ourselves, as sources of inspiration, intelligence, friendship, etc. This might be the biggest windfall from thinking locally. When people truly recognize that collective engagement is the only way to survive peacefully, they will more actively participate in civic arenas. They will care (and probably know) who gets elected. Pessimists or apathetic people will be compelled to leave their negativity at the door. There will be too much life in the neighborhood to

avoid connecting and being part of something special. Through our engagement with one another, we all become active members in the creation of our preferred destiny. We'll thrive when we feel part of something bigger than ourselves yet understand that our individual contributions matter as well.

Localism, as a way of living, doesn't necessitate isolationism, however. Certainly, many of us will continue to travel and be concerned with happenings that are going on elsewhere. We'll certainly still be part of the global community. However, whenever and wherever we do go, we'll appreciate and respect the local focus and direction unique and particular to each community we visit. We'll recognize that they are tackling some of the same problems that we are and we'll expect them to design their own solutions, which may be quite unlike ours.

All of this local talk probably seems super idealistic and, perhaps, totally unrealistic. That is fine and I welcome naysayers and critics as much as converts. I just don't

see the globalization process continuing without great suffering continuing (at increased levels, if that were possible). I believe we have reached limits that we must respect. There is a reason that nearly every one of us doesn't do much about the unnecessary suffering that is happening everyday throughout the world. We don't because we are either suffering ourselves (and therefore have a difficult time finding the energy and time to do so) or we simply don't have to concern ourselves with the plight of others. No matter which group you find yourself identifying with more, we can all take some satisfaction that we can begin today taking care of those around us while greatly reducing the destruction perpetrated by our current lifestyle and resource dependence. This new locally-rooted lifestyle will allow all of us to secure our place in our communities while at the same time enabling others, be they two-leggeds, four-leggeds, or the winged, to enjoy life and the magic and wonder that this special planet offers. We can make this happen. It is simply a matter of will.

Works Cited:

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