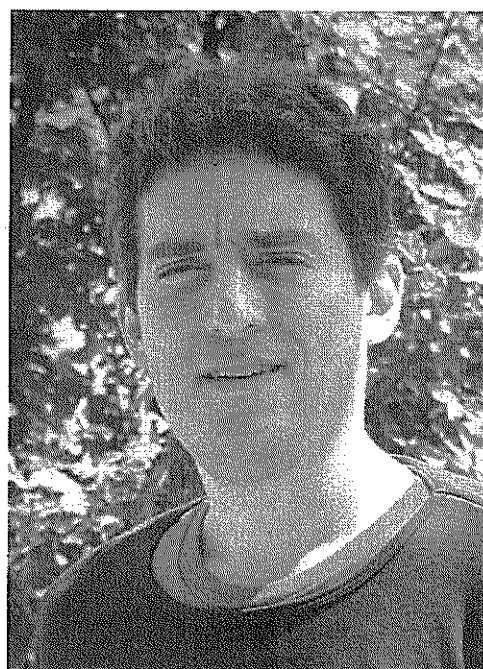


ENOUGH IS ENOUGH**Peter Schwartzman****From whence comes sustainability?**

The "green train" that people are jumping on uses lots of terms to represent its inspirations and intentions but perhaps the most widely used one right now is "sustainability." While relatively new in our vernacular, the term embodies a concept that has a long and rich history. Widely used by businesses and institutions today, "sustainability" has become little more than a "buzzword" in some instances. In other cases, it is the overarching goal of national and international treaties and policies. Clearly, sustainability has captured our attention. How did we get to this point and what does "sustainability" really have to offer any of us?

To understand where we are, we need to look at the past. Great minds in Western Civilization contributed mightily to our current way of thinking about the environment. Francis Bacon, referred by some as the "father of science," argued in the early 1600s that science would enable humans to dominate nature. Rene Descartes, a famous French scientist and contemporary of Bacon's, considered animals to be machines and as such didn't think there were ethical limitations to how we used/treated them. These lauded minds of our not so distant past promoted a way of thinking that was often invoked to justify and defend an Industrial Era that saw nature simultaneously as a barrier to progress as well as a commodity to be exploited. Their conceptions, which dominated Western thinking for the past several centuries, were also used to rationalize the subjugation and extermination of large populations of "savages" in the New World and Oceania. (Oddly, these "great" minds are rarely questioned/criticized for the impact of putting their thoughts into action.)

In the late 1800s, several people began to take issue with this domineering attitude towards nature. John Muir was one of them. He thought that nature had so much to offer us, spiritually, aesthetically, as well as materially. He fought to get Yosemite to become a National Park in 1905 and helped establish an environmental organization, the *Sierra Club*, which thrives with membership today. More contemporary, Aldo Leopold, born in Burlington, Iowa, had his famous treatise, *The Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously in 1949. It was a work that described the need for a new "land ethic" where "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." This vision of the world emphasized the importance of living things both in their own right as well as members of a larger interdependent system which included humans. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* just thirteen years

later. In it, arguably the most important non-fiction work of the 20th Century, she described the overly risky and, ultimately, misguided practice of using synthetic poisons on our fields and lawns. Leopold and Carson demonstrably changed the way many people looked at nature and the relationship humans have with it. They realized that "subduing or dominating" nature was a very dangerous practice and antithetical to a healthy future. This new way of thinking had a lot to do with the energy, passion, and commitment necessary to bring forth the first Earth Day, held April 22, 1970—a momentous event celebrated worldwide by ~20 million people.

So what does any of this have to do with "sustainability"? Plain and simple, for the past four hundred years, Western Civilization has adopted a scientifically-rationalized "seek and conquer" mentality. Now, through the effort and thoughts of many scholars (as well as, grassroots practitioners that I have neglected here), we recognize how arrogant and destructive we have been. Using a simple criterion for sustainability—"living within the means of the Earth"—our civilization is living very far from sustainably. Soils are thinning, fisheries are collapsing, rivers are heavily polluted (~40% of U.S. rivers are so polluted that fishing/swimming is not advised), and heat-trapping greenhouse gases are on the rise. These are all signs that the way we are living must end soon. In economic terms, we are living, and have been for 20-30 years globally (when we finally exceeded the planet's carrying capacity), on the Earth's principal or endowment. We can do this for a short while but eventually, when the environment gets too depleted, our civilization is bound to collapse—as have many other civilizations throughout human history (on a much smaller scale). Given this situation, the key question is: Will we direct the change that is necessary (to avoid further collapse) or will we wait until we must change according to the dictates of the natural world?

Fortunately, many have decided to be proactive about the future. They aren't willing to risk the prospects of fate. For many of these people and groups "sustainability" acts as a guiding principle to direct positive change. Next week, I will describe some of these efforts and suggest how sustainability might have something in it for all of us.

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