

Sustainable Development: The Key to Our Future

By Wayne Visser

The “Green movement” has come a long way since its debut on the global scene back in the “hippie sixties”. Back then, to the pilots of industry and progress, “greenies” were fringe extremists, crazy liberals - certainly not to be taken seriously. On the other hand, to the environmentalists, the business world consisted only of selfish, greedy, exploiters - undoubtedly the roots of all evil - who had to be crippled at all costs, if the “green” cause was to be realised.

Now, things are different. Environmentalists are more professional and less militant, and industry has developed a social conscience. Whereas it used to be “them against us”, now it’s “let’s work together for a common future”.

How did this come about? The change has to do with an emerging consciousness and the growing realisation that more can be achieved through co-operation than confrontation; that balance and the middle way are better than rigidity and extremity; and that every thing in the universe is connected and joins together to make up a larger, more meaningful whole.

At the very heart of this new consciousness is the concept of “sustainable development”. It is based on the idea of the Earth as a living, regenerative, self-sustaining organism. In other words, nature comprises complex ecosystems which ensure that nothing is wasted, that every product of one process feeds in as an ingredient of another, and that there is harmony and sustained life on Earth.

However, every system has a “breaking point” - a point at which forces upsetting its inherent equilibrium exceed its ability to compensate and restore harmony to the system. And this has been the case with the effects of industrialisation on the environment. Our interference with the Earth’s natural systems in the name of “progress” has brought us to a breaking point situation. And the bottom line is this: if the Earth’s natural systems break down, so does its ability to support life (i.e. exit human race!).

So, in our belated wisdom, we have realised that what is needed is sustainable development. In other words, development which meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The analogy for our Western left-brained mind is that, if we liken the Earth to a financial investment we need to learn to live off of its interest, rather than running down its capital base. This

means that development is not condemned but rather is undertaken in such a way as to preserve the environment's ability to sustain itself.

Taken to heart, sustainable development demands a whole new way of perceiving the world and of conducting our lives. How do the everyday products which we use fit into this new mindset? Are they recyclable in terms of the Earth's natural systems, or are they contributing to its breakdown? Industry needs to ask the same question of its business operations: cradle-to-grave, are they contributing to the problem or the solution?

Now, rightly, it's no longer a question of "them and us" - it's just us all of us as global citizens facing a common crisis regarding a common future. The meaning of the Chinese word for *crisis* is "dangerous opportunity". And that's precisely what it is. And the way to realise this opportunity for creating a better world is for us, each one of us, to become a part of the solution - by living a more sustainable life.

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