

Thriving in a Changing World: In Conversation with John Elkington

By Wayne Visser

When I sat down for my Thriving podcast with guest John Elkington—one of the pioneering thinkers in the field of sustainability—it felt like a continuation of a conversation we’ve been having across time. He had generously written the foreword to my book *Thriving*, and I’ve long seen alignment between his evolving ideas and my own work. I opened by asking him how the concept of thriving fits into his current thinking.

“I like the idea of thriving,” John responded. “Every time you have a change agenda – and this is certainly one of them, whatever we call it – that goes mainstream, you have this phenomenon where everyone suddenly wants to be part of what they would originally have ignored or pushed back against.”

It’s a pattern we both recognise: as new paradigms gain traction, they’re often diluted, commodified or misunderstood. But, as John added, “I hear people talking about thriving in extremely positive terms, so it’s clearly connecting and well done.”

We turned to his groundbreaking work on the triple bottom line, which he famously “recalled” 25 years after launching it—not to reject the concept, but to highlight its limitations. “It is a tool and if it’s used in the right way, it can actually be helpful,” he said. “But... they all have strengths, and they all have their weaknesses. So, I’m just saying, let’s think it through a little bit and just work out what is working and what is not.”

What followed was a discussion about his new lens—the 3-R framework: responsibility, resilience, and regeneration. As he put it:

“Responsibility is foundational in this space. But it clearly was not enough.”

He described how even when responsibility cascaded through supply chains, “it wasn’t really driving the sort of changes that we want to see.”

Resilience, he argued, was often assumed to be a halfway house to addressing these challenges, but that assumption didn’t hold: “These are wicked problems; they are increasingly interconnected. And it is a systemic crisis that we face.” His conclusion? “It has to be regeneration. It has to be regeneration across the triple bottom line... But it also has to be around politics, it has to be around education, it has to be around science – all of these things that are absolutely, intimately interlinked.”

That resonated strongly with my own six Rs—two each for nature, society, and economy—and the focus I place on resilience as an essential trait in times of disruption. A thriving future is one that can absorb shocks and bounce forward.

We shifted to discussing science. John shared a formative story: “I was the only one in the school who refused to cut up frogs – because at that stage, you cut them up while they were alive, and I refused to do that. So, I was told I couldn’t do biology.” Later, he rekindled his connection with science through writing. “I wrote for [*New Scientist*] four or five years, and probably a feature article a month.” That exposure, he said, opened his eyes to how science influenced both government and business.

His view now is that science is being overlooked and undervalued. “I think science is, in its many different facets and dimensions, absolutely fundamental to what comes next,” he said. “And I also think we’re in the midst of a profound scientific paradigm shift.” He recalled reading *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* at age 14 and said, “Paradigm shifts are nauseating. They’re really shocking to people in the old paradigm.”

From there, our conversation flowed into systems thinking and the inspiration we both draw from nature. I mentioned Jan Smuts’ *Holism and Evolution*, and the idea that living systems evolve toward more complex wholes. For me, thriving is an attempt to apply that theory to real-world challenges. John noted, “Too much systems science is too complicated for the average human brain.” Yet he sees promise in emerging technologies: “There are a range of things around big data and expert systems and artificial intelligence now, which could give us the capacity to deal with some of these extraordinarily complex problems.”

He returned to a theme close to both our hearts:

“I think one of the answers has to be immersion in nature. It’s what started me off.”

He referenced Eugene Marais’ work on termites and baboons and pointed to the discipline of biomimicry as “hugely powerful.” Having served six years on the board of Biomimicry 3.8, he said, “That whole biomimicry discipline... has the potential over the next 15 to 20 years to transform the way more and more people think about the world that we’re trying to build.”

From science we moved, almost inevitably, to science fiction. “I think it can [teach us], although... it needs violence to entertain and to engage,” John said. But he praised authors like Ursula Le Guin, and the world-building in *Dune*. “Science fiction can poke our brains and help us imagine things, or think through things, that we wouldn’t otherwise have been able to do.”

We discussed Andy Weir’s *The Martian*, a brilliant illustration of circular economy thinking, and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future*, which feels increasingly prophetic. “Looking at the temperatures currently in Pakistan,” John said, “it’s very clear that Kim Stanley Robinson was way ahead of most people.” He recommended *The Water Knife* and reflected on how it portrays a world of unintended consequences: “We might assume things are going to turn out for best if we do certain things, but being humans and reality being the way it is, that’s not always the way things go.”

As we approached the end of our conversation, I asked John if it was still responsible to talk about thriving when things seem to be getting worse.

“Hope is the most precious and very often the most precarious element in all of this. We’ve left this for so long, we’re going to have to do this at warp speed.”

John’s parting message was a powerful call to continued intergenerational effort. “I think the risks that we face currently... is that older people will get to the point of wanting to retire and put their feet up... I think that is deadly dangerous. I think we’ve got to build pan-generational processes.” He joked that his wife asks if he works with young people just because they’re cheaper. “And I say no, because that’s the future, and if you can be in an ongoing conversation with the future... hallelujah.”

As ever, John left me inspired. His clarity of thought, deep historical perspective, and enduring optimism are gifts to our field. “Keep on trucking. Keep on thriving,” he said as we wrapped up. And so I shall.

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