Are We There Yet? A Look Back at the Environmental Revolution and its Implications

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The roots of the revolution could be traced back, decades back, to when conditions seemed comparatively pristine. What would have happened if those first advocates of the environment in the late 1960s and early 70s could have seen the state of the world fifty years in the future, if they could have gauged the extent to which the sustaining processes of the globe would eventually be diminished? Would they have given up then? By the time the revolution had begun, I mean when it had really kicked off in earnest, things had reached a depressingly hopeless and dismal state.

Yes, the roots had sprouted long ago. The public became aware of the changing state of their environment, and concerned citizens began to take action. Public outcry led to the first environmental legislation. This legislation aimed to protect some of the largest public commodities, our air and water. But how much positive effect could this legislation have in a country ruled by the corporation? Loopholes, lack of enforcement, and the government's own self interest may have negated some of the positive effects of these laws. Even more of a problem was the lack of a place for environmental services and functions within the economic model of the time. Mostly people didn't notice what was happening to these life-sustaining services. If they were told that the environment was in good hands, they did not resist. But some did resist. Grassroots organizations began to pop up, many with widely disparate goals. But all of these goals had one overriding theme: protection of the environment.

Human populations swelled and global food production lagged. Land was being cleared at unprecedented rates. Fossil fuels were enabling these changes to occur.

Vested in the use of these fossil fuels was a hidden threat, one that science had long noted but had not guessed at the magnitude of. Here was global climate change, the one big threat to the earth, the rallying cry of all environmentalists. Now these various roots had one common tree to which they could divert their resources. The revolution had begun.

But it began slowly. Even when the idea of global climate change had moved from the realm of science into the realm of public consciousness and concern, many nations were still unwilling to sign on to the growing number of international agreements. Of course, all of these agreements dealt with reductions, with scaling things back. It was difficult breaking the faith in growth and production of several of the world's most highly consumptive nations, especially when the returns appeared so far distant. Only when the need became too great to ignore did the revolution reach its tipping point.

Enter the extreme weather of 2010. People of older generations had begun to notice the changing weather independent of what the scientific community was clamoring about. Farmers in the center of the country were seeing prolonged droughts, the extent of which they had not seen before. Fishermen were noticing that storms were coming up more quickly and with greater violence than in years past. Those living in northern climates began to see shorter winters with less snow. But this didn't really hit the public consciousness until the tropical storm season of 2005, when the city of New Orleans was all but washed away. That year set a new record for the number of storms. Now the general public was beginning to buy into the science of climate change, that we really were altering the weather. But at that point, most people were still satisfied with the band aid solutions—just raise the houses up so that they wouldn't flood the next time around. What no one was expecting was that 2006 would set a new record for storms in one

season. As would 2007, and 2009. In 2010, after the fourth year of severe drought, the United States needed to import more food than they ever had before. Two Category 5 hurricanes hit the southeast, one destroying New Orleans for the second time in five years and one devastating Miami. A Category 4 hurricane caused massive floods in Washington D.C., Baltimore, and Philadelphia. California experienced some of its worst mudslides ever. Tornadoes ripped across the central and southeastern U.S. Band aid solutions would no longer work for the magnitude of these disasters.

Now the social movement that had been growing behind the worsening effects of global climate change finally had a majority of the public opinion. The wide assortment of environmental groups mobilized behind the leadership of Jon Isham. The former rebels who had denounced the continued growth, the continued production of climate changing agents, had now become the speakers of common sense. Those who had been striving for change finally had a solid footing on which to advance.

This was a multifaceted problem, one whose tendrils extended into all aspects of our life on this planet. Not to cheapen the significance of past social struggles for human rights, but this was a problem that transcended all boundaries of race, ethnicity, religious faith and gender. And with the scale of the problem came the scale of the solution. Many of the causes of the situation were obvious, but they were far too numerous to begin to deal with on an individual scale. The neoclassical economic model that shaped our market economy was one of the culprits. This market had failed at correctly representing the cost of environmental services and sustainability. Some pointed the finger at the dominant religious faiths that had played a significant role in shaping the accepted societal relationship to the environment. Humans as divine controllers meant

that blind resource use and economic development were a God-given right. It was also difficult to argue that some religious views had played a significant role in exploding population growth rates. These religious faiths had developed hundreds or thousands of years before, reflecting the needs of society at that time. New religious models were needed for the requirements of a new age where increasing human populations and extracting all available resources from the environment had begun to negatively affect society. The Christian Stewardship movement sought to rectify some of these problems, but this was still an entirely anthropocentric ideal. The religious aspect of the environmental movement, led by Mary Evelyn Tucker, realized that what was really required of the dominant religious faiths was a new interconnection of peace and ecological stability. Some of the religious leaders saw this and began to rally support for this notion, slowly beginning the changing the place or religion in the juxtaposition of society and environment.

Those states that had been mounting their own efforts to reduce emissions exclusive of the federal government and had been pushing toward a greater sort of decentralization spearheaded the next step. Many of these states had been promoting movements such as food cooperatives, land trusts, and public investment strategies for years, putting them at the forefront of social change. With the assistance of those great social organizers who had been pushing for reform and with the support of a federal government that was at ends for delivering a solution, these states organized the first national summit on the future of the country. Global climate change had been the unifier of the movement, but there was recognition that this was just part of a global issue of sustainability. As forecast years earlier by Richard Heinberg, global oil production was

quickly declining as increased extraction from the existing reserves provided diminishing returns. Yet very little funding had been directed toward the development of sustainable energy solutions. It was this lack of foresight and our inability to break our consumptive habits that had gotten us into the current situation. The summit was organized with the goal of establishing prudence for the future. Here was the first mass gathering of leaders designed to collaborate on a collective vision of the direction we wanted this country, not to mention this world, to take in shaping a future. A future that did not look like the present global disaster.

As the head chair of the summit, Rik Leemans began easily enough with the designing of a model for what a desirable future would look like. At the foundation of this model was the realization of basic human needs for all. Building on this model was the idea of maximizing Quality of Life, the satisfaction and contentment among the public. It had become obvious in the previous few years that without these goals being foremost, social unease and disgust for the system would increase, eventually causing collapse. The members of the summit agreed that the route to the maximization of these needs and desires was through creating entirely sustainable systems that could increase stability and security.

The contention began with discussion of a fitting solution and route toward this sustainable society. Again, the scale of this problem was enormous and overarching. What sort of change would be required to combat it? Two camps formed, on one side those who supported mass reform, and on the other those who favored a total revamping of the entire governmental system. Both sides agreed that the functioning government did not represent the values and desires of the American people. Instead, we had become

a nation controlled by corporate power. All of the focus was on economic gains and maximizing efficiency. The old constitutional design now allowed for a relatively small group of people to manipulate the entire nation. But the reformists claimed that the original role of the government could be updated to meet the needs of this modern society. The decentralizationists, led by Gar Alperovitz argued that the old system was completely inapplicable, that a new sustainable society needed a new form of democracy that would put the power to create sustainable lifestyles in the hands of the people.

One of the bases of the decentralizationist argument was that the United States had grown too large to function properly under the old system. The old system that had allowed the rise of a corporate power with little counterbalancing effects no longer worked when sustainability was foremost. Maximization of sustainability rather than profit required a system that was not driven by corporate gain. They claimed that decentralization was the first key step in moving toward a sustainable society. A functioning democracy needed a smaller scale in order to operate effectively. Getting rid of federal governance and forming smaller regional groups would be a step toward a working democracy. If we really wanted to achieve sustainability, we first needed to discard of the old system that had bred unsustainable practices.

The strength of the decentralizationist side of the debate underscored that the scale of the solution needed to match the scale of the problem. This first national summit on the future ended with agreement on the need for a new system, but no agreement as to what exactly this system would look like or how it would operate. The leaders of the decentralizationists defined 10 major regions of the nation based on watershed boundaries. Representatives from all 50 states now met jointly to begin discussion on

drafting new regional constitutions. The focus of these constitutions was of course creating a sustainable system, but within the context of a truly participatory democracy. The new constitutions sought to build local stability through security of the citizens, allowing them the time to become involved in the choices facing the society. They also had a focus on equity among all parties, ensuring certain standards of Quality of Life for all. Several aspects of the new constitutions directly addressed sustainability. Any subsidy that promoted degradation was outlawed. Instead, land owners would be rewarded for proper management of ecosystem services. This meant that the full value of ecosystem services needed to be taken into account.

With these pending changes in the system came the need for new institutions at all scales, bodies that would support ecological sustainability, equity, efficiency, and democracy. Locally based institutions were started to promote local food production and consumption and to enforce new construction standards for efficiency and green design. Regional institutions were created to raise awareness of practices that threatened the sustainability of the region and to create ways to hold "environmental criminals" accountable for their actions. The national association of regional bodies had larger institutions that focused on the goals of the country as a whole. These institutions were begun with functions such as promoting and researching solar and wind energy solutions, promoting new forms of sustainable agriculture and sustainable development, and promoting the use of nationalized public transportation.

One important national institution that was formed focused solely on media reform. As media was accessible to all citizens, this institution had the purpose of ensuring that the media was used in such a way as to promote education and a

presentation of all sides of important local, regional, and national issues that could potentially effect citizens. The handful of corporations that had previously had control over media outlets had lost their rights for power over the public airwaves.

The national collection of regional bodies began the Earth Shareholders Commonwealth in association with other developed nations of the world. This David Batker-inspired institution had the goal of creating equity by introducing global ecological economics. The first mission was to relieve the debts that developing nations had with various international banks and funding agencies. The debt relief was followed by deployment of trainees to assist in spreading sustainable farming practices, more sustainable forms of resource extraction and use, and sustainable energy solutions. This did not directly improve the economies of the indebted nations, but it took a large step toward improving quality of life of citizens and displayed a movement toward global equity.

So here we are, thirty years after the creation of these local, regional, national, and global institutions, after the drafting of the regional constitutions, after the environmental catastrophe and social revolution that shaped our current path toward sustainability. I think it is safe to say that all members of today's society who were alive during the 2010s would agree that this is a much more desirable world we live in today. True, we have given up much of what used to characterize our American lifestyle. But we have also gained much in how these lifestyle changes have shaped society. Take for example sense of community, accepted by social psychologists as one of the main ingredients for human happiness. In our old world, people tended to arrange their living spaces to be as far

away from another living space as possible. The nearly universal use of personal vehicles allowed portable barriers to social interaction. All food and goods could be bought at only a few large stores where only one cashier would be encountered. A person could go for an entire week without needing to talk to more than a handful of people. Now we are forced into interaction and cooperation with our neighbors. Living spaces are primarily designed as parts of cooperative communities, where chores are shared. The utter reliance on public transportation means that those old metal barriers to interaction have been broken down. And now one cannot visit a single place to purchase all of his goods—the acquisition of goods requires direct interaction with all of the community members who have made these necessities available. When Bill McKibben wrote about his experience trying to eat locally in Vermont back at the turn of the millennium, it seemed like it might have been more trouble than it was worth. But this increased sense of community has generally contributed to a higher quality of life. It has also given people a greater impetus to become actively involved in the democratic process that shapes our society.

This idea is along the same lines as the employee owned economy. With people working for the maintenance of their own Quality of Life, effort and cooperation are maximized. One change from the old way of life that I don't think anyone would complain about is the much reduced time spent working to produce one's basic needs. This has had the net effect of creating citizens who have plenty of leisure time while also having time to maintain their status as active, interested members of society.

An important step has been the throwing out of the classical economic model. We realize now that perpetual growth not only is unrealistic, it is also inequitable and

decadent. The old measure of improvement, Gross Domestic Product, promoted unsustainable practices. The new standard for the measure of a nation's improvement, Quality of Life, is directly tied in with the new quest for sustainability.

Perhaps the most important part of the environmental revolution has been the reinvigoration of a connection to the land, to nature, and to each other. The self interest that the nations of the world used to display fueled exploitation of resources and environmental degradation. Realization of the interconnectedness of environmental processes and life on earth has unified peoples of all ethnicities and religious faiths. We have moved from a time when war and destruction were profitable into the era of the global community, where cooperation and equity are clearly the only ways to sustain life. As David Orr might have put it, we have moved out of the time of "I" and into the time of "we."