

## Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition

ID number: 705

### Summary:

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*Incremental improvement and reacting to problems as they arise is no strategy for success in the face of a fundamental sustainability challenge. A universal and intuitive definition of sustainability at the core of cultural consciousness is necessary to ensuring resilience, but it must be defined negatively by the identification of natural constraints within which society must operate. Only mainstream confrontation with the possibility of failing to meet the global sustainability challenge, and widespread contemplation of the implications of such a failure can ensure the development and fundamental incorporation of such a definition.*

### Essay:

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Having finally come up against natural constraints that have always been very distant, global society faces a situation which at least in terms of scope is unprecedented. The orientation of our whole civilization has been towards growth. Discovering that unmitigated expansion might undermine our continued existence is a shock from which we have not yet recovered. Damage control is no way to guarantee survival, but this is to what our response so far amounts. We move to change only as direct empirical evidence confirms the serious negative consequences of specific activities. In this way we commit ourselves to continually run into unanticipated consequences like a fly hitting a window.

Luckily for us, we can create options. The unique blessing of our species is an advanced frontal lobe that allows us to follow possible causal chains into the future and plan toward goals. Unfortunately large groups of us are famously worse at this than individuals. But whether or not the frontal lobe has a true analogue at a societal level, history demonstrates that when new shared fundamental understandings of how the world works become mainstream we can move quite well in the same direction with minimal formal coordination.

To accomplish a sustainable meeting of needs for everyone on the planet, a certain large portion of people will need to share a common fundamental understanding of what is a sustainable way to live. Understanding the individual consequences we encounter as aspects and indicators of overall systematic limits will amount to a concrete definition of what is not sustainable so that sustainability can be defined in the negative.

Such a definition will not require individuals to possess an encyclopedic knowledge of known environmental consequences. It must be much more intuitive. It will not be about knowing that some plastics release endocrine disruptors that accumulate in the food chain, throw off hormonal balances, and ruin reproductive systems. Rather it will be commonly understood that nature has never developed systems to deal with newly engineered chemicals and so they are by definition unpredictable and dangerous if not properly contained. It will not even really be about knowing that carbon and the other greenhouse gases have been proven to cause climate change. It will be about understanding that life systems on Earth have evolved according to very slow-changing concentrations of fundamental elements, and that most forms of life and the greater systems that surround them can accept a fairly narrow threshold of change to these balances.

No longer will we be constantly discover new things we cannot do. What we cannot do, the constraints, will be given. Through an ingrained mindfulness of limitations, we will ensure that mistakes will not be catastrophic and so free ourselves to focus on possibilities. Development will be reoriented from expansion to enhancement. New technologies will continue to be developed, but in such a way that blind alleys will be ruled out much earlier and investments will be far better assured of producing value. We will have a mechanism which very naturally, and at a very fundamental level, drives our society to progress in such a way that there is now a track along which the development must occur if forward motion is to be maintained.

With a shared understanding of sustainability, the wealthy countries of the world will have the opportunity to channel the momentum of their economies and take the lead in technology and reshaping infrastructure towards far greater resilience. Developing countries will have the opportunity to build from the ground up, and international development organizations will be able to focus on fostering truly sustainable development aimed the creation of lasting institutions that provide real value to the people they are meant to serve.

There is no guarantee that the necessary collective transformation of consciousness will occur. It will only have become possible by the mainstream acceptance that we not only can, but are undermining the basis of our own survival. Sustainability is impossible to grasp without an understanding of unsustainability. As unpalatable as it may be, individual consequences seen as aspects of overall systematic constraints can only be achieved through honest and profound contemplation of the danger and possibility of failure. This is true at the individual as well as societal level.

Our need is not for incontrovertible scientific proof, or even widespread awareness. These things were necessary and have been well accomplished. Today there is little excuse for ignorance of anthropogenically driven climate change or several other urgent environmental issues. Evidence has been provided and awareness is fairly high. What remains is internalization.

The next necessary step is to actually integrate into the foundation of our culture a fundamental recognition of what is the global sustainability challenge. This is where effort must be concentrated. Those of us who by thinking about it are beginning to come to terms with the implications of the situation must strive to use what resources we have to bring others to a deep recognition of the real danger and likelihood of disaster.

We possess the capacity for fear because it is an evolutionary advantage to be afraid of things that threaten our survival. To spare ourselves fear by refusing to realistically consider the threat is to ignore one of the most potent means of motivation we have. Considering the political implications of prolonged national water shortages are extremely unpleasant and scary, but to avoid thinking about them does not make them any less real. By recognizing, and focusing on those things we should be afraid of, we will be able to come to a point of understanding them as indicators of the overall systematic constraints within which our species is confined to operate. Understanding our limitations will allow us to maximize our freedom of movement within them and take more conscious control over the genuine progress of our civilization.