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Assignment #1 – Ecological Sustainability – What and So What?

What is 'ecological sustainability'?

The term ecological sustainability suggests a long-term, ongoing environmental system. The word sustainability is a transitive verb so there is an implication of action to be taken, a course of action. The word sustainability comes from Latin and Indo-European linguistic roots that mean to hold from below, which connotes an action that supports something. Ecology is an environmental system in which various

Jacobs points out that the term ecology came from awareness that the relationship between entities in nature resembled economic systems. (2000) This comparison might suggest that there is an environmental balance sheet, a bottom line. In this economic metaphor, being in the red, or having a negative balance would represent an environmental system that is in danger of collapse.

The idea 'sustainable ecology' seems to suggest a long-term stable state. McDonough's work reveals that this could result in a paradigm where "less bad is good" that leads to a vanishing point at the level of zero bad. (2002) This characterizes ecological sustainability as a balancing loop on a more primary human activity of progress and production. Not withstanding the questionable value of the cultural predilection in the West for a particular self-serving paradigm of progress, re-visioning ecological sustainability as a reinforcing loop on the primary global bionomic process provides a paradigmatic switch. Switching from a paradigm of "less bad" to "more good"

allows for a vanishing point of ecological activity to be infinitely distant instead of frustratingly inadequate.

How serious are the threats to ecological sustainability?

Categorizing the threats to ecological sustainability for me is primarily a process of learning about history. Every civilization in world history appears to have developed unsustainable practices within the context of its environment. A recent June 8, 2004 article on CNN suggests that the civilization that built the Angkor Wat temple complex in current Cambodia was not primarily wiped out by wars but by ecological practices poorly matched to the resources available to them. Similar examples are without specific citation to be anecdotally found for every major civilization. More importantly even on a small scale, settlements in the new world such as the failed colony at Jamestown or the failed settlement on Greenland are testaments to the importance of developing at least a sustainable relationship with the environmental context in which one intends to survive.

The point where human civilization can destroy itself has come in many ways. Not only is it possible for the human race to annihilate itself through war, but the atavistic and recidivistic paradigm of nature as an enemy to be conquered has passed from a useful social metaphor in a dangerous world to a dangerous metaphor in a world essentially subjugated except in the most catastrophic natural events.

In a recent movie called *The Corporation*, based on the work of Joel Bakan, one of the interviews pointed out that the modern corporation is significantly an "externalizing machine." (2003) Externalities are. If the existence of externalities was just a modern example of inability to recognize systemic costs of production, it might be merely an oversight. However, the constant recurrence of unaccounted costs in the course

of human history suggests that there is a structural and cultural tendency toward willful ignorance.

Within this destructive cultural context, I suggest that the most serious threat to the project of ecological sustainability is activity that increases ecological sustainability. Much like the tragedy of the commons archetype, any movement toward ecological sustainability merely increases the apparent available resources that can be used for expansion of enterprise and an acceleration of Western-style progress. A simple indication of this danger is in *Cascadia Scorecard* where the indicator for the economy and the indicator for energy appear to be in an almost exact relationship: the worse the economy, the less energy use; the more energy use the better the economy. (2004, p72) Unless the underlying cultural abuse of resources is addressed holistically, specific entities and firms that reduce energy consumption merely make the apparent supply for those not adjusting their attitudes to expand energy use. Limited attempts to achieve sustainable levels, will likely lead to intensification of resource use not an overall reduction. Another example of this is the way in which automobile fleets have been including new, more efficient models but that these gains are matched by an increased number of larger, less-efficient models. The underlying attitude leads to those able to over-consume to take advantage of the resource gap created by those that under consume.

This surfaces a power dynamic. Because those with more social power have more access to resources and money, those power elites have less incentive to take actions that further ecological sustainability. This devolves the responsibility for ecologically sustainable changes to those with the least social power and the least social influence. Further, this functions like an austerity program which forces those with less power to

conserve, reduce and sacrifice while it leaves those with vested social power in a position to exercise that power in a social environment where those with less power voluntarily abdicate competition for those resources.

There is will also be resistance to ecological sustainability because there is structural advantage in creating artificial scarcity to increase resource costs for those already in positions of power in relation to the resource market.

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