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Sustainability: How do we know when we're there?

Michele Deakin, Special to Oceanside Star
Published: Monday, October 20, 2008

So what does a sustainable community really look like? Does it have to mean a world so full of limitations that there would be no enjoyment or happiness?

Getting to sustainability is somewhat like the stop-smoking campaign. When it began, few believed it would be possible to change social values and behaviour to the extent that smoking would be outlawed in public buildings, restaurants, and even personal vehicles. It was only after the public accepted that a problem really existed than any progress was made.

Similarly, the sustainability discussion is finally getting underway and the first step is to get society to understand and then accept that there really is an issue. We're living unsustainably and we can't grow our way out of it. But some long-held beliefs still get in the way of our moving toward a sustainable society.

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One common belief is that the market will correct itself; that when materials become scarce, prices will go up and consumption will drop, which will then encourage the development of alternatives. But quite the opposite has actually happened. Prices of many nonrenewable resources have actually gone down, indicating a flaw in market pricing.

If we are to be sustainable and address serious issues like climate change and biodiversity loss, we need to consider the actual costs of doing business. Ecological economists agree, pointing out the need to evaluate indicators like the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The GDP does not account for the negative cost to society from such things as oil spills, man-made calamities, or other impacts that cost money to fix. It simply includes them as if they were a positive part of the growth. The GDP also does not count quality-of-life measures, such as leisure time, or spin-offs from stay-at-home moms.

The drive for growth is another roadblock to sustainability. Growth, usually reflected in the measurement of the GDP, has only been seen in human society during the last 200 years, and especially since the Second World War. "Most economists are under the impression that 2 to 6 percent annual growth is a normal condition for human society," says John McNeill, professor of environmental history at Georgetown University. Six percent growth is a very high growth rate, which would double the use of our limited natural resources about every 12 years.

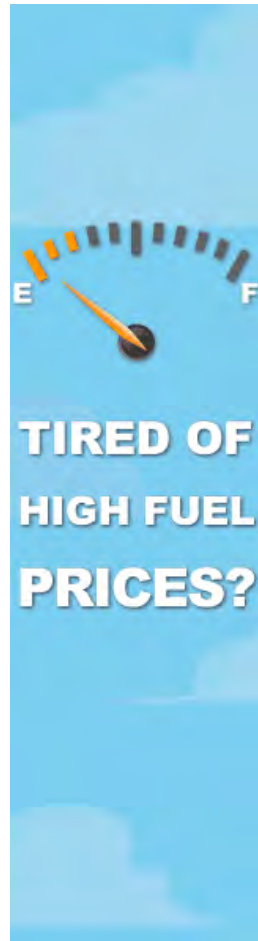
This relentless pursuit of growth seems particularly to be a North American ideal. The average American works six more weeks per year than the average European, which means Europeans have \$10,000-\$20,000 less disposable income to spend than the typical North American.

North Americans, when asked, tend to identify happiness with more money, or link quality of life with standard of living. But quality of life is not tangible. Rather, it's the degree of well-being we feel, how healthy we are, how stressed we are, or how much pleasure we get out of each day.

Despite earning significantly less, Europeans enjoy a lower crime rate, lower divorce rate, lower poverty rate, good health care, and longer vacations. They tend to be happier than North Americans and have a higher interest in community, which encourages their getting involved in creating a better society.

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In order to capture these differences, staff at the Economist developed a tool to compare countries based on their quality of life. Eight of the top 10 countries were in Western Europe. The United States, despite having the second highest income per capita, came in 13th and Canada, with a per capita income higher than six of the top 10, came in 14th.

If we are to be sustainable and have quality of life, we need to find new ways to evaluate how well we are doing on the road to sustainability. We need to include those things the GDP does not and also consider the true quality of our lives. We need to see if where we are headed is where we want to go. Then we can use these parameters to guide the markets, for example, rather than be servants to them and have them guide us.

Let's think in terms of "the politics of possibility" as coined in the essay, "The Death of Environmentalism," and encourage, for example, "epic" government support for new energy technologies that will allow us to move to renewable energy sources. Then we can deal positively with the depletion of fossil fuels and the excessive pollutants they emit to the atmosphere. Such an approach could result in significant changes and spin-offs we can't even predict.

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healthy shorelines, and recovery work in local watersheds and estuaries. You may reach her at auklet@shaw.ca

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