

Sustainable – To Be or Not to Be

We have but two choices: to be sustainable or not. Currently, we are choosing “not”. By definition, that does not bode well for humanity and all living things. This was the main messages put forward by both guest speakers (Neil Dawe author, biologist and director of the Qualicum Institute of Sustainability and Ken Melambled, mayor of Whistler) addressing the issue of Sustainability to Salt Spring Islanders this weekend. Both speakers agreed on most everything:

1. We are killing the planet (good planets are hard to find)
2. We are totally dependent on ecosystems and their biodiversity for everything.
3. A healthy eco-system has to be our primary concern (the three legged stool concept does not work)
4. We don't have much time
5. Technology will not solve our problems alone
6. We will have to change the way we think and behave.

The emphasizes of their talks were different and Dawe addressed the talk more on a global level and Melambled on a community level i.e. Whistler.

Dawe's main point is we have to address the root cause of why we are not living sustainably and causing so much degradation on the planet. We cannot address the symptoms and expect to be successful. As a society, we have not been living in a sustainable manner. The root cause of our unsustainable ways is ECONOMIC GROWTH. Economic growth is a continual increase in the production and consumption of goods and services and is predicated on increasing population and per-capita consumption. It is creating a serious conflict with the ecosystems of the Earth. The result is an increasing and cumulative loss or degradation of ecosystem services, the very services that allow and sustain life on the planet. Because of this fundamental conflict, biodiversity loss is likely to become a problem of far greater importance, even than that of climate change, unless we stop our perennial drive for more and more growth and move to a sustainable economy (Beyond More).

“What I am really trying to get across is this: If we continue to address ONLY the symptoms and not the root cause, we can't succeed. We can of course do both at the same time, as long as there is sufficient emphasis on the root cause.” Says Dawe.

“How is it”, Dawe asks, “Despite all our conservation efforts, we have come to this point? Today, there are more conservation and environmental organizations, more environmental regulations and legislation, more protected areas, and more environmental awareness than ever before, and yet there is more environmental degradation than ever before. What we are doing to protect biodiversity is not working?” It is not working because we are not addressing the root cause of the degradation: ECONOMIC GROWTH. One reason that economic growth is the main culprit flows from the faulty model under which conventional economics operates. It ignores both physical and ecological laws such as thermodynamics and carrying capacity. So, don't worry about biodiversity loss – we will find a substitute. Where is the question? Melambled would be in complete agreement.

Melamed talked about the Natural Step program. Whistler was the first municipality in North America to adopt the Natural Step Framework on a community-wide basis. The Natural Step was developed in the late 1980's in response to growing concerns over health problems resulting from increased environmental toxins and current resource use practices.

Sustainability says Melamed, "means meeting the needs of global society forever. To meet human needs we must maintain the integrity of the ecological systems that support life." The Natural Step System Conditions describe the minimum requirements for a sustainable society. The Natural Step Framework brings together society's needs with nature's requirements.

When Dr. Robert, founded the Natural Step, he observed that, for the most part, society operates in a linear direction. "It is a one-way street. We are very effective at take-make-waste: taking resources from the earth, making them into products and throwing them away – producing large amounts of waste and reeking havoc on ecosystems. Nature's processes, on the other hand, are cyclical. In nature, there is no waste. One cycle's "garbage" is another cycle's food. Everything is re-assimilated into the system or reused."

Melamed admits, "Whistler is not sustainable. You can't have a million people visiting you every year and be sustainable but that should not stop us from doing everything we can to work towards becoming sustainable."

Both speakers gave us much to ponder and supported the planning and forward thinking of our OCP. Communities must work together on a united front to deal with sustainable living. They both admitted these can be hard concepts to grasp and assimilate, as our culture has been raised on GROWTH without understanding the planet has limited resources. Dawe may ask Melamed, "If you believe in sustainability why did you ask for the Olympics? Fair Question. Is Whistler just addressing the symptoms, is what the author would ask?"

.Don't ask what this life owes you; ask what you are willing to do to maintain life sustainably on the planet? This is what it comes down to. Each one of us changing our thinking and behaviors or as the ancient Chinese proverb says, "If we do not change our direction, we are liable to end up where we are headed"