

Sustainable what?

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1: In the wild, radical youth of the environment movement in the 1960s and 70s, nobody talked about sustainability. (Foresters made frequent reference to sustainable yields, a forest conservation ideal much more spoken of than practised). But by the time middle age began to set in – in the late 80s – the urge for respectability and compromise with the status quo set in. We were told we had to be positive, not negative in thinking about the avoidance of ecological collapse. The idea of “sustainable development” was born.

We early greenies spoke with urgency of ecology, ecosystem breakdown and survival. And the environmental crisis is a matter of survival surely. As I put it in my last book, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge 2002, p 1)

“The often-invoked term ‘sustainability’ tends to obscure the seriousness of the situation ; clearly no culture which sets in motion massive processes of biospheric degradation which it has normalised, and which it cannot respond to or correct can hope to survive for very long.”.

In my view the concept of sustainable development expresses and even encourages a reduced sense of urgency. Getting some sort of parity with future generations sounds like a nice but unnecessary virtue we can put off learning just about forever.

2: There have been many definitions of sustainable development but the one most often cited is that defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development’s (WCED) *Our Common Future*, (1989) also known as the Brundtland Report, which states that sustainable development “*meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*”

I want to ask 3 questions about this particular way of defining sustainability.

1: Is it a useful concept ? ANS: A very qualified yes, as I’ve already indicated above.

2: Is it the one key concept for environmental thought ? ANS: a definite NO.

3: Are there other key related or more fundamental concepts ? ANS: Indeed there are. Environmental justice, ecological rationality, partnership ethics, human/nature dualism. are a few I would appeal to.

There are several problems about taking the Brundtland concept to be the central concept for environmental ideals:

1) It refers to the needs of *future people*. This would make sustainable development a matter of a type of *environmental justice* – distributive justice for future people. So environmental justice is a more fundamental underlying concept than sustainable development.

What is environmental justice? I take this answer from a recent encyclopedia article I wrote on the subject.

“Although questions of environmental justice cannot be identified either with humanity or with distributional issues,¹ the concept of environmental justice has been employed especially to interrogate the distribution of environmental risks, harms and benefits among human populations. As one of its major theorists, Robert Bullard, puts it, environmental justice raises questions of “differential exposure and unequal protection ... the ethical and political questions of ‘who gets what, when, why, and how much’.”²

Justice for Future Generations

There is some contention amongst philosophers, but most now concede that we do have obligations to future people, and that these questions about our impacts on the environments of the future must be considered.

Our obligations towards the future are often assumed to arise only in relation to distributive justice, but other concepts of justice also have application in relation to the generations of the future. The main distributive issues here are whether the consumption and life patterns of the present generation should be allowed to inflict serious environmental risks and costs on the people of the future, either by depriving them of resources they would benefit from that previous generations have enjoyed or by leaving them a legacy of pollution, impoverishment or other environmental damage. This issue is particularly serious where losses are irreversible, as in the case of species extinction, land salination, loss of biodiversity, and nuclear waste production. The concept of environmental justice for future generations thus raises questions that overlap with questions of sustainability.

One suggested answer is that the ethical position of people who are removed from us in time is not essentially different from that of people who are removed from us in space. If justice is to be done, the impact of environmental policies on future generations must be considered and given due weight. The main problem that arises in the case of both temporal and spatial removal is that of uncertainty. In some cases there is uncertainty about what the needs of future people will be, whether they will be the same as or very different from our own. But even if future people and their needs are very different, this does not excuse exclusion of future impacts, since however much the future may change socially and technically, the basic needs of future generations for a healthy biosphere are unlikely to be substantially different from our own.

2) Interspecies Justice

I think the main problem with this concept of sustainability is that it involves an overly exclusive focus on future humans. This is too narrow and human-centred for the central environmental concept. We also need to take account of the needs of non-humans,

¹ On the case against identifying questions of justice with questions of distribution see especially Iris Young 1990 Justice and the Politics of Difference Princeton, Princeton University Press, and Karen Warren “Environmental Justice : Some Ecofeminist Worries about a Distributive Model” Environmental Ethics (forthcoming). These objections, although in the main well taken, do not seem to me to disturb the claim that distributional issues are important and in certain contexts seriously neglected .

² Robert Bullard “Environmental Justice Challenges” in Nicholas Low ed. Routledge London, p35.

present and future. Environmental justice is broader than this and has an interspecies distributive aspect (Plumwood 2002 p 117) as the need to share the earth not only with future humans but with other species – including difficult and inconvenient ones. Interspecies distributive justice asks us to provide adequate habitat for species life and reproduction, objecting to the use of so much of the earth for exclusively human purposes that non-humans cannot survive or reproduce their kind. So, it would recognise not just human but also non-human needs as part of the concept of sustainability. The standard concept is too exclusionary or is too vague about this.

3) An alternative set of concepts I find more useful than sustainability are *ecological rationality* and *partnership ethics*, the latter as a response to dominant problematic of *human/nature dualism*. Reconsidering the problem in terms of these concepts helps to restore a sense of urgency and to place the problematic of sustainability in a historical context. Situating human life ecologically is one of the key cultural tasks of an ecologically rational culture. This is hindered by the dominant western traditions of human/nature dualism. Human/nature dualism conceives the human as not only superior to but as different in kind from the non-human, which as a lower sphere exists as a mere resource for the higher human one. This ideology has been functional for western culture in enabling it to exploit nature with less constraint, but it also creates dangerous illusions in denying embeddedness in and dependency on nature, which we see in our denial of human inclusion in the food web and in our response to the ecological crisis.

Human/nature dualism is a double-sided affair, destroying the bridge between the human and the non-human from both ends, as it were, for just as the essentially human is disembodied, disembedded and discontinuous from the rest of nature, so nature and animals are seen as mindless bodies, excluded from the realms of ethics and culture. Re-imagining ourselves as ecologically embodied beings akin to rather than superior to other animals is a major challenge for western culture, as is recognising the elements of mind and culture present in animals and the non-human world.

The double-sided character of human/nature dualism gives rise to two tasks which must be integrated. These are the tasks of situating human life in ecological terms and situating non-human life in ethical terms. Both have connections with our ability to deliver sustainability as the ability to create long-term partnerships with the non-human sphere. A partnership ethic between human and nature is both possible and necessary. It would consider both human and nature needs in a suitable, context-sensitive balance. (On partnership ethics and concepts of institutions see Plumwood 2002 and Carolyn Merchant's new book *Reinventing Eden* (Routledge 2003). There are strong and obvious connections between partnership ethics, sustainability, and the avoidance of ecological collapse. Any long term relationship or partnership between two or more agents must be built on communication and on reaching some sort of inter-agency and inter-species accommodation or negotiation of mutual needs. This is the sphere of partnership ethics.