

Minimalism in an Overabundant Society

Ozone Layer! Global Warming! Climate Change! Carbon Footprint! The End is Nigh! - sounds familiar? For those of us involved in naturopathy, the current preoccupation with the catastrophic repercussions of climate change has a familiar ring to it. And if we search as far back as possible into recorded culture, there has never been doubt about human responsibilities towards nature and the consequences of our neglect.

But will the warnings and predictions of modern science awaken a moral obligation to care for our physical environment any more than it has patently failed to convince us to be sensitive custodians of our own bodies? And what can we learn from naturopathy about our role in caring for the ecos, our temporal home?

Consume (v.): to ingest; to use up; to completely destroy

In February 2005, at a conference at the Hadley Centre in Exeter, England, 200 of the world's leading scientists issued a most urgent warning: that dangerous climate change is taking place today, and not the day after tomorrow.

Delegates heard how human activity has wrought havoc with the environment, particularly over the past 50 years. Over half the land surface has been transformed through, deforestation, mining, industry, concretization, and agriculture. Especially affected are the two vital functions of the carbon and nitrogen cycles, through the burning of fossil fuels, and the use of nitrogen fertilizer in industrial agriculture. (1)

Dangerous chemicals abound in the environment to the extent that Mother's milk is so contaminated that food safety laws would ban it if it were sold as a packaged product. Even modern substances designed to help vulnerable people, such as pharmaceutical medicines, end up as residue in water supplies where, unprescribed, they threaten the health of others. (2)

Measured in metric tones of CO₂, it has been estimated that every person living in the USA 'pollutes' the planet by 20 tones per year; those in Europe by 8; China is 2. The example of Nigeria (which supplies much of the West's CO₂ producing oil) where pollution is virtually nil, only underlines the global injustice between those who cause no harm and those whose extravagance harms others.

Pioneers and Visionaries

An early alert to the unfavorable aspects of industrialization and its unsustainability was by given by the Scottish botanist, planner and educationalist Patrick Geddes (1854-1932). Geddes despaired of the "nature starvation" of the early 20th century, observing " Since the Industrial Revolution, there has gone on an organized sacrifice of men to things, and a large scale subordination of life to machinery".

Geddes' theory of "Place, Work and Folk' combined radical thinking with a skilful activism. His sympathy for people and the natural world, and his understanding of systems has influenced urban development from the UK to the Far East. 'Profit', thought Geddes, was really no more than "the interest paid by nature on the energy expended upon Her during the processes of production" – real wealth was "calculated in terms of clean and plentiful air, water and earth". A true pioneer, it is from Geddes that we inherited the clarion call of ecology, Think Global, Act Local!

Silent Spring, (3) the seminal work of Rachel Carson (1907-1956) has been rightly credited as the most eloquent expression of contemporary environmental concern. Carson drew attention to the dangers of pollution from pesticides and industrial wastes, with a fine balance of lyricism and scientific dispassion that captured widespread attention from the general public all the way up to the president of the USA. An accomplished zoologist, an authority on the oceans, and recipient of an Oscar, she drew the fire of the great commercial polluters but attempts to discredit her and threats of lawsuits only served to inspire her further.

Her detractors tried but failed to parody Carson as a crusading eccentric, because her clear message was that she was not opposing the use of chemicals in the environment where necessary, but biologically challenging their indiscriminate use.

One of the more shameful criticisms of Carson was that she was a mere “woman with too much time”. In fact, mild mannered but determined Carson’s personal life was equally admirable; she pursued her career while simultaneously caring for an aging mother, the nieces of a deceased sister, and eventually the child of one of the nieces who also died early.

Although her book struck a deathly tone, the sanity in Carson’s argument is persuasive:

“The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, river and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but also in living tissues is for the most part irreversible.”

Can anyone believe it is possible to lay down such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth without making it unfit for all life? They should not be called ‘insecticides’ but ‘biocides’.”

With the caution “We are now far too clever to survive without wisdom, and further developments of our cleverness can be of no benefit whatever”, the radical economist E F Fritz Schumacher (1911-1877) invites us to consider the limitations of scientific and technological advancement and its materialistic influence on our inner life.

An eco-philosopher of international repute, Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful* (4) is accepted as one of the 100 most influential books published since WW2. His contribution to global ecology has been to draw attention to the ‘brutalization’ of the modern world, and the consequent diminution of the quality of life over quantity; the incapacity of materialistic science to develop an understanding of the complexity of life; and the gradual loss of our inherent powers through atrophy.

He appeals to a realization that our present values and consuming attitudes are patently unsustainable for ourselves and the planet; that unlike any previous culture or civilization, whether agricultural or industrial, we are living artificially and superficially on the Earth’s capital rather than on its income. His remedy is challenging but straightforward: man is small, and therefore, small is beautiful.

A Smaller Ecological Footprint

The trouble with land”, said Mark Twain “is that they stopped making it some time ago”. And while a modern US administration has been quoted as saying that the American way of life is “not negotiable”, it has been estimated that it would take at least four Planet Earths to support the world’s population on the current Western lifestyle. In an effort to translate the urgency of a more sustainable existence for all, the degree of human impact on nature has come to be known as our ‘ecological footprint’. (5)

The effect of this impact is now being measured in terms of carbon-producing emissions, and can be related to the by-products of our everyday lives. If a “sustainable” carbon budget is estimated be for the whole world, then divided by the global population, a figure of approximately one tonne (1,000kg) per person is reached.

It is more than likely that we Westerners will be embarrassingly above this figure. (The national average for the UK is 9,000kg, for the average Australian 18,000kg, and leading the way is the USA’s average of 19,000kg) But a glance at the leading causes of emissions and the steps we can collectively take to reduce them is not daunting, perhaps just a little taming of our affluence.

Heating

Major area – heating accounts up to for 70% of the energy we consume and is the biggest user of energy in domestic households.

NC Response: Simple – don't be tempted to share a bath but think otherwise Scandinavian and insulate more (but don't forget to open the windows everyday).

Electricity

Between 1972 and 2002, electricity use in the household sector doubled, and is projected to rise another 12% by 2010. This is mainly due to our insatiable appetite for more electronic gadgetry, and the 24-hour day.

NC Response: switch off 'stand-bys': abandon the electric bread-maker; go to bed earlier.

Transport

Car culture is unhealthy and ecologically destructive, yet sometimes necessary. In former times, shops or amenities were usually in walking distance, within an interdependent community. We now shop centrally, commute more and live further apart from family members and friends.

NC Response: use the new community of the Internet to obtain goods and services long distance; shop locally and expect to pay more to sustain services.

Retail/Retail Therapy

Witnessing the popularity of the local market place around the world, shopping appears to be a human instinct – for necessities, and also to boost moral ("when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping"). The problem for Westerners is that much of what is for sale carries an 'energy penalty': not only the energy in producing and gathering, but to an alarming extent the industrializing, packaging and transporting, and ultimately the extraordinary lengths manufacturers will go to promoting their goods.

Of all retail and retail therapy, food sales naturally loom largest. The food industry is arguably therefore the biggest single contributor to harmful emissions. (6)

The way that modern food is grown and raised, how far it travels, and how it is processed generates massive consumption of fuels. Ironically, the cheaper foods are actually the most expensive for the common good. Nutritional value is poor, and encourages over-consumption; undernourishment in one area of life often leads to overcompensation in others.

To get some idea of the standing of your Ecological Footprint, try this ready reckoner just for Retail:

- I have the latest of everything, love shopping and eat mostly packaged convenience food: attract 3,000kg.
- I'm fairly thrifty, but buy new things when I need them and get most of my food from supermarkets: attract 2,000kg.
- I grow my own organic food (even bean sprouts), shop locally, reuse and recycle, and wouldn't buy out-of-season food or clothes: attract 600kg.

NC Response: Aim to be organic at all levels by supporting quality and craftwork in shopping, in order of: foods, clothing, aesthetics and accessories; in foods, fresh and short lived, in others, durability and recyclability.

Medicine

At the acute end, sales in the US suggest that up to 80% of adults ingest at least one medically prescribed drug every 24 hours. (7) Of these the majority will be for pain-killing (principally digestive), and antibiotic. At the level of chronic illness, the purpose of conventional medicine is increasingly being viewed as a process of prolonging death, rather than extending life.

Neither of these scenarios makes for a viable future. The routine use of medicines originally intended for serious complaint leads to immune system compromise, and creates vast and unnecessary waste material. And apart from unsustainably spiraling costs, studies suggest that clinically extended life in older age is actually very short, and for many people these years are spent in considerable discomfort. (8)

NC Response: manage acute illness without resort to medicines and reserve the use of suppressive drugs for emergencies; if a 'fatal' disease develops after the birth of grandchildren, accept it – give way, and plan a dignified death.

Population

"I have a simpler, more accurate way for you to judge your Footprint. Count your children. More than two (per couple) and you are living a lifestyle that is not sustainable in the long term. Your real carbon footprint stretches down the ages, via your offspring, and this long-term effect is the cause of most environmental problems in the world today, and tomorrow".
(9)

NC Response: Consider adoption from around the world!

From a Naturopathic Point of View

With an overwhelming official case for action on energy policy and adaptation being proposed, naturopathy observes a certain irony in the present situation. Whereas conventional authorities are anxious to devise ways of acceptably reducing human activities, naturopathy's observation is that perceived environmental problems are themselves the result of restriction: the maximizing influence of industrialization has minimized the human being.

Furthermore, appeals from authority to conserve more and consume less may cause resentment for two reasons. Looking out into the natural world, we see apparent plenty, nature's bountifulness, and for eons until comparatively recently, we have been accustomed to sharing of more than enough. The adjustment to a world of scarcity may take a deep psychological adjustment.

Secondly, and at a more conscious level, people have become increasingly suspicious of 'scientific' pronouncements. And the more severe predictions being issued presently do not represent unanimous professional opinion. Scientific models are more useful for understanding problems in general rather than predicting outcome, and there is already concern that in presentation, science is being 'oversold' to the public. ("Is Mankind Sleepwalking to the End of the Earth?") (10)

Taking healthcare as an example, it is doubtful whether changes in other social behaviors recommended by 'experts' will be adopted universally. And for the masses, the Western way of life has already become firmly established as the goal. But as we have discovered in naturopathy, significant and lasting adaptations can be engendered from conveying a sense of personal responsibility, rather than 'being made to feel responsible'.

The appeal might be better directed towards our immediate sphere of existence, ('under our roof', in the literal translation of the Greek *ecos*) and we will have to re-grow into it, in little ways for little reasons and little advantages, as Schumacher might have put it. The *ecos* can be taken care of by our ethos.

Schumacher's admirer, the eco-philosopher and humanitarian Satish Kumar has devoted his life from an early age to the ecological cause. He understands well the complexities our situation, the challenges ahead and the need for a meaningful response. His suggestion, attainable for all, is simple: reclaim Sunday as a day of rest! No great hardship or inconvenience will be experienced by cutting out non-essentials for one day a week. We can resist the trip to the supermarket, eat simply, ease up and reduce mobility. We can write or paint, garden (more bean sprouts), walk with friends, or simply spend time contemplating our lives. At a stroke, Satish points out; we can reduce our negative impact on the *ecos* by one seventh. (11)

And to inspire us in our small steps, from Rachel Carson:

"We still talk in terms of conquest. We still haven't become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. Man's attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself. Now, I truly believe, that we in this generation, must come to terms with nature, and I think we're challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves."

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