

Resistance to Sustainable Practices

Voices calling for sustainable practices have been heard in America for well over 100 years. But America has been unable to hear this message. Why? Beyond the obvious desire to allow free commerce, there are many important reasons why. I will discuss three.

1. Scarcity. People react more strongly to losing something than they do to gaining something of equal value, and they value something more if they believe it is in short supply. Thus, people are especially reactive to anything that they experience as a deprivation or loss. If people perceive sustainable practices as requiring them to give something up, especially if they are doing so because it is in short supply, it will be particularly difficult for them to do.ⁱ

2. Stability. Cognitively, people are set-up to anticipate that established trends will continue into the future. And, for the most part, our world is relatively stable and predictable, so it serves as a useful and accurate strategy. However, some aspects of the world are non-linear and react with volatility to underlying change. Complex natural systems are such chaotic systems. In the environmental debate, it is necessary to demonstrate how the underlying situation has changed, and that past trends cannot be relied on. Historical examples of volatile change abound. Environmental change is an example of a continuously changing world to which Americans have always adapted particularly well, and to which we must continue to adapt.ⁱⁱ

3. Manifest destiny. Throughout history, humans have felt that we have a special place among the world's species, and that we have a right to dominate the world and consume its resources. This ethic is directly stated in the Bible, but it is not unique to Judeo-Christian cultures.ⁱⁱⁱ In America we find a particular manifestation of this ethic. The Puritans first spoke of America as having a special place in human history, a special role to play, and this belief became enshrined as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.^{iv} This belief demanded that we occupy the whole continent, that we develop its resources and despoil its environment, and that we eliminate or subjugate its native populations. Sustainability requires a different ethic, one that sees humans as one of many species connected in a vast web of life. Our wellbeing depends on the integrity of the whole web. This is a very big, very deep change in how one sees oneself, one's place, and one's role on this planet. It is difficult to preach sustainability to someone who believes that his or her role is to despoil and dominate nature. There are many ways to frame the new ethic positively—finding one's place in the world, an ethic suitable for the 21st century, an ethic of cooperation and security. In Judeo-Christian terms it could be framed as caring for the marvelous gift, the world, that God gave us.^v National organizations have sprung up to try to help the country move in this direction.^{vi} It would be particularly powerful if Americans could come to believe that part of our special place in the world involved helping humanity with the issue of climate change.

ⁱ The reaction to scarcity and deprivation is a well-known cognitive error. For an interesting discussion of it, see Cialdini, Robert. (2007). *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. New York: Harper Collins.

ⁱⁱ The assumption of stability, that current trends will continue, is another well-known cognitive strategy that is often erroneous. My discussion is from no particular source.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Quinn, Daniel. (1995). *Ismael: An adventure of the mind and spirit* New York: Bantam Books for an interesting, though simplistic, discussion of the role humans take vis-à-vis the rest of the natural world. See also Genesis 8.14 – 9.7.

^{iv} A discussion of Manifest Destiny can be found in any American History text that deals with the 19th Century.

^v See Genesis 2.15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and care for it.”

^{vi} See, for instance, the website of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, <http://www.nrpe.org>. This organization is endorsed by the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of churches of Christ, and the Evangelical Environmental Network.