

I live out in the boonies. No television, radio, or internet access. I do not know who won the Super Bowl, or how many people died in Iraq today, or even who is running for President (it IS an election year, right?). But I can feel it. I can smell it. The air is thick with it. Everyone wants to be 'green'; shop green, travel green, live green. It's all the buzz. Well, what does it mean to be green? It is the same as that other foggy, elusive, hard-to-pin-down buzzword, 'sustainable'. Sustainable is what we really mean by green.

In one respect, sustainable is very easy to define, for sustain means 'to maintain'. In the context of 'green', what is it we are trying to maintain? In my opinion, what we are trying to maintain is a human presence on this Earth. I believe that humans and humanity are beautiful. Yes, our love, altruism, and compassion can be overshadowed by our greed, lust and shortsighted selfishness, but when we are true to ourselves we become one with the universe; as perfect and graceful as a falling leaf. I feel that behind the buzz of 'being green' is the realization that we are on the verge of fouling our nest to the point of annihilation. It seems that some species, in an absence of an external check on their population, have the tendency, by their very existence, to create conditions conducive to their demise.

Four and a half billion years ago, all life on the planet was made up of anaerobic bacteria. They were very successful and expanded in numbers filling every niche on the planet. Simply by living, by respiring, inhaling carbon dioxide and exhaling oxygen, they changed the composition of the atmosphere enough to annihilate all but a few. Some evolved to become all the diverse species we see today. The rest became relegated to ocean depths, subsoil, and the sludge at the bottom of your septic system. Hopefully, we can learn from our ancestors and exercise more foresight.

It is hard for us to know what is sustainable. 'Sustainability' and 'green' have become clichés used for promoting goods and services to consumers who truly want to be environmentally responsible citizens. Take, for example, a company who markets "ultra natural" dish soap. I don't think a redwood tree would call itself "ultra natural!" People's good intentions have been turned against them in the name of greed. Another example is that ethanol has been touted as the 'green energy' of the future. No more need to burn oil! We all want to believe it's true. Most of us drive cars and we do not want to be associated with such a damaging energy source. It is easy to be misled. We need to look beyond the rhetoric to see the truth. The truth with ethanol is that for every one calorie you get out of it you are using eight calories of petroleum to manufacture it in the form of pesticides and fertilizers. We dump so much oil onto our crops that it is an 8:1 net loss. We would have 8 times more energy if we bypassed the ethanol and put the oil right in our gas tank!

How, then, can we determine for ourselves what sustainability truly is? I believe we must look to life for answers. The most sustainable thing on the planet is life. Life has been around the block five and a half billion times. When I study natural processes I notice something striking: There are no linear processes in nature; they are all cyclical. In contrast, all human systems are linear, and they generally end in a landfill. The water cycle, the carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, the organic cycle....all are natural processes without waste. In our culture (and society in general), food=waste. How can we consider ourselves sustainable if we even have the conception of waste? Being sustainable means removing yourself from linear processes and becoming a part of natural, cyclical processes. My future articles in this series will deal with practical ways to do just that.

*Editor's Note: Nathaniel and his wife, Shyam, maintain a permaculture community called Steward's Draw, in Wisconsin. They are passionate about teaching others ways to be good to the Earth so that future generations may continue to enjoy the many gifts our planet has given us!*