

Green Economy – a Holistic Approach to Planet Earth

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Planet earth's social, environmental, and economic fabric is being threatened from all sides by challenges such as global warming, violence, poverty, and general environmental degradation, caused by unsustainable use of earth's resources. In this context the relationship between economic growth, human well-being, and the achievement of a sustainable future is a topic which has gathered a growing amount of interest and attention in the latter half of the 20th century. At the base of all discussions about the environment and planet earth is the realization of the interdependency that exists between the planet and us. What happens ecologically is reflected economically and socially. We are bound by a web of cultural, economic, ecological and social connectedness. As people concerned about planet earth there is a great need to reflect on the care of the earth and the environment and its relationship with humanity.

The Earth and the Economy

The earth may be considered as an organism whose health depends on the health of all its parts. Current environmental trends threaten to radically alter the planet, and that threatens the lives of many species upon it, including the human species. Until recently, the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly classified within nations, within sectors (energy, agriculture, industry, trade), and within broad areas of concern (environment, economic, social). These boundaries have begun to dissolve especially in the background of various global 'crises' that have seized public attention, particularly over the last few decades. These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one.

There has been a growing realization in governments and institutions that, it is impossible to separate economic development issues from environment issues; that

development erodes the environmental resources upon which they must be based, and that environmental degradation can undermine economic development. Poverty is a major cause and effect of global environmental problems. It is therefore futile to attempt to deal with environmental problems without a broader perspective that encompasses the factors underlying world poverty and international inequality. Rising poverty and unemployment have increased pressure on environmental resources as more people have been forced to rely more directly upon them. Many governments have cut back efforts to protect the environment and to bring ecological considerations into development planning.

This has brought to the fore the linkages between the global economy and global ecology. In the past concerns were expressed about the effects of economic growth upon the environment. Today the effects of ecological stress - degradation of soils, water systems, atmosphere, and forests upon our economic prospects are important. With globalization there has been a sharp increase in economic interdependence among nations, and noticeable now is the accelerating ecological interdependence among nations. Ecology and economy are becoming ever more interwoven locally, regionally, nationally, and globally into a seamless net of causes and effects.

It has been realized that the efforts to guard and maintain human progress, to meet human needs, and to realize human ambitions are simply unsustainable - in both the rich and poor nations. They draw too heavily, too quickly, on already overdrawn environmental resource accounts to be affordable far into the future without bankrupting those accounts. They may show profit on the balance sheets of our generation, but the future generations will inherit the losses. It is as though we borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying.

Sustainable Development and the Green Economy

The present economic course is unsustainable: forests are shrinking, deserts are expanding, water tables are falling, soils are eroding, fisheries are collapsing, and arctic ice is melting. Consumption of basic commodities such as food and water is rising exponentially. Thus a holistic approach becomes necessary to prevent economic

instability, political conflict, and disruption of the social order which could result in stalling economic progress.

Humanity, which exists as a part of nature, has no future unless nature and natural resources are conserved. Economists will tell you that conservation cannot be achieved without development to alleviate the poverty and misery of hundreds of millions of people. But both economists and environmentalists have realized the need to restructure the global economy to prevent economic and ecological collapse. What is needed is the implementation of a comprehensive poverty eradication strategy, and restoration of damaged ecological systems. It was in this context of the interdependence of conservation and development, that the world was first introduced to the concept of “sustainable development.”

Sustainable development depends on caring for the earth. Unless the fertility and productivity of the planet are safeguarded, human future is at risk. The three objectives of sustainable development were stated as:

- i Essential ecological processes and life-support systems must be maintained;
- ii. Genetic diversity must be preserved;
- iii. Any use of species or ecosystems must be sustainable.

This 1980 World Conservation Strategy gave the message that conservation is not the opposite of development. It emphasized that conservation includes both protection and the rational use of natural resources, and is essential if people are to achieve a life of dignity, as well as, assure the welfare of present and future generations. It drew attention to the almost limitless capacity of people both to build and destroy. It called for globally coordinated efforts to increase human well-being and halt the destruction of earth's capacity to support life.

Today the concept of the “green economy” is widely accepted to a large extent because it provides a response to the multiple crises that the world has been facing in recent years – the climate, food and economic crises – in the form of an alternative paradigm that is friendly to the earth's ecosystems and can also contribute to poverty alleviation.

Holistic in character, as it encompasses the three pillars of development – economic, social and environmental – and in particular focuses on inter-generational equity. The green economy term and concept is also understood to include the need for international provision of finance and technology and accompanying global economic reforms. This is reflected in UNEP’s (*United Nations Environment Programme*) definition of a green economy as “one that results in improved human wellbeing and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities”.

This approach to sustainable development, de-centers growth to focus more directly on the achievement of social justice and the conservation and protection of ecosystem services. It realizes that maximizing the quality of whatever we do with the earth’s finite resources will always conserve them, thereby spreading nature’s wealth among more people and generations. Conversely, maximizing the quantity of any material withdrawn from the earth’s finite supply to feed the insatiable appetite of today’s consumer economy can only squander nature’s limited wealth.

This does not imply that unlimited growth is possible or desirable, but it provides a framework for balancing the costs and benefits of growth and for directing goods and services to ends that best reflect society’s values. It suggests that a sustainable future will come into being if the biophysical and social conditions needed to support economic activity and human flourishing are maintained from each generation to the next. In addition, it emphasizes *meeting needs* rather than promoting growth or satisfying consumer preferences as the defining characteristic of “development.”

Necessity of a Holistic approach

The green economy idea stems from the inadequacies of current economic structures, policies, and practices in meeting humanity’s material needs, much less our needs for personal dignity, meaning, caring connection, and freedom from violence. This calls for an economic theory based on a more complete understanding of this earth. Conventional economic models give little value to nature, and treat environmental “harms” as externalities— damage caused by the inadvertent clumsiness of the ‘invisible elbow’ attached to Adam Smith’s ‘Invisible Hand’¹.

Caring for planet earth is viewed as a liability in the conventional cost-benefit analysis, and until recently was not even an issue in economic theories. Besides, when economists address environmental and social problems, they're usually caught in the free markets/privatization versus central planning/government regulation debate that surrounded the conflict between capitalism and communism. These discussions ignore the fact that neither capitalist nor communist systems have been able to solve chronic problems such as environmental degradation, poverty, and the violence of war and terrorism that diverts and destroys economic resources and scars so many lives. Indeed, many of these problems have been the result of both capitalist and communist economic policies.

In our interconnected world none of us has a secure future as long as hunger, extreme poverty, and violence continue unabated. Economic rules and practices fail to adequately value the most essential human work: the work of caring for ourselves, others, and planet earth. There's a common denominator underlying our mounting personal, social, economic and environmental problems: a lack of caring. We need to deal with the plants, animals, minerals, human beings and all life, as if they were a part of ourselves. Because we are a part of creation, we cannot differentiate or separate ourselves from the rest of the earth.

The way in which we interact with the earth, how we utilize the plants, animals and mineral gifts, should be carried out with the future generations in mind. We cannot simply think of ourselves and our survival; each generation has a responsibility to ensure the survival of the future generations. Respect for people and for the earth is linked together in order for people to survive and care for future generations.

As Chris Maser puts it, fulfilling our obligation as environmental trustees of the earth as a biological living trust requires fundamental changes in our social consciousness, economic and cultural norms. To meet these challenges, we need to fundamentally reframe our way of thinking. Instead of arbitrarily delineating our seamless world into discrete parts, disciplines and subjects, we need a holistic approach— one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of causes and effects, actions and consequences. At this moment in time it is the concept of the green economy.

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(Footnotes)

¹Invisible Hand, a metaphor for harnessing individual self-interest to serve the general well-being, is a powerful principle. It is viewed as the best mechanism for producing and distributing the necessities of life.

However, self-interest alone can lead to disaster for all as was demonstrated mathematically by

John Nash. Self-interest coupled with concern for the good of the group is most likely to benefit everyone.

change both the built and the natural environments and how those environments change them.

Environmental psychology began in the late 1960s and is the term most commonly used around the world. Environmental psychology is the study of the interrelationship between behavior and the built and natural environment and the natural environment is studied as both a problem area, with respect to environmental degradation, and as a setting for certain recreational and psychological needs.

Conservation psychology, proposed in 2003, began with a primary focus on the relations between humans and animals. Introduced in ecology, policy, and biology journals, some have suggested that it should be expanded to try to understand why humans feel the need to help or hurt the environment, along with how to promote conservation effort.

Conservation psychology research has broken down the four most important tenets of promoting positive conservation attitudes into “the four ‘I’s.” These include: Information, Identity, Institutions, and Incentives. Research has been done in all four categories.

1. **Information:** Teaching people about the benefits of conservation, including easy ways to help conserve, is an effective way to inform about and promote more environmentally friendly behavior. Studies have shown that the way in which crises are presented is a key predictor for how people will react to them.
2. **Identity:** In general, people like to fit in and identify with their peer social groups. Studies have shown people identify more intimately with close friends and family, which is why conservation campaigns try to directly address larger number of people.
3. **Institutions:** Another approach that has been considered is the use of organized institutions and government as the leaders for promoting conservation. However, only trusted leaders can be effective. People need to understand that they are being encouraged to act a certain way out of necessity, and are not being misled.
4. **Incentives:** Incentivizing conservation through rewards and fines is another approach. Monetary incentives have been shown to work for companies showing some effort to make their buildings and practices more ‘green.’ Studies have also

shown that doing something as simple as putting a water meter in homes has helped incentivize conservation by letting people track their energy consumption levels. Finally, studies have shown that when giving fines, it is better to start with very small and then raise it for repeated violations.

Nature and children

Play is the business of childhood. Two hundred years ago, most children spent their days playing around fields, farms or amidst wild nature. By the late twentieth century, many children's environments had become urbanized. But even then, as recently as 1970, children had access to nature and the world. They spent the bulk of their recreation time outdoors, using the footpaths, streets, playgrounds, parks, greenways, vacant lots and other spaces "leftover" during the urbanization process. Fortunately, there is a growing movement to transform the paradigm for playground design in preschool and kindergarten settings. They are designed to stimulate children's natural curiosity, imagination, wonder and discovery learning as well as nurture children's connectedness with nature.

Benefits of Naturalized Playgrounds: Research provides convincing evidence of the more profound benefits of experiences in nature for children due to their greater plasticity and vulnerability. Some findings indicated that: Children with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are better able to concentrate after contact with nature. Also, children with views of and contact with nature score higher on tests of concentration and self-discipline. The greener, the better the scores.

Nature and Religion

All the religions of the world have traditionally expressed some ethical concern for the environment and its creatures. Throughout history, the world's religions have understood the Earth to have some kind of religious significance, or religious value, and that humans have some religious obligations to care for its creatures. These shared ethical concerns are found in historical teachings, but not necessarily in actual religious practices. Greed and destructiveness are condemned, while restraint and protection are affirmed by most religious traditions. For reasons that are complex, controversial, and poorly understood, these religious concerns for the environment have faded with the rise of modern society. The development of modern scientific, economic and political institutions have taken the place

historically accorded to religion, and traditional religious attitudes towards nature have largely disappeared in modern societies.

However, over the past few decades, some leaders of every religion in the world have returned to their origins to recover their pre-modern religious practises by promoting inter-religious dialogue.

Further areas of research

Conservation psychology seminars tend to focus on four points regarding research.

- 1) Ways to help develop loving attitudes for animals and the earth, on the basis of which effective educational and interpretive programs could be created.
- 2) Ways to help develop connections of humans and places. Unfortunately, today as biodiversity is lost, every generation has fewer chances to experience nature. Strategies can be devised to persuade to make them want to join in programs that help maintain biodiversity in their proximity.
- 3) Ways to produce people who act environmentally friendly by promoting conservation behaviours. Some empirical evidence shows that simply “being the change you want to see in the world” can influence others to behave in more environmentally friendly ways.
- 4) Discussing the values people have towards their environment and the origin of these values. We absorb most of our values from our religion. Efforts can be directed at involving environmentally educated people and religious leaders, to convey value based communication at the village, city, state, national or even at a global level.

Conclusion

Psychology is defined as the scientific study of human thought, feeling and behaviour. As a social science, it has played a major role in applying its theories and principles to deal with

environmental challenges by crafting a wholesome and environmentally durable society. It not only explores nature-related attitudes, perceptions, motivations and values but also devises intervention techniques for promoting environmentally appropriate behaviour by using a variety of measurement scales.

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