

When the Ecofads Fade, Ditch the Carbon- Footprint Calculator and Pick up a Shovel

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2010: a few decades into the Green Dream. Sometime in the latter half of the twentieth century, upwardly mobile, socially conscious, academically educated professionals—those who could afford to—began to drive the commercialization of products and services that were healthier, less cruel, and more conserving of natural and cultural resources. The intent behind this movement was, and is, well-meaning. It grew out of an increased awareness of the destruction wrought by global consumerism and has sought to change that; in the words of the movement itself, to “make the world a better place through conscious consumption.” People set out to reverse the course of destruction wrought by consumerism, through a different type of consumerism.

Decades before the Green Movement emerged, a similar political movement was embraced by even larger segments of the population. Progressive politicians and activists worked through the political process, legislating for increased social justice, revamping laws to clean up waterways, and regulating the processes of modern industry to better protect biodiversity and do less damage to Planet Earth in the creation of “products.” Indeed, much of modern “progressive” politics can be seen as an attempt to minimize the damage wrought by the increasingly destructive ways citizens of this nation make their living. And with each decade Americans moved further away from domestic production toward an evermore globalized, colonial resource relationship, all the while exponentially increasing the take-make-waste capacity of each citizen.

No doubt this movement toward no-VOC paint, ecotourism, green building, CFLs, organic foods, fair-trade goods, low-flow fixtures, hybrid vehicles, and more stringent regulations slowed the rate of cultural- and natural-resource obliteration, but it has not reversed the trend.

These progressive consumer and political movements of the late twentieth century failed to change the underlying structure that gave rise to massive human-ecological unsustainability in the first place. Radical consumerism and its transference of value from two-thirds of the world’s humanity to the richest third continued unabated, further bankrupting earth principal (biodiversity, soil, fresh-water and clean-air reserves), mining human capital (physical, intellectual, and emotional health of individuals and societies), and looting value from distant places and from future time periods.

Thus, despite these movements, the scope of human destruction continues to rapidly expand into the twenty-first century with:

- Greenhouse emissions of nations ratifying the Kyoto Protocol still on the rapid increase;
- Tropical rain-forest deforestation accelerating;
- Nuclear-waste production increasing;
- Species extinction accelerating;
- Climate changes happening faster than at any other time in human history;
- Resource-related warfare on the rise, with concomitant waste in money, energy, and lives;
- Overall biospheric toxicity increasing faster than any other time in the Holocene Period, and probably for quite some time previous.

Confronting the fact that the social justice and green movements (let's call them "surface movements") have not succeeded in changing the human trajectory away from perennial emergency toward a positively evolving, healthy, peaceful world forces us to recognize the structural forces that are at work. We start to see how surface movements have served largely to distract us ("let them have green products" instead of "cake"). The most meaningful forces determining the resource relationships between humanity and Planet Earth operate largely beyond the influence of these movements.

So how do we effect meaningful change, recognizing that our choice of dish detergent or fair-trade goods is not going to change the underlying drift toward deepening catastrophe?

Sometime in the twenty-first century the systems that had concentrated wealth in the hands of the few—the same systems that had become the most dominant social-organizing systems on the planet—began to disintegrate. A few generations of accumulating instability from the system's sheer scale and depth of injustice finally overwhelmed its capacity to contain its own fallout.

What if the same cultural process that stimulated the social-justice and green causes coalesced into a massive force and began to replace a consumer society with a society of producers based in decentralized, egalitarian, human-scaled, smaller units of organization? This shift is beginning to happen, starting from the home scale and working outward, to the neighborhood, village, city, and region. It's what the Transition Town movement represents.

Ask yourself what actions you can take to harness this transition away from a consumer society that belittles your own humanity to an organizing force that fosters individual empowerment—a liberating and enlightening cultural revival that replaces consumers with producers, hyperdependency with self-reliance. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Starting down this road opens the door to scores of other possibilities. The lifestyle of the producer can actually be far more stimulating, complex, and interesting than a consumption-oriented way of living.