

Peace, Conflict and Sustainability

Richard E Bradshaw PhD



Most definitions of sustainability, across history and cultures, come down to two themes: resources, meaning the wise use and management of economic and natural resources, and respect, meaning respect for people and for other living things. The two are deeply interconnected. True sustainability depends on an ongoing, dynamic balance between managing resources and respecting the living systems around us. Finding that balance may be the next real step in humanity's evolution toward a species that lives in harmony with the rest of the biosphere.

But resources and respect can pull against each other. Managing any other species in our ecosystem imposes constraints on it that transform it in ways we cannot fully predict, simply because our knowledge of other complex living systems is incomplete. Interfering in the lives and evolution of other

species with such limited understanding isn't really respect, it's arrogance, and arrogance tends to blind us to the true nature of whatever we're looking at. Real respect starts with coming to know the other, whether an individual or a species, and we already know how hard it is to fully know even one other person. On the scale of an entire species, that difficulty multiplies many times over, especially since every species, including ours, is in constant evolutionary flux, shaped by its relationships with everything else in the biosphere.

Picture a web of countless, diverse beings, where any action by any one of them sends ripples through the structural and relational dynamics of the whole web. That's roughly what happens whenever a species inside an ecosystem tries to manage its environment. True respect, then, has to mean something more active: a constant search for a more viable sustainability through intelligent, perceptive, compassionate interaction with every other species, plant or animal, that we share this planet with. In practice, that means treating everything out there that isn't us as though it were us, which is the only way we'll come to understand the ecosystem well enough to give back what we've taken from it, ideally with some care and improvement built into the exchange.

The other theme, resources, is a more personal endeavor. It requires rethinking what our real needs actually are and harmonizing the fulfillment of those needs with the needs of every other species on earth. That calls for becoming more parsimonious: taking what you need, but only what you need, to sustain your own species. It's a demanding, ongoing effort, not a one-time fix, and it may well require real shifts in how we see ourselves, our lifestyles, and our relationships with other forms of life. Part of that shift means questioning whether ever-increasing consumption is actually a measure of happiness or well-being at all. Gross national product measured in quantity misses the point; some countries have started asking about gross national happiness instead, weighing

physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being rather than sheer output. Endless consumption driven by manufactured wants, rather than real needs, is a vicious cycle whose main products are waste, pollution, and a strange kind of collective unhappiness.

Peace researcher Johan Galtung describes the alternative as a state of entropy, not chaos, but a vast horizontal network of interconnected, individually empowered nodes of creativity, where information and communication can travel freely in any direction, much like the internet. That kind of open complexity encourages maximum creativity and efficiency within any ecosystem. Today's vertical power structures do the opposite: they concentrate and isolate power within polarized groups, shrinking the number of real connections and often producing competition, hostility, and violence over belief systems and the private hoarding of resources. The trouble with hostility and hoarding isn't just that they're unpleasant, it's that they're wasteful. They waste creativity, material resources, and our ability to work together as a species, and waste is the enemy of sustainability precisely because resources are always limited.

So we return to parsimony: taking only what we need and leaving room for others to find what they need, building a world where polarization stops being an attractive alternative to peace and creative communication. That kind of horizontal, open exchange helps all of us maximize our creative potential, and it's where real happiness and well-being are actually found, in our own creativity and self-actualization, not in how much we can consume. Nothing in this world is static. Every action within the biosphere ripples outward and blends with countless other ripples in ways we can't fully predict, which means the fantasy of neatly managing the environment from the top down is exactly that, a fantasy. It's time we spoke to the other species on this planet as equals, each with its own story and its own wisdom, and found a sustainable place for ourselves inside that

web rather than above it.

This material is adapted from the Freedom books. For further insights into the self, self-actualization, and who we are as spiritual beings, see Freedom: What It Is and How to Achieve It.

Continue the journey

The Freedom Series: what freedom is, and how to live it

The Clarity Series: insight poetry on perception and awareness

The Mandalam Series: a consciousness sci-fi journey

All ebooks: acosmicjourney.com/shop

© Richard E. Bradshaw, PhD. Free to read and share with credit.