

Second Nature: Becoming Unconsciously Sustainable

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The sustainability and environment movement has long wrung its hands, imploring the world that if only we could live sustainably – mindfully and consciously – we could halt and reverse many of the adverse impacts of unsustainability.

But I wonder whether becoming ‘consciously sustainable’ may not be the ultimate desired state.

This is just a thought I’ve had for a while – and I recognise that there are a lot of nuances to this within and between cultures and over time, yet I think its a fair, broad brush overview of humanity’s journey.

Once upon a time, we were:

Unconsciously Sustainable

For thousands of years, before human beings were ‘big’ in terms of our numbers, technology and population, we could have been considered as ‘living sustainably’, that is, living within the biological limits of nature.

We might not have been trying to be 'sustainable', in fact the very notion of 'sustainability' wouldn't have even been a consideration.

But our impacts were limited, our collective footprint was well within nature's capacity, and nature's resources were plentiful. Where there was competition for resources, it would have been localised.

By default, we were unconsciously sustainable. There are small populations of human beings around the world who still live this way.

Then we became:

Unconsciously Unsustainable

It's difficult to pinpoint when human beings first shifted into becoming unconsciously unsustainable – some would say the onset of the Industrial Revolution, some would argue at the time agriculture was invented.

Was it in the post World War II years with the rise of consumer societies in many parts of the world? Was it only when we moved into overshoot and became 'too big' for the Earth, or was it when we adopted social and technological changes that put us on that trajectory?

At some stage, we transitioned from being sustainable to unsustainable, without realising it.

Many people remain in the phase of being unconsciously unsustainable. Now we are:

Consciously Unsustainable

It's also hard to pinpoint where we first became conscious of living unsustainably – when the impacts of pollution from the Industrial Revolution began to be evident? At the start of the 20th century when the nature conservation movement arose? In the mid 20th century with the rise of the environment movement?

Clues lie throughout history where 'pushback' can be found – such as the protecting of nature in parks, and the passing of key pieces of legislation such as clean air and water acts.

In any case, we are now more aware than ever of impacts associated with how we live, from climate change and biodiversity (species) loss, to water quality and availability, to overconsumption, sprawl and how all of this affects our health and wellbeing.

Many people are now conscious that, as a species, we are living unsustainably.

A colleague has suggested there is a subspecies of people who are in denial about being unsustainable – but I'm not sure if they fit into unconsciously unsustainable or consciously unsustainable!

So now we're working towards becoming:

Consciously Sustainable

In a world where unsustainable has become the default way of living, some people have found or chosen ways of living more sustainably than others. Where people have a very small footprint through no choice, this may not be sustainable if their quality of life is adversely impacted eg. being unable to access healthy food or education.

Asking people to 'live sustainably' requires them to make a conscious effort to do something different within existing system conditions. Yet the capacity for the human brain to make millions of decisions each day is limited, and so the brain has adapted with heuristics, which are '...mental short cuts to ease the cognitive load of making a decision'.

In short, habit and defaulting to the status quo is easier than the effort required to change behaviour, and habit will generally take precedence over the time and energy needed to blaze new neural pathways.

My concern is – can we expect the vast majority of people to become 'consciously sustainable'?

What if we could design the world that produces so much 'unsustainable' as the default, to instead produce the 'sustainable'?

Unconsciously Sustainable

Rather than becoming 'consciously sustainable', I would argue that the ultimate goal is to come full circle – that we must make choices and design things so that we can't help but live sustainably, without having to think too much about it.

Living sustainably in a world that has been designed to make it hard to live that way can be a struggle. There's a lot of extra work and time involved in developing awareness about a plethora of issues, making decisions and pondering the trade offs.

This involves a high level of ecological literacy to begin with, and an understanding of complex systems (how things are connected and impact on each other) rather than a focus on single issues (which can result in adverse, unintended consequences).

Even equipped with this capability, it's all too likely that you will end up trying to untangle a morass of information, or end up down a technical cul-de-sac wishing someone had written a life cycle analysis where none exists, as I have discovered many times in my work.

How are these things going to translate into people's everyday lives eg. purchasing decisions in a supermarket, where the buyer is a busy parent trying to pick the most affordable healthy food choices for the family on the whirlwind trip home from work? Labeling systems are one answer in this context, however what happens when labeling systems for different issues clash – should you buy local, or organic? Is an imported product from a water abundant country better or worse than a locally grown product in a water scarce country?

Even for the aware, informed and committed, working out the best choice for every life decision in relation to a range of criteria including but not limited to sustainability, this complexity is exhausting and often overwhelming.

Do we seriously expect people who are less open to, or engaged with sustainability to grapple with it?

We need to make unconsciously sustainable the 'default' once more.

In researching this piece, I found only one other reference to this idea, *Stages in Sustainability Maturity*, although the context was that of business and organisational DNA, not humanity as a whole.

Is it preferable that we are consciously sustainable, or unconsciously sustainable?