

Ecofficiency

Making sense of Sustainability
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As consumers, we all have a significant impact on our world – especially for those of us who live in the United States, Europe, or any other industrialized country. International trade and commerce has created a global consumer system that brings us resources, products, and services from all corners of the planet; mostly from developing countries – countries that all too often lack the environmental and social controls that citizens (consumers) from industrialized countries have demanded and achieved long ago. The globalized consumer system, as we know it today, has resulted in many negative environmental, social, and economic impacts – impacts that are seen and felt the world over.

To counteract the consequences of these impacts, a significant movement towards sustainability has emerged. At its heart, the sustainability movement is an effort to promote more responsible consumer behaviors and systems, which allows us to address environmental and social problems, while maintaining a strong economy. Unfortunately, sustainability has become disjointed as a movement – mostly because it has become confusing as a concept, due in large part to it being co-opted for a variety of marketing purposes. The problem is that sustainability – as a developmental or economic concept – has never meant anything specifically, nor has it ever been a call to action. Definitions and models of sustainability have typically been general, and therefore open to interpretation and manipulation.

The predominant understanding of sustainability comes from the Bruntland Commission of the United Nations in referring to sustainable development: “...sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” While this sounds great, and looks good on the surface, it doesn’t actually mean very much, nor does it provide a distinguishable pathway of change.

Sustainability lacks structure and clarity. Therefore, as a term and a concept, it is easily co-opted in ways that promote “green washing,” push specific agendas, and ultimately fails to inspire meaningful actions for change. A structured understanding of what lies behind sustainability is paramount in solving the vast majority of environmental, social, and economic problems that our world faces. Ecoefficiency provides such structure.

Ecoefficiency as a Model for Change

Understanding sustainability as a practice of ecoefficiency helps bring structure to the movement, and provides a distinguishable pathway of action – based on what YOU can do within your realm of influence. Ecoefficiency balances **economy**, **ecology**, and **equity** – and their relationships – in determining how we as individuals, industries, and institutions can shape our worldviews, values, and actions so that we can promote positive consumer impacts and outcomes. Conceptualizing ecoefficiency helps to more effectively understand the ideas behind sustainability, and how they can be incorporated into the ways we lead our lives, conduct business, and govern our societies.

Understanding and acting on concepts from an ecoefficient perspective promotes more responsible consumer systems and behavior. Ecoefficiency is not focused on promoting the benefits of a “green” economy. Rather, ecoefficiency is a consumer driven ethic, encouraging individuals to assess their consumer impacts from a holistic point of view, taking into account social and environmental elements, locally and globally

The fundamental question:

Are the impacts associated with extracting, producing, shipping, packaging, storing, and disposing of the resources, products, and services we consume worth the benefits they provide us as individuals or to society at large?

This is an important question, which requires much thought. Without action, however, our answers mean little. To truly make a meaningful difference, this question must become a part of our daily consumer decision making process, and we must then act accordingly whenever we can.

Ultimately, this question demands that we consider economy, ecology, and equity based impacts on equal terms. Ecoefficiency is not entirely unlike concepts such as the “triple bottom line” (people, planet, profit) or other sustainable development models. However, ecoefficiency focuses on individual citizens as the primary instigators of change, from the ground up, as opposed to models designed to be implemented from the top down. As individual citizens adopt a lifestyle that practices ecoefficiency, they will then bring this ethic into their business ideologies, and demands of government. This should not be an overwhelming process; do what you can when you can – just make sure that the steps you do take eventually lead to more steps. If we act together, we will make significant and positive change!

Consumer Responsibility

There is no single solution to the problems that our world faces, but one thing is certain: if we truly want to solve the problems our world faces, we as individuals are going to have to begin consuming more responsibly – or ecoefficiently.

Consumer driven globalization is now a basic component of most societies; with it, unfortunately, comes consequential impacts felt all over the world. Social and environmental impacts – such as climate change, economic crises, polluted waterways and oceans, forced migration, the spread of infectious disease, habitat loss, human trafficking, transnational crime, and acts of violence and terror – are deeply intertwined, and can be seen at local levels across all continents, as well as on a global scale. Individual consumers ultimately contribute – substantially – to most of these impacts. We cannot simply shrug our shoulders and blame the impacts of our consumption on a system that we think we have no control over. The reality is that consumers have a lot of power, and the time is now to begin using it.

Going Green

When thinking of consumer responsibility (or sustainability), many of us think about going “green.” This has become a popular mantra lately, coming from political candidates, corporations large and small, various communities, and numerous advocacy groups. While we should all be heartened by the movement in bringing needed change to the American lifestyle and our global consumer systems, we need to revisit what it means to go green.

Going green puts the focus of our consumer impacts on environmental issues, which have become disproportionately focused on reducing emissions that contribute to climate change. Obviously, reducing these emissions is critically important for our future, but there are many smaller environmental impacts that are nearly as important – if not more so. Not only that, but focusing the environmental often

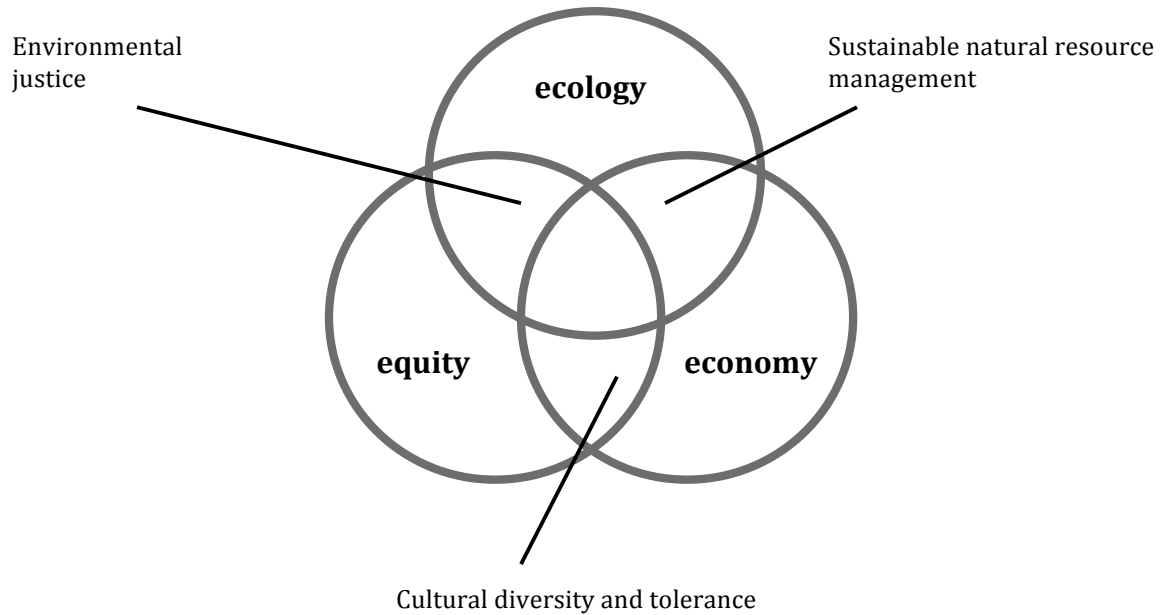
takes attention away from the social issues that are so important – such as forced migration, civil conflict, human trafficking, and labor abuses – which frequently stem from the globalized economic system that feeds our consumer demands in industrialized countries. All of the issues are deeply intertwined, and as such, need to be addressed simultaneously – which requires a more holistic and structured approach to understanding and acting on consumer responsibility.

As individual consumers, we need to take control of the power that comes with consumer demand. Politicians won't do much more than what they feel is needed for our votes, and businesses lack incentive to do any more than what we support with our wallets. The time has come for individual consumers to incorporate an **ethic** of consumer responsibility into our lifestyles; by doing so, we place the same demand on business and its practices, as well as from government and the policies that are put forth on our behalf.

The goal of Ecoefficiency is simple; to provide the structure necessary to inspire you to live a life that more positively impacts our world. None of us are perfect, and consumer responsibility can seem like a pointless struggle at times – many of us don't even know what it means – but it is vitally important. There are a number of simple things we can do to begin making huge impacts immediately. All of us, however, must first make an ethical commitment to do so.

The Ecoefficiency model helps make sense of how all the pieces fit together, and why it is important for us as individuals to proactively initiate a process of change. Nobody can tell anyone else exactly what to do; we are all so different – age, where we live (city/country, hot/cold climate), size of our families, and cultural differences to name a few – with different capacities for change. Therefore, we must each decide for ourselves what we as individuals can initially do, and make that be the first step toward our next step...and so on and so on.

The Model



Ecology, Economy, and Equity

Balancing the needs of **economy**, **ecology**, and **equity** is ecoefficiency in practice. The aim is to eliminate waste, maintain healthy ecosystems, and promote social justice and equity around the world – while contributing to a strong economy. The key, however, is in achieving what the lies in the relationships between these components. First, the components:

Economy

Economic development and exchange are essential in promoting market based social systems such as capitalism and neo-liberal democracy. Economics is a central aspect of any social system, be it capitalism, communism, or even in hunter-gatherer societies. All humans consume, and in doing so, we exchange goods and services with each other – forming the base of economic activity. Too often capitalism has developed **economy** at the expense of **ecology** and **equity**. While it happens, there

is no natural law of free market economies (i.e. capitalism) that dictates economic development MUST degrade ecosystems and/or weaken equity.

Ecology

Most sustainability models designate this concept as “environment.” Ecology, however, makes more sense as it conveys the importance of considering the natural and developed world from a holistic perspective, accounting for the symbiotic relationships between species - including humans. Ecosystems must be preserved on a local and global scale. Localized pollution (frequently the result of export-based industries) has a destabilizing affect in nearly all developing countries. This instability is a threat to peace and justice throughout the world.

Equity

Citizens in countries like the United States have demanded, and achieved, significant levels of environmental and social safeguards, ensuring a high standard of living and security across racial, cultural, and religious lines. While there is more to be accomplished, it is noteworthy that the US is the first industrialized nation to elect a minority as its leader. That says a lot about the ethics behind who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. It is now incumbent upon the US – still the most powerful and influential country in the world – to take the lead in genuinely spreading the same ethic of equity and respect outside of our borders. This will only help stabilize an increasingly insecure globalized economic system, while serving to promote peace and justice internationally.

The Relationships as “Building Blocks for Global Peace”

In identifying the relationships between each of these concepts, we see the emergence of large-scale societal goals towards peace. Ecoefficiency in practice will achieve environmental justice, sustainable natural resource management, and a true sense of diversity and tolerance; all of which can be just as easily termed “peace, prosperity, and longevity” – ideals most of us want to achieve.

Economy and Ecology:

Sustainable natural resource management

When the needs of economic development are balanced with the needs of maintaining healthy ecosystems – thus ensuring a lasting future of resource utility and benefits – we see sustainable natural resource management.

Economy and Equity:

Diversity and Tolerance

Cultural diversity and tolerance (where divergent groups of people coexist peacefully and prosperously) arise when all stakeholders benefit from economic development. While this does not necessarily mean that every individual benefits equally, it does mean that no groups of people are left out of the decision making processes or economic benefits resulting from actions that affect where they live.

Equity and Ecology:

Environmental Justice

This relationship ensures that everyone benefits more or less equally from the resources where they live; not just through economic development, but also through ecological conservation. This relationship also ensures that no one is subject to the ill effects of pollution more so than any one else. Negative ecological impacts at local levels in the developing world borne from consumer demand in industrialized countries, frequently exposes large populations of people to increased levels of disease, poverty, and insecurity.

ecoefficiency in practice:

Sustainable Natural Resource Management

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Diversity and Tolerance

+

Environmental Justice

=

A world we all want to live in

An Ethical Imperative

What should our motivation be to consume more ecoefficiently? A prevailing strategy in today's "green" movement is that we should be motivated by the financial benefits of going green, such as developing a green economy, or cutting costs in our homes and businesses. Many people in the sustainability movement believe that if we do not show how people or businesses will benefit economically from "going green," no one will adopt these values. This is a troubling and unfortunate mindset that basically says people have no moral code of ethics. Do not be fooled by this line of reasoning – usually put forth by people that benefit financially from the sustainability movement, or those that are skeptical of it; neither of which have bothered to look deeply into what they are saying.

The bottom line (pun intended) is that the overwhelming majority of people are good, and they do want to do what is right. When was the last time you knowingly bought something that was stolen, or illegally dumped something toxic into the environment? Although doing so is in our economic self-interest, we don't do these things because we know it is wrong to do so. In other words, it costs us money to do what we know is right. As we adjust our understanding of what is right and wrong, we need to adjust our willingness to pay the cost.

One of the problems with appealing to financial benefits of going green, is that what is financially beneficial is up for debate. Are we talking long-term or short-term benefits? In the sort-term, resources, products, and services cost more to produce in a positively impacting and responsible way – which means they cost more to buy. This sends a mixed message. While these costs will go somewhat down over time, many people who bear these costs aren't sure they will see any financial benefit in the long-term...let alone the immediate term. If economic benefits are the used as the push to go green, under this scenario, there is no incentive to actually do so.

Furthermore, what happens if the large-scale economic benefits of a "green

economy” don’t pan out as advertised, which is a very real possibility given all of the global variables involved – many of which have nothing to do with going green? The answer is a “green backlash” and increased skepticism about the benefits and overall validity of developing a green economy. Obviously, there are numerous possibilities for sound economic development that incorporates green technologies and practices; ecoefficiency supports this as one of its fundamental components. But make no mistake; this is a moral issue, and needs to be promoted as such.

Ecoefficiency emulates a different model, a model proven to be successful that is based on an ethical imperative, differentiating between what’s right and what’s wrong – such as the model put forth by the Civil Rights Movement. We must appeal to peoples’ sense of logic; the importance of conserving limited resources, keeping our homes clean, and making sure that our neighbors are healthy and secure. The reality is that ideologies borne through an ethical imperative appealing to a basic sense of logic have staying power, and as such, are far more impacting.

Well into the 1990s, the idea of a Black man becoming President of the United States was outright laughable. While we still have a long ways to go, look how far we have come due to the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was not advanced because of an appeal to an immediate economic benefit. Rather, it was advanced because it logically appealed to our understanding of the difference between right and wrong. As such, this paved the way for Barack Obama’s Presidency; a Presidency that – no matter what your political view – signifies a positive and lasting shift in consciousness. While the Civil Rights movement was not promoted or advanced based on economic benefits, what we have learned is that businesses that have proven to minimize racial barriers, have also proven to be more profitable over time – an interesting correlation that the sustainability movement can learn from.

To adequately address sustainability, it is going to cost money; we face many of the problems of today, because we have failed to pay the true cost of what we consume.

Ecoefficient Management in Practice

Ecoefficiency as an ideology should be practiced, not just at personal levels, but also at business and industry levels. When individual consumers demand resources, products, and services that are sourced and produced responsibly, businesses – entire industries even – will respond, or face losing market share to competitors that will. This is the beauty of a free (and fair) market economy. Consumers must understand, however, that sweeping changes will not happen overnight.

Nevertheless, if educated and motivated consumers make their demands known, businesses will be compelled to make positive changes.

Ecoefficiency also provides structure for businesses to identify where they can begin implementing a plan that has long-term positive impacts from a holistic perspective. Like individuals, businesses are largely unique (albeit with similar management structures), and as such they face the challenge of identifying how they can tailor specific management practices to promote consumer responsibility. Not only does ecoefficiency provide structure to facilitate such plans, but it also helps businesses identify and prioritize action items as part of a series of steps in doing so. The first steps in the direction of any type of change are often the hardest.

A sustainability plan based on the principles of ecoefficiency can then be used as a means to (transparently) publicize, efforts at promoting consumer responsibility – without resorting to “green washing.” More importantly, however, an ecoefficiency based sustainability plan will prompt other businesses to follow suit, thus spreading the values and ideals of consumer responsibility across and between industries.

Consumer Demand

All humans consume, and it is our consumption that drives the vast majority of our actions. Consumption in industrialized countries generates enormous social and environmental impacts all over the world. While some of these impacts are positive,

far too many are negative. The population of the United States is just under 5% of the world's total, yet the US consumes over 25% of the world's resources. The US also operates on a massive trade deficit (about \$400 Billion per year!), meaning that imports from around the world far exceed exports. In order to facilitate this imbalanced consumer model, resources and products imported into the US are made far cheaper than they should be by not having to comply with the social and environmental controls that have been demanded and achieved in the US by its citizens. In short, the US consumes far more than its fair share, and produces a massive amount of negative environmental and social impacts along the way.

The European Union is not much different in this regard, and countries such as Japan, Canada, and Australia are well into their march down the same path. As a result, our planet has become divided into consuming nations (the "industrialized" world) and producing nations (the "developing" world). While the developing world largely produces what the industrialized world consumes, overall, they have not seen much benefit from this relationship, and have been left to deal with many consequences – originating from consumption in the industrialized world.

This must change, and the United States can – and should – take the lead.

Until recently, the impacts resulting from this globally disproportionate consumer / producer relationship have stayed "out of sight and out of mind" to those of us living in countries like the US. This has made it difficult for us as citizens and (especially) consumers to see and understand the impacts we have made on the rest of the world. However, with the proliferation of information technology, we have become increasingly exposed to the realities of what is happening across the planet. More to the point, however, we are starting to come face to face ourselves with some of the consequences resulting from an imbalanced consumer relationship – consequences such as climate change, economic meltdown, the spread of infectious disease, immigration concerns, habitat loss, transnational crime and conflict, and terrorism.

What causes such outcomes to emerge? Certainly it is not because the most adversely affected people around the world are stupid, lazy, or don't care. The reality is that all of the aforementioned outcomes can be traced to an imbalanced consumer model originating from within a globalized consumer system. As a whole, this system has largely evolved organically, and while there has certainly been a history of manipulation by agenda driven politicians, economists, and corporate leaders, there has not been any one individual or group of people that can be held solely responsible for these outcomes...other than perhaps the ultimate consumers – that is to say you and I in the industrialized world.

We as consumers have incredible power, and the time has come for us as individuals to use it to productively contribute to solving our world's problems. This can, and MUST be done! Corporate ideology has proven that it will listen to consumer demand. The only catch is that consumers have to actually make their demands known – such as ethical and responsible systems that produce the resources, products and services we consume. We can no longer afford to sit back and wait for government or industry to take these actions on their own volition. The process is proving to be too slow. Government is bogged down by agenda driven political conflict and business is driven by short-term profit. Expecting either of these entities to initiate any kind of meaningful change – without consumers demanding it – is unlikely to say the least.

If we, as consumers, are going to help fix these problems, we must educate ourselves about what our relationship is with the world around us, and how we as individuals can consume more responsibly. Then, we must make the commitment to enact necessary changes in our own lives, and what we will support with our wallets and our votes. Business and government will respond, but only if these demand originate at a grassroots level.

Lifestyle

At its core, Ecoefficiency is an appeal to modify our personal lifestyles to reflect an ethic of consumer responsibility, an ethic that encourages all of us to live in a way that positively impacts the world around us. Unfortunately, we lack direction in how to accomplish this. All too often, our ideologies, values, and actions are dictated by clever marketing campaigns aimed to sell us more stuff, or by heavy handed political campaigns designed to push a one sided ideological agenda – neither of which are very concerned with solving problems at their root.

Practicing ecoefficiency is an effort to provide an ethical structure to an otherwise amorphous movement of change. This means encouraging individuals to look within, to see how we are each connected to the world around us, and to then take responsibility for our personal actions – based on incorporating our understanding of what we believe to be the difference between right and wrong into our consumer behavior.

As individuals we are all different, with varying capacities for enacting change. Nobody can tell you what to do, but each of us has to do something, and what we do has to be the first step toward doing something more. Ecoefficiency is not about searching for the last consumer “tips” for what you can do, or the latest green gadget. We simply want to provide individual consumers with the structure to begin understanding our relationship with the world around us, the significance of our impacts, and hopefully, some inspiration to make changes in how we live our lives, and how we consume.

An ecoefficient lifestyle is not about: ZERO impact

Nor is it about: MINIMAL impact

An ecoefficient lifestyle is about: **POSITIVE** impact

Economic development within a capitalist system CAN result in positive outcomes for people all over the world; we as consumers just have to be willing to accept the

conditions that allow this to be the case - which means consuming responsibly, and demanding that the businesses we support operate responsibly. Supply and demand provides us as consumers a tremendous amount of power to see this through, and if this costs us a little more money in the short term that is something we will have to accept. Fundamentally, we will have to recognize that as responsible consumers that cover the true cost of our consumption, we will have to pay more for many resources, products, and services. If we do not cover these costs now, we will have to pay for them eventually; as the saying goes, “there is no free lunch.”

Our tips:

Do

- Educate and think for **yourself** about your relationship with the world
- Construct a lifestyle that values experience over material goods
- Understand that paying more money for goods and services is necessary to cover the costs of negative social and environmental impacts
- Buy used and/or recycled products whenever possible
- Be conscious of the extended impacts of your consumer behavior
- Use gift-giving as an opportunity to promote ecoefficiency

Do Not

- Limit your efforts in consuming responsibly to simply “being green,” or reducing your carbon footprint
- Avoid change - the world is changing, and to stay relevant, we must as well
- Buy products that have a short life span, or come in excess packaging
- Base your world view and lifestyle on political ideology
- Let a fear of hypocrisy keep you from making changes to your lifestyle
- Let other people, businesses, or organizations decide how you should think about various issues

The time to act is now. The world is watching. This is our opportunity to make a lasting impact; no generation in the history of human kind has had the opportunity that we have lying at our feet. If we seize this opportunity, we will be revered – if we ignore it, we will be reviled. The choice is ours.

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