On the subject of sustainability
On the Subject of Sustainability

By Patti Pedrus

In today’s global world where the earth’s natural resources are being bombarded by climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity impacts, the need to redefine the term sustainability is crucial. We often ask ourselves, why has earth gone mad? Instead, we should ask why has our value system gone bad? Indeed, our value system is one in which money and material goods are coveted. We live in a world where time is money. In fact, problems arise when money is perceived as the only means to progress. Sustainability does not necessarily depend on more money for progress. It can mean just the opposite—less money for a healthier life.

This is not a new concept. In fact, numerous print and multimedia texts have encouraged people to rethink what is at stake: their values and their relationship with the environment. However, the mainstream world continues to produce materials that are designed to make life simpler.

Sustainability has come to mean survival through meeting material needs and fighting for a depleting earth. We have disengaged ourselves from direct contact with nature. We have created bubbles in our cars, homes, office cubicles, and stores. It has come to the point where we can no longer learn without the web or other media; nor can we be entertained without electricity.

Consequently, the earth’s health is deteriorating, no matter what is said in campaigns. We have chosen to place great importance on living in luxury rather than in the natural world. Moreover, education has become so sophisticated that complexity overrides simplicity. Can complexity and simplicity be balanced in working towards a sustainable way of life? In essence, how can modernization be simple?

Over the years, Pacific islanders have depended on their capacity to use natural resources sustainably. In fact, they have demonstrated a strong resilience to environmental stresses. Today, however, overpopulation, overconsumption, and the adverse effects of climate change are challenging their traditional livelihoods and well being. Throughout the Federated States of Micronesia, changes in diet and education and a lack of concern for the environment are taking over the lives of people who were once close to nature. Our ancestors once relied on the land for subsistence living, but imported foods and products has changed our attitudes about a healthy diet.

Our communities must redefine sustainability. To reconnect with our environment and become healthy again, we, with our government and educators, need to take responsibility and begin to ask some important questions.

Are we willing to ride bicycles instead of cars to reduce the effects of pollution? Are we willing to use recycled products in building to use less? Are we willing to work together to use less?

Are we willing to change our current diet of excess cholesterol, salt, sugar, and spices to reduce the incidents of hypertension, diabetes, kidney failures, and related diseases?

Are we willing to learn from nature and acknowledge that sustainability is a community practice, which means we take learning outside the classroom to root it in a deep knowledge of place?

Are we willing to protect and respect life and dignity of every human and living being as we make these choices?

“Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract—sustainable development—and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people.”

—Mr. Kofi Anan, Former Secretary General of the United Nations.

A sustainable community promotes the quality of life and health of the current and future generations, while living within the limits of its social and natural systems. The need for physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual sustenance is essential to such a community.

More importantly, a sustainable community relies on technology and social institutions that support and cooperate with nature’s inherent ability to sustain life. It results from a community of educated and compassionate people. Today’s educational system can redirect its approach and engage students in their civic responsibilities with hands-on learning experiences. Students can apply theories learned to address real, pressing environmental issues. Drawing from the past, they can determine what can and cannot work for present and future generations.

When we redefine the concept of sustainable community, the definition is not new. In fact, we are simply instilling traditional knowledge from societies that have lived sustainably for a very long time.

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