



We need an ecological civilization before it's too late



In the face of climate breakdown and ecological overshoot, alluring promises of “green growth” are no more than magical thinking. We need to restructure the fundamentals of our global cultural/economic system to cultivate an “ecological civilization”: one that prioritizes the health of living systems over short-term wealth production.

Ecological overshoot

The climate emergency is merely a harbinger of other existential threats looming over humanity as a result of ecological overshoot — the fact that we're depleting the earth's natural resources at a faster rate than they can be replenished. As long as government policies emphasize growing GDP as a national priority, and as long as transnational corporations relentlessly pursue greater shareholder returns by ransacking the earth, we will continue accelerating toward global catastrophe.

Currently, our civilization is running at 40% above its sustainable capacity. We're rapidly depleting the earth's forests, animals, insects, fish, freshwater, even the topsoil we require to grow our crops. We've already transgressed three of the nine planetary boundaries that define humanity's safe operating space, and yet global GDP is expected to more than double by mid-century, with potentially irreversible and devastating consequences. By 2050, it's estimated, there will be more plastic in the world's oceans than fish. Last year, over fifteen thousand scientists from 184 countries issued an ominous warning to humanity that time is running out: "Soon it will be too late," they wrote, "to shift course away from our failing trajectory."

An ecological civilization

The crucial idea behind an ecological civilization is that our society needs to change at a level far deeper than most people realize. It's not just a matter of investing in renewables, eating less meat, and driving an electric car. The intrinsic framework of our global social and economic organization needs to be transformed. And this will only happen when enough people recognize the destructive nature of our current mainstream culture and reject it for one that is life-affirming

— embracing values that emphasize growth in the quality of life rather than in the consumption of goods and services.

A change of such magnitude would be an epochal event. There have been only two occasions in history when radical dislocations led to a transformation of virtually every aspect of the human experience: the Agricultural Revolution that began about twelve thousand years ago, and the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century. If our civilization is to survive and prosper through the looming crises of this century, we will need a transformation of our values, goals, and collective behavior on a similar scale.

An ecological civilization would be based on the core principles that sustain living systems coexisting stably in natural ecologies. Insights into how ecologies self-organize offer a model for how we could organize human society in ways that could permit sustainable abundance. Organisms prosper when they develop multiple symbiotic relationships, wherein each party to a relationship both takes and gives reciprocally. In an ecology, energy flows are balanced and one species' waste matter becomes nourishment for another. Entities within an ecology scale fractally, with microsystems existing as integral parts of larger systems to form a coherent whole. In a well-functioning ecosystem, each organism thrives by optimizing for its own existence within a network of relationships that enhances the common good. The inherent resilience caused by these dynamics means that, without human disruption, ecosystems can maintain their integrity for many thousands, and sometimes millions, of years.

An ecological civilization would be based on the principles that sustain all living systems

In practice, transitioning to an ecological civilization would mean restructuring some of the fundamental institutions driving our current civilization to destruction. In place of an economy

based on perpetual growth in GDP, it would institute one that emphasized quality of life, using alternative measures such as a Genuine Progress Indicator to gauge success. Economic systems would be based on respect for individual dignity and fairly rewarding each person's contribution to the greater good, while ensuring that nutritional, housing, healthcare, and educational needs were fully met for everyone. Transnational corporations would be fundamentally reorganized and made accountable to the communities they purportedly serve, to optimize human and environmental wellbeing rather than shareholder profits. Locally owned cooperatives would become the default organizational structure. Food systems would be designed to emphasize local production using state-of-the-art agroecology practices in place of fossil fuel-based fertilizer and pesticides, while manufacturing would prioritize circular flows where efficient re-use of waste products is built into the process from the outset.

In an ecological civilization, the local community would be the basic building block of society. Face-to-face interaction would regain ascendance as a crucial part of human flourishing, and each community's relationship with others would be based on principles of mutual respect, learning, and reciprocity. Technological innovation would still be encouraged, but would be prized for its effectiveness in enhancing the vitality of living systems rather than minting billionaires. The driving principle of enterprise would be that we are all interconnected in the web of life — and long-term human prosperity is therefore founded on a healthy Earth.

One way or another, humanity is headed for the third great transformation in its history: either in the form of global collapse or a metamorphosis to a new foundation for sustainable flourishing. An ecological civilization offers a path forward that may be the only true hope for our descendants to thrive on Earth into the distant future.

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