

Overcoming Denial: Toward an “Ecological Civilization”

Setting the stage

The goal of global economic development today is to maintain economic growth in ways that maximize economic production and consumption, i.e., by integrating national economies (globalization) and increasing factor productivity (technology); by exploiting cheap labour and ecosystems; and by capitalizing on economies of scale, free-market efficiencies, specialisation and trade, and corporate mergers. A major socio-economic effect is to generate unprecedented profits for a relative few, thus enabling economic and political elites to consolidate their positions of wealth and power while claiming to generate the revenues needed to repair ‘the environment’ and alleviate poverty. Market externalities (unaccounted costs) include the simplification of local economies, loss of community resilience, economic insecurity for many, unsustainable inter-dependences, plunging biodiversity, runaway pollution and accelerated ecological degradation to the point of ‘overshoot’. This economic system (corporate capitalism) is ultimately socially and ecologically self-destructive since it exploits ordinary people, discounts social relationships, depletes natural capital and undermines the biophysical life-support functions upon which it depends, all without ending poverty. Indeed, unsustainability to the point of potentially irreversible systems collapse, is an inevitable ‘emergent property’ of this or any other economic model based on continuous, parasitic exponential growth on a finite planet.

Now imagine an economic system structured to satisfy people’s biophysical needs in ways that respect the dignity of individuals, nurture their home-places and social communities, diversify local economies and maintain the circular flows and functional integrity of connected ecosystems. Properly planned and regulated, the resulting socio-ecosystem system would optimise long-term population well-being through a combination of material sufficiency, regional self-reliance, economic security, relative equity, community resilience, and ecological stability. With maturity, growth would be restrained and the system ultimately brought into a dynamic ‘steady-state’ (continuing to improve qualitatively) at a population and material scale compatible with the regenerative and waste-assimilation capacities of supportive ecosystems. Such economies would be self-sustaining at both local and global levels so human communities could theoretically thrive indefinitely. Indeed, sustainability would be a natural ‘emergent property’ of this or any similar socio-economic system designed to nourish human and social capital while functioning as an integral, contributing component of local ecosystems and the ecosphere.

The choice before us

The future of *H. sapiens* depends on whether the global community can transition successfully from today’s growth-based consumptive economy as described in the first paragraph above, to the ‘steady-state’ eco-economy described in the second. The motivating logic (if not the switch itself) is simple—perpetual unequal growth is self-destructive; the equitable steady-state is self-perpetuating. The real question is whether modern humans are capable of overcoming deep cultural denial of reality and rising to their full, uniquely human potential. Success (a true ‘ecological civilization’ on Earth) demands high intelligence, inclusive morality, evidence-based policies and cooperative planning for the long-term common good. Failure (ignominious decline and collapse) requires little more than business-as-usual, the relentless playing out of short-term reptilian logic—continuous, competitive, self-interested material accumulation on a finite planet.