An important new statement on sustainability has just been published by the UTNE READER. [1] Here we summarize and excerpt it, skipping on the details.

The author is Paul Hawken, a businessman (founder of Smith and Hawken, which sells upscale gardening implements, furniture and clothing). He starts by discussing the "socially responsible business" movement -- some 2000 or so U.S. companies that aim to do good while doing a brisk business.

Hawken immediately confronts a hard truth: if every company on the planet were to adopt the environmental and social practices of the best companies--of, say, the Body Shop, Patagonia, and Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream--the world would still be moving toward environmental degradation and collapse. Therefore what we have here is not a management problem but a design problem.

If the fundamental problem is overconsumption (people simply using up too much of the Earth's bounty), then socially-responsible businesses are contributing to the decline of the planet as quickly as other companies because they too promote consumption.

In order to approximate a sustainable society, we need to describe a system of commerce and production in which each and every act is inherently sustainable and restorative. Businesses will not be able to fulfill their social contract with the environment or society until the system within which they operate undergoes a fundamental change, a change that brings commerce and government into alignment with the natural world from which we receive our life.

A system of sustainable commerce would involve these objectives:

1) It would reduce absolute consumption of energy and natural resources among developed nations by 80 percent within 40 to 60 years. 2) It would provide secure, stable, and meaningful employment for people everywhere. 3) It would be self-acting as opposed to regulated, controlled, mandated, or moralistic. 4) It would honor human nature and market principles. 5) It would be perceived as more desirable than our present way of life. 6) It would exceed sustainability by restoring degraded habitats and ecosystems to their fullest biological capacity. 7) It would rely on current solar income. 8) It should be fun and engaging, and strive for an aesthetic outcome.

What is needed, says Hawken, is a conscious plan to create a sustainable future, including a set of design strategies for people to follow. He suggests 12:

1) Take back the corporate charter; reassert legal control by state legislatures over the issuance of corporate charters. Bad actors should lose their charter to do business. "This is not merely a deterrent to corporate abuse but a critical element of an ecological society because it creates feedback loops that prompt accountability, citizen involvement, and learning," says Hawken. 2) Adjust prices to reflect costs. The market presently gives consumers bad information. For example, it tells us that flying across the country on a discount airline ticket is cheap when it takes a change that brings commerce and government into alignment with the natural world from which we receive our life.

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3) Throw out and replace the entire tax system. The present system taxes what we want to encourage--jobs, creativity, payrolls, and real income--and it ignores the things we want to discourage--degradation, pollution, and depletion. The entire tax system must be replaced over the next 20 years by "Green fees," taxes that are added onto existing products, energy, services, and materials so that prices in the marketplace more closely approximate true costs. Under an enlightened and redesigned tax system, the cheapest product in the marketplace would be best for the customer, the worker, the environment, and the company (rarely the case today).

4. Turn resource companies into utilities. An energy utility is an interesting hybrid of public-private interests. A utility gains a market monopoly in exchange for public control of rates, open books, and a guaranteed rate of return. Because of this relationship, and the pioneering work of Amory Lovins, we now have markets for negawatts. Negawatts are the opposite of energy. They represent the collaborative ability of a utility to harness efficiency instead of hydrocarbons. This conservation-based alternative saves ratepayers, shareholders, and the company money--with the savings passed along to everyone.

All resource systems, including oil, gas, forests, and water should be run by some form of utility, creating markets in negabarrels, negatrees, and negacoal.

Oil companies could form an oil utility and "invest" in insulation, super-glazed windows, conservation rebates on new automobiles and the scrapping of old cars. Consumers would pay them back a return on their conservation investment equal to what utilities receive, a rate of return that would be in accord with how many barrels of oil they save, rather than how many barrels they produce. A $60 billion investment in conservation will yield, conservatively, 4 to 10 times as much energy as drilling for oil. Imagine a system where the resource utility benefits from conservation, makes money from efficiency, thrives through restoration, and profits from sustainability. It is possible today, says Hawken.

5. Change linear systems into cyclical ones. Our economy has many design flaws but the most glaring one is that nature is cyclical and industrialism is linear. In nature no linear systems exist because they exhaust themselves into extinction. Because industrialism is linear, Americans produce six times their body weight every week in hazardous and toxic waste water, in incinerator ash, in agricultural wastes, heavy metals, and waste chemicals, wood, paper, etc. This does not include CO2 which if it were included would double the amount of waste. Cyclical means of production are designed to imitate natural systems in which waste equals food for other forms of life, nothing is thrown away, and symbiosis replaces competition.

6. Transform the making of things. There are three categories of products: consumables, durables and unsalables. Consumables are products that are either eaten or when they are placed in the ground turn into dirt. We should be designing more things so that they can be thrown away into the compost heap. Heretical as it sounds, designing for decomposition, not recycling, is the way of the world around us.

7. Durables should not be sold but merely licensed. Cars, TVs, refrigerators would always belong to the original manufacturer so they would be made, used, and returned within a closed-loop system. Unsalables are toxins, radioactivity, heavy metals, and many other chemicals. No living system treats these as food, and they can never be thrown away. These must always belong to the original maker, but must be safeguarded by public utilities that store them in glass-lined barrels indefinitely and charge the original manufacturer rent for the service. The rent ceases when a scientific panel confirms that there is a safe method to detoxify the material. All toxic chemicals would carry molecular markings identifying them as belonging to the manufacturer so that if they are found in wells, rivers, soil, or fish the manufacturer must retrieve them and clean up.

8. Restore the guardian

There can be no healthy business sector unless there is a healthy government sector. There are two overarching and complementary...
syndromes permeating our society: the commercial and the guardian (business and government). They need each other. At present our guardian system has almost completely broken down because of the money, power, influence and control exercised by business and, to a lesser degree, other institutions. Business is preventing the economy from evolving, so business loses, workers lose, and the environment loses.

9. Shift from electronic literacy to biologic literacy. We are moving not into an information age but a biologic age, and unfortunately our technological education is preparing us for corporate markets, not for the future. Understanding biological processes is how we are going to create a new symbiosis with living systems (or perish).

10. Take inventory. We do not know how many species live on the planet within a factor of 10. We do not know how many of these species are being lost. We do not know what happens to 20 percent of the CO2 that is off-gassed each year (it simply disappears). We do not know how to calculate sustainable yields in fisheries and forest systems. In short, we need to find out what's here, who has it, and what we can or can't do with it.

11. Take care of human health. The greatest amount of human suffering and mortality is caused by environmental problems that are not being addressed by environmental organizations or companies. Contaminated water is killing a hundred times more people than all other forms of pollution combined. Millions of children are dying from preventable diseases and malnutrition. Ironically this creates a population problem because people produce more children when they’re afraid they’ll lose them. Not until the majority of people in the world understand that environmentalism means improving their lives directly will the ecology movement walk its talk. Americans will spend more money in the next 12 months on the movie and mementos of JURASSIC PARK than on foreign aid to prevent malnutrition or provide safe water.

12. Respect the human spirit. If hope is to pass the sobriety test, then it has to walk a pretty straight line to reality. Nothing written, suggested, or proposed here is possible unless business is willing to integrate itself into the natural world. It is time for business to initiate a genuinely open process of dialogue, collaboration, reflection, and redesign.

Business must yield to the longings of the human spirit. The most important contribution of the socially responsible business movement has little to do with recycling, nuts from the rainforest, or employing the homeless. Their gift to us is that they are leading by trying to do something, to risk, take a chance, make a change—any change. They are not waiting for "the solution," but are acting without guarantees of success or proof of purchase. That is what all of us must do. Being visionary has always been given a bad rap by commerce. But without a positive vision for humankind we can have no meaning, no work, and no purpose.

--Peter Montague

[1] Paul Hawken, "A Declaration of Sustainability," UTNE READER (September/October, 1993), pgs. 54-61. The ideas in Hawken's UTNE article are from his new book, THE ECOLOGY OF COMMERCE, to be published in November by HarperCollins ($23.00). UTNE READER is a bimonthly journal that really does capture "the best of the alternative press." $18 per year from: LENS Publishing Co., 1624 Harmon Place, Suite 330, Minneapolis, MN 55403; (612) 338-5040. Subscribe to the UTNE READER; you won't be disappointed.

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