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Creating a Sustainable Life

The definition of sustainability is 'the capacity to endure'. In ecology the word describes how biological systems remain diverse and productive over time. For humans it is the potential for long-term maintenance of wellbeing, which in turn depends on the wellbeing of the natural world and the responsible use of natural resources.

From an ecological standpoint, there is now vast scientific evidence to support the concept that humanity is living unsustainably. But returning human use of natural resources to within sustainable limits will require a major collective effort. Ways of living more sustainably can take many forms: reorganizing living conditions, reappraising economic sectors and work practices, using science to develop new technologies, and making adjustments in individual lifestyles to conserve natural resources. Those who practice sustainable living often attempt to reduce their carbon footprint by altering methods of transportation, energy use, diet, and consumption patterns.

What is key to remember is that the imperative to live on this earth in a sustainable way crosses all barricades – most specifically, whether or not you believe that climate change is being caused or accelerated by mankind. Simply put, the planet's growing population is using earth's bounty too quickly and that has to stop or future generations will be living under very inhospitable circumstances.

Over the coming year the Green Matters column will spend some time focusing on sustainability as it relates to how we live, work and play. This week's column is intended as a primer on the notion of sustainability, and to provide some clarity on why it matters to us and in our lives going forward.

Sustainability is not just an environmental notion, in fact, it applies equally to our economy and our society – everything from how we consume, spend and waste; to how citizens in our society are treated and allowed opportunities to advance. The successful economies, cities and lifestyles of the future are the ones that are paying attention now, to this delicate balance between economic and social development, and environmental protection. These are the ones that are beginning to cultivate a water and resource ethic, and a general 'use less' philosophy; versus the 'use more' mentality that has been present for several decades now. These are the ones that are creating opportunities for equality of citizens via social programs, healthcare, housing, and quality of life; versus those that continue to employ the 'winner take all' practice of social advancement, while many citizens continue to fall through the cracks of a broken system.

On all counts, to live sustainably is to live within our means. Of course, it's easy to recognize if we are living beyond our financial means because we quickly feel the effect of not having enough money. It's also easy to see if our lifestyle is not sustainable in a social and time-use sense. We eventually have to decline an invitation, commit to fewer activities, get some sleep, or at least take a break! But to live sustainably in an environmental sense is more difficult to distinguish. This is because there is often a time lag between our actions and concrete evidence of the effect of our actions on the environment. An example is the rising price of natural resources over time as they become depleted and scarce – our population and consumption habits continue to grow keeping demand high while supply diminishes, therefore price rises. This does not happen all at once, but over decades of mismanagement and overuse.

Pursuing a sustainable life offers us an opportunity to reassess how we value a myriad of valuable inputs to our lives: time, 'stuff', others, water, energy, space, and the list goes on. To live sustainably requires that we begin to consume less in maintaining our lifestyles. Hence, for most of us, sustainability means making do with spending less. And while this may seem like a bleak proposition at first, it actually opens the door for us to move beyond the rat race and start refocusing on what we would do with our time if the pressure to earn and consume was reduced somewhat.

Honestly assessing our environmental footprint provides a window on our daily lives. Understanding how we move through our days, how we spend, consume and waste, how we regard or disregard our natural and built environment, our need for 'stuff', will clarify the challenges and opportunities of creating a sustainable life.

In 2010, as I too attempt to walk this path (and sometimes stumble!), I will explore with you the practical ways to live in a more sustainable way - the challenges, barriers and the rewards of a daily life that tries to tread more lightly. Along the way, I welcome your comments and council.

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