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Seeking Sustainability

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"Sustainability," the late Ray Anderson--founder and chairman of Interface Inc. --once told the *New York Times*, "doesn't cost, it pays." After his "conversion experience" on the harmful effects his modular carpet business had on the environment, Anderson redirected his corporate philosophy to focus on the noble goal of absolute sustainability. Through his efforts, the company's industrial processes were improved to start making peace with the planet--all while continuing to run a profitable business. His dedication to a sustainable society is one that, ideally, all CEOs should share, but most do not.

There's little to debate about the enormous impact our commercial culture has had on our planet and its costly toll on the environment. But there is much to debate about how our culture of excess consumerism and materialism can be transitioned into one of more efficient restraint and responsibility.

The Worldwatch Institute recently released their "State of the World 2013"--a collection of essays by leading environmental thinkers titled [*Is Sustainability Still Possible?*](#)

Indeed, this is a question we must ask, as the effects of our industrialized, commercial civilization causes more and more irreparable damage. When one considers the needs of humanity, compared with the vast cost of a first-world lifestyle and the comfort it provides, the precarious state of the planet is clear. This is summarized well by Robert Engelman, president of the Worldwatch Institute, who writes: "We are 7.1 billion sizable individual organisms, each requiring thousands of kilocalories of food energy and several liters of water per day. The vast majority of us are unwilling to share our private living space with wild plants and animals. We like to live in a temperature range far narrower than that of the outdoors, and we like to be mobile." Engelman notes how so many of us "enjoy pleasures and comforts unknown to even monarchs in the past."

A powerful statement--and quite true, particularly in the United States. Consider our use of electricity, our running water, our ample food production chain, our automobiles, our high-speed internet, our smart phones, our LCD TVs. The list of creature comforts, both basic and extravagant, goes on and on. It's a daunting task to examine each link in the supply chain and what happens when natural resources are consumed. The many talented writers and essayists in *Is Sustainability Still Possible?* step up to this lofty challenge. It's impossible to read their analyses and not be persuaded to think critically about how we can begin to transform the most harmful aspects of our throwaway culture into one that will stand the test of time.

One point is clear, something must change. It's a question of whether that change will come from the people or be forced upon them when the Earth's carrying capacity is irreparably breached. Legendary environmentalist Barry Commoner once wrote: "Our air, water and land weren't polluted and filled with

toxic waste by some evil demon. The destruction of our environment begins in our farms and factories-- and that's where we have to go to save it."

For many Americans, change can start personally and locally. Consider the repercussions of one's own consumer habits. What are the things one truly needs, how does one acquire them, what sort of waste do these products leave behind? The "Story of Stuff" project, created by Annie Leonard, does an excellent job through online videos, blogs, and other means, of analyzing our culture of "stuff" and the effect it has on the environment. (Visit storyofstuff.org to learn more.)

It is encouraging that more and more people are deciding to "go local"--rejecting processed foods and purchasing their groceries from spreading local farmer's markets and participating in community gardens and crop shares (CSAs). Some U.S. cities--such as Washington, D.C. --have made it safer and easier to bicycle by adding bike lanes to major streets and successfully promoting bicycle rental stations throughout the city. Secondhand, reuse and material exchange programs are becoming popular alternatives to buying new. Such types of environmentally friendly alternatives are sprouting up in communities across America.

Despite all the "sustainababble" from greenwashing corporations, many companies continue on with their harmful activities, such as opposing a carbon tax and vital pollution control standards. And of course, selling disposable products is very profitable for those companies who want you to keep buying new.

There's one motto that should be held above all as we look to the future of our planet and our society. It was the great Ray Anderson's guiding standard. We must take out of the Earth no more than we put into it. Finding this balance is crucial. It's time to start a serious discussion about the future of our corporate-dominated culture, our economy, our environment, and the world we leave behind. Is sustainability still possible? Only if the people will it and work at it as a way of life.

(My latest book *The Seventeen Solutions: Bold Ideas for Our American Future* is [available from Politics and Prose, an independent book store in Washington D.C.](#))

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