Taboos and Denials: Major Obstacles to Sustainable Use of the Planet

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Abstract

A taboo is a (1) prohibition excluding something from use, approach, or mention because of its sacred and inviolable nature and (2) an object, work, or act protected by such a prohibition. Denial is a refusal to believe in the existence or reality of a fact or entity. Human society professes to believe sustainable use of the planet is a means of leaving it in a habitable condition for future generations. However, a taboo, especially among mainstream politicians, has been placed on the free and open discussion of present practices that are unsustainable. At the core of the taboo is the refusal to discuss the certainty that infinite growth on a finite planet is impossible. Reducing population growth and/or immigration to achieve a stable population is an example of a more specific taboo. Even in societies that profess to be liberal, there is either denial that the problems exist or a profession of excessive optimism about the future, even without substantive supporting evidence. Achieving sustainable use of the planet will require a free and open exchange of ideas on the present practices that are sustainable and which unsustainable practices should be eliminated or greatly modified to make them sustainable. Until then, the term *sustainable development* will be a placebo rather than a cure.

Keywords: Sustainable development; Compassion; Value systems; Eco-ethics.

> A man said to the universe: "Sir, I exist!"
> "However," replied the universe,
> "The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation."
>
> *Stephen Crane, 1899*

Introduction

The poet Stephen Crane recognized over a century ago that the human species has no special rights and its mistakes are not forgiven any more than those of any other species. If humans are to live sustainably on the planet, they must openly discuss the factors that are essential to this aspiration of sustainability. Making such discussions taboo or denying that major obstacles to sustainable use of the planet exist is not a productive approach!

Ryan and Durning (1997) give a "Warning to Readers" that reading too much STUFF at one time can be bad. Even reviewers (presumably, experienced people) of early drafts of journal articles reported feeling overwhelmed or depressed after learning the true stories of how things are made. I had the same response to *Material World* (Menzel, 1994) – the disparity in material goods from one family to another was shocking. Pessimism about what is being done is justified.

However, optimism is justified about what can be done to achieve sustainable use of the planet. For example, Hawken *et al.* (1999) describe an environmentally sensitive form of capitalism that protects and rehabilitates *natural capital* (e.g., top soil, old growth forests, wetlands) and provide case histories of such undertakings from both developed and developing countries. Raffensperger and Tickner (1999) also give case histories related to the general duty of precaution in environmental protection for governments and business. Nattrass and Altomare (1999) focus on the use of planetary resources by businesses in ways compatible with sustainable use. Quinn (1999) provides a philosophical/ethical

justification for social solutions for an actively caring relationship with natural systems. While their observations are not limited to natural systems, the Dalai Lama and Cutler (1998) examine happiness (as distinct from pleasure) that, since it is not based on material possessions, would enhance the possibility of achieving sustainable use of the planet.

Benefits of Open Discussion

Open discussion of the consequences of promiscuity has definitely moderated the problem of AIDS in some countries, although the crisis is far from over. Similarly, societies that openly discussed the problem of driving automobiles while intoxicated have reduced the problem and almost eliminated it in countries with strict laws and considerable peer pressure. People who openly discussed the adverse consequences of these behaviors were not labeled "gloom and doomers" and were not commonly challenged with statements such as "I am optimistic about the future." How can one account for this difference in attitudes? One strong possibility is that only one primary behavior needed change, not a multidimensional array. Also, the consequences of driving under the influence were immediately apparent in many cases, and, in the case of AIDS, a single moment of carelessness could have devastating, although not immediately apparent consequences.

The Downside of Targeted Compassion

Just as most teenagers regard themselves as immortal and age proof, the case histories of the environmental collapse of ancient civilizations (e.g., Diamond, 1994, 1997) are ignored, as are contemporary parables such as that of Nauru Island (McDaniel and Gowdy, 2000) in the Pacific Ocean. Most people have never heard of Nauru, and many of those who have note that it is a quite different culture and "it couldn't happen here."
However, Hardin (1993) hits a more crucial aspect when he notes that society fails to mandate economic sanity because human brains are addled by compassion. High-powered lobbyists may have a major impact as well. Should all environmental protection be put on hold until every human on the planet has the same ecological footprint as wealthy individuals? Cairns (1998) believes that sustainability requires a balance of three types of compassion: (1) for those presently disadvantaged, (2) for other species with which humans share the planet, and (3) for future generations. These types of compassion are more difficult to achieve simultaneously and are less personally satisfying than targeted compassion. Future generations and other species cannot express gratitude, so one's personal efforts are difficult to distinguish from comparable efforts of other like-minded individuals. On the other hand, if one sponsors a starving child (targeted compassion), then the child can write and send photos, and some beneficial results will probably be immediately apparent. Consequently, targeted compassion produces targeted gratitude – a very satisfying result.
Arguably, the solution to this dilemma of multidimensional versus targeted compassion is the development of a global environmental ethos or set of guiding beliefs that bring honor and status to exemplary practitioners of multidimensional compassion. The nomadic North American plains Indians did not accumulate material possessions, so the primary source of status was the "coup stick" on which a notch was cut for each notable achievement that benefited the tribe. In a small social group where others know each individual's actions, this type of recognition is not difficult to implement. In a larger arena where a harmonious relationship with natural systems is the key to the type of sustainable use of the planet generally envisioned, multidimensional compassion must somehow be rewarded.

The Utopian Soft Landing

Cairns (2001) speculates about the variety of scenarios that might lead to sustainability. The "soft landing," which causes no increased human suffering during and after the transitional period, is the scenario that receives the most media attention because it is optimistic and is what most people, and nearly all politicians, want to hear. Humans have had sustainable use of the planet for virtually their entire history. During this time, population numbers were low, kept so by high mortality and short life

expectancy. Only in relatively recent times have exponential growth in population and remarkable per capita affluence for a few emerged. The exuberant optimists proclaim no limits to this growth. Others proclaim that further such increases are impossible on a finite planet. The outcome will probably become abundantly clear in this century!

The Extinction of *Homo sapiens*

For most of the planet's existence, the human species was not present. During that period, many species became extinct, and even mass extinctions occurred in some periods. The extinctions occurred because some species failed to adapt to changing physical/chemical/biological conditions, including competition from better adapted species. Most species do not survive for substantial periods of geological time. Why should the human species be one that does? The most commonly offered answers focus on human technology, economic prowess, creativity, and ingenuity. But these same attributes are creating problems faster than society can solve them. The least likely answers being suggested at present are societal ethics, ethos, sense of individual responsibility, and compassion for other species. Yet, it is the human value system that is the *sine qua non* of sustainability. How can this conclusion of the need for value systems be valid when a reasoned approach is essential to achieve sustainability with minimal trauma to humans and an actively caring relationship with natural systems? The answer, of course, is a free and open discussion of all issues and substantively reducing or even eliminating taboos and denials.

Even with a free and open discussion, a clash will probably occur between value systems and a reasoned approach. Still, value systems are essential because every problem cannot be resolved by evidence produced by reductionist and/or holistic or integrative science. The "least likely answer" mentioned previously is the least frequently used or offered because reexamination of value systems or societal ethos is usually a painful and contentious exercise. As a general rule, a catastrophic event is essential to have an entire society involved in the discussion. For example, some of the restrictions on individual freedom that were considered unthinkable before the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States are now being implemented with what appears to be fairly strong citizen approval – at least for the short term. Evidence and reason can often estimate risk rather well – only a value judgment can determine acceptable risk. It is also well to remember that, for a few people, prolonging the problem is profitable.

Ethics in Action and Inaction

The National Research Council (NRC, 1992) recommended that U.S. wetlands be restored at a rate that offsets any further loss of wetlands and contributes to an overall gain of 10 million wetland acres by the year 2010, largely through reconversion of crops and pastureland and modification of existing water control structures. However, at the end of 2001, equilibrium has been reached between wetland loss and restoration. For rivers and streams, the NRC recommended restoration of 400,000 miles, approximately 12% of the 3.2 million miles of streams and rivers in the U.S. Excluding the Great Lakes and flood control and water supply reservoirs, the recommendation was to restore by the year 2000, 1 million of the 4.3 million acres of degraded lakes, with restoration increased to 2 million acres in the long run. Near the end of 2001, these goals are as distant as they were in 1992, yet the U.S. has enjoyed a period of remarkable prosperity and low unemployment. Arguably, more restoration was carried out during the Great Depression of the 1930s when the Civilian Conservation Corps revegetated many areas. Ironically, the economic boom of the 1990s was fueled by profligate use of natural capital, which was not being reversed at a rate essential for sustainable use of the planet. Even if resources were infinitely substitutable as some economists propose (e.g., Simon, 1981) and humans were not resource limited, as are other species, some daunting problems in eco-ethics would remain.

1. Even if humans were no longer dependent upon natural systems, would this independence free human society from an ethical responsibility toward the integrity and health of natural systems?
2. Many societies have abolished the death penalty for humans. Should this prohibition be extended to other species (i.e., take no action that leads to their extinction)?

3.   Even if humans became free of resource limitations, their quest for substitute resources would deprive other species of resources (e.g., space, fiber, food). Since there are millions of species on the planet, what is the maximum equitable share for one species (*Homo sapiens*)?
4.   What precautions should be taken to reduce the environmental impacts of genetic engineering?
5.   Even if a wholly technological life support system were to be developed, would it not be prudent to retain the natural life support system (which has served humanity well for most of its existence) as a backup system? The failure of Biosphere II (Avise, 1994) shows how far society is from achieving a reliable technological life support system that replicates the ecological life support system.
6.   If a more intelligent life form with a superior technology appeared from another planet, would humans expect treatment that is better than or comparable to the treatment they give "lower" life forms on this planet?

These are illustrative problems in eco-ethics that should elicit a free and open exchange of ideas in human society. Since they do not, society is either denying that the problems exist or feels that such discussion would degenerate into a greater polarization of opinions. As a consequence, discussion can be considered taboo (e.g., Hardin), or the importance of the problem is denied (e.g., Orr and Ehrenfield, 1995).

Arguably, there is no human society so monolithic that every individual denies that a particular problem exists or does not feel upset about societal norms. Some remain silent or take covert action; others speak out and sometimes lose their lives or social status; still others may be highly honored after their deaths (e.g., in the environmental field, Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold). However, both taboos and denials are powerful social forces and should be a matter of concern. In addition, there are always a few people who think they can beat the odds, however formidable they appear to be.

Hardin (1996) defines taboo as a prohibition excluding something from use, approach, or mention because of its sacred and inviolable nature or an object, word, or act protected by such a prohibition. Since the concept of sustainable development has been embraced by both organizations and people whose practices do not proclaim a reverence for natural systems, some very powerful taboos are preventing a free and open discussion of implementing sustainable use of the planet. Even if the taboos do not prevent people from talking about sustainable use, there is denial. If denial does not stop free discussion, calls for more studies muffle or suspend it.

Illustrative Taboos on Sustainability

As Harding (1996) notes, those enthralled with a taboo not only resist discussion of it, but they even deeply resent the open naming of it. When scientific evidence has implications for the quest for sustainable use of the planet, implications must be communicated and discussed, and value judgments need to be made.

1.   One must not question whether development or "smart growth" is compatible with sustainability.
2.   Carrying capacity may be discussed for elevators and bridges, but not for humans on a finite planet.
3.   The relationship between population size and quality of life is not open for discussion. In the United States, this taboo is so strong that policy goals include extending residency to illegal aliens (Grier and Chinni, 2001).
4.   One must not discuss the "sixth great extinction" – the first biotic impoverishment primarily due to humans and their artifacts.
5.   Redesigning human society for a better relationship with nature may only be discussed in the context of economic growth.
6.   Human dependence upon natural capital, ecosystem services, and the planet's ecological life support system is not open for discussion.
7.   Restoring damaged ecosystems can be discussed, but when and how ecological destruction and repair are balanced cannot be discussed.

Illustrative Denials Affecting Sustainability

Denials are merely the taboos of people who refuse to use the word *taboo*.

1. Human population growth is not a problem.
2. Highways and other human artifacts have no environmental impact.
3. Economic growth, as presently defined, improves the quality of life rather than diminishing it.
4. Placing trust in the managers of the global marketplace will protect the environment and enrich human lives.
5. The willingness to risk global disaster is essential to progress and job security.
6. Dominion over all other forms of life is a consequence of human superiority, and there is no reason to be concerned.
7. Humans are independent of nature and their intelligence, technology, and creativity free them from the natural laws that affect other species.

The Enforcers

In 1777, the famous English explorer James Cook introduced his compatriots to the word *taboo*, which he had picked up in the South Pacific (Hardin, 1996). Of course, repressing speech or practices was not new to the western world – only the name was new. Arguably, the quest for sustainable use of the planet involving both science and value judgments is the most vulnerable aspiration of human society since it requires a free and open discussion of a multitude of concepts and beliefs. In Polynesia and other cultures, taboos (no matter what they were called) were enforced effectively, often brutally, by powerful people. How, one wonders, could taboos possibly be enforced in the 21st century in that bastion of rugged individualism and free speech – the United States of America? It can be done more easily than one might think.

In academe, where analysis and examination of all hypotheses and concepts should be subjected to rigorous validation and verification, there are speech codes. Much emotion is invested in speech codes, so a fearless discussion of them is difficult. In addition, politicians depend heavily upon funding from special interest groups for their increasingly expensive election campaigns. Support for one special interest group will cause countervailing effects in other areas (e.g., protection of endangered species, which has a tiny lobby compared to most economically important areas). As Keppler (1995) notes for the United States, special interest groups are adept at penetrating the political process and using their electoral influence to achieve their goals. In the U.S. capital of Washington, D.C., there are 90,000 lobbyists, in addition to 60,000 lawyers for back up, or 280 for every member of the U.S. Congress. The monthly cost for this is at least US$100 million and is increasing (Shuldiner and Raymond, 1998). The payoff can be immense: between 1993 and mid-1996, American oil and gas companies gave US$10.3 million to political campaigns and benefited from tax breaks worth US$4 billion (Roodman, 1996). Finally, television stations, newspapers, and magazines are not likely to offend their advertisers; one notable exception appears to be some radio talk shows. Who believes that taboos cannot be enforced in the land of the free and the home of the brave?

Taboos That Facilitate Sustainability

From a different view, taboos may have benefits that facilitate sustainability. Taboos may be an effective method of achieving sustainability while environmental literacy remains low. This prospect is definitely not appealing. However, as one committed to reason guided by evidence and compassion, the following may be regarded as illustrative taboos enhancing sustainability. They are primarily drawn from Cairns (1997).

1.   Human artifacts may not systematically increase on the planet.
2.   The integrity of the planet's ecological life support system shall not be impaired for any reason.
3.   Anthropogenic extinction of species is prohibited.

4. Large ecological footprints for both nations and individuals must be reduced.
5. Production of wastes not compatible with natural biogeochemical cycling may not be produced.
6. Ecological destruction may not exceed ecological repair.
7. Human society shall not co-opt so much of the planet's energy that ecosystem integrity is impaired and ecosystem services are disrupted or diminished.
8. Dependence upon yet undeveloped technologies to solve ecological problems is prohibited.
9. Failure to utilize precautionary practices to prevent catastrophic events, even if the scientific evidence is uncertain, is unreasonable. It is essential to remember that, if the outcome is uncertain, it could be catastrophic.

These illustrative taboos that might facilitate the quest for sustainable use of the planet will clearly be complex if human society is balancing the integrity of both economic/technological and ecological life support systems simultaneously. Since human society is now dependant upon both (Cairns, 1996), this balancing act must be done.

Conclusions

Taboos are not an adequate substitute for information but those favoring sustainability may be required to use them if human society as a whole remains ecologically illiterate. In addition, information is not knowledge and knowledge is not wisdom, but all will be needed to achieve sustainability. If people refuse to discuss a subject, how can they inform the unknowing what it is that is sacred? Thus, a word—*taboo*—held inviolate becomes a taboo on thinking itself. Ultimately, a word taboo held inviolate for a long temporal span becomes a thought taboo (how can one think of something one hears no words for?). In the United States and many other countries, discussion of unsustainable practices is taboo. Among the most sacred taboos is the free and open discussion of government subsidies for practices that adversely affect human health and the environment. Even some U.S. organizations that purport to favor the environment are wary of discussions about immigration policy, which is a key component of population policy that, in turn, strongly affects sustainable use of the planet.

Ultimately, it is not only what humans do that affects their lives, the lives of their descendants, and biospheric integrity but also what humans choose not to do. If humans choose not to discuss factors important to the quest for sustainable use of the planet, how can they possibly expect to achieve sustainability? The planet is finite, yet discussion of limits to growth of all kinds is increasingly taboo in centers of enlightenment (academic institutions), compassion (religious organizations), and even town councils.

Opposition is often silenced, but not persuaded, by use of terms such as smart growth. As James Thurber remarks, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." This situation masks a taboo rather than exposes it, which can be very dangerous to both individuals and organizations. Openness is essential to achieving sustainable use of the planet.

Acknowledgments

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