



Sustainable Living - 3

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Dear Friends,

Greetings from Amrita

Let us continue with this new series on the theme of Sustainable Living / Sustainable Lifestyle. Earlier, we discussed what is sustainability, how lifestyles impact sustainability and attempted to offer some definitions of sustainable lifestyles.



This month, we shall try to cover the following topics:

Why is this important? The answer lies in the following:

- Our Mother Earth has abundant but limited resources
- All life forms have a claim on these resources, but humans are upsetting the balance
- Mother Earth is trying to reset the balance. (Unable to take the load?)

The Irony of Abundance but Limited Resources

Earlier, sustainability was not an issue. Yet, ancient Indian seers promoted reverence to Nature, and cultivated a sense of gratitude to all of Nature for generously providing us with everything we needed. We humans evolved on this Mother Earth just as any other life form and depended on our survival through gathering and hunting. Things changed dramatically, when our ancestors learned agriculture. Slowly, humans acquired a dominating presence over all other living forms, solely on account of the special capabilities of observation and reasoning we possess. This happened about 10 to 11 thousand years back, and gave rise to several 'river valley civilizations' as these valleys offered fertile grounds for agriculture.

Slowly, we began to 'prosper'; meaning we had more of everything we needed – food, shelter, cloths and above all time. Gradually, we learned to harness animal power, and use of different tools using stones and metals. Our numbers grew, and our demands on natural resources also grew. Things were quite good, till the advent of the steam engine and the subsequent industrial revolutions that ensued. We learnt the use of fossil fuel for producing energy to run the machines. Eventually, after two world wars, we learnt that war is not the solution, and we have avoided large scale wars for almost 8 decades as of now. But during this same period, post 1950, we have witnessed an exponential growth on all dimensions, leading to the suggestion that we are living in an era of 'Anthropocene'.

Anthropocene literally means ‘The Age of the Human Being’. In other words, we humans have acquired the capability to steer the course of our Mother Earth in an unprecedented manner, never before witnessed in its four-billion years history. There are quite a few pointers to this effect. Perhaps the most obvious example comes from the 2023 update on ‘Planetary Boundaries’, scientists telling us that we have crossed six out of the nine boundaries. Yet another prominent indicator is the Earth Overshoot Day – the day in a year when we consume whatever the Earth can produce in a year, and then we live the remaining part of the year on a sort of ‘borrowed capital’. Before the 70s, we usually did not overshoot, but since then, we have progressively been taking more and more, and

- “In 2023, Earth Overshoot Day falls on August 2nd , meaning that between January 1st and August 2nd , humanity’s demand for biological regeneration is equivalent to the planet’s entire annual regeneration”. [1]
- “Humanity has burned through Earth’s annual budget for resources in just over seven months.
- Known as Earth Overshoot Day, 1 August (2024) marks the date on which we’ve used up all the resources that the planet can regenerate in one year.
- “Overshoot will end," says Lewis Akenji, a Global Footprint Network board member. "The question is how: by design or by disaster. A planned transition gives us better security than ceding to the whims of a planet thrown off balance by overshoot.” [4]

This goes on to establish the fact that although our Mother Earth has resources in abundance, human demands, especially since the middle of the last century has pushed them to the limits.

Interdependence of Ecological System

Now, one might ask, “So what?” Well, the answer lies in the fact that we are not alone, and more than that, we are heavily dependent on the functioning of the eco-system. A commonly cited example is the contribution of honey bees for pollination.

“Almost 90% of wild plants and 75% of leading global crops depend on animal pollination. One out of every three mouthfuls of our food depends on pollinators such as bees. Crops that depend on pollination are five times more valuable than those that do not”. [2]

Humans are Upsetting the Balance

But all other forms of life, on which our very survival depends, also need to sustain themselves by drawing upon the Earth’s resources. Our actions are progressively reducing their habitat as well as food. We humans are usurping both of these vital necessities, causing the sixth massive extinction of species. [3]



“Evidence suggests that we are well on our way to that outcome, if not in a mass extinction already. We are currently losing species hundreds or thousands of times faster than normal background extinction rates”.

Very interestingly, more than 100 years back, Swami Vivekananda had cautioned us as under:

“Men are increasing in numbers and some animals are decreasing; we are killing them off, and taking their land; we are taking all means of sustenance from them. How can we say, then, that happiness is increasing? The strong race eats up the weaker, but do you think that the strong race will be very happy? No; they will begin to kill each other.” [5]

We had mentioned this quotation in the last month, but I felt it to be worth repetition.

Nature Restores Balance

Nature has its own methods of restoring balance between opposing forces. Giulio Boccaletti, former Chief Strategy Officer & Global Ambassador for Water with The Nature Conservancy, writes [6]:

- “Nature has agency. Nature acts on the planet on a scale that dwarfs most human processes. The Earth’s powerful climate system is a case in point. The impact it has on every person in the world makes clear one basic fact: We are small, we are fragile, we are the ones at risk. One of its principal components, the hydrological cycle of the planet, for example, is a system of extraordinary complexity and power. The energy released over the course of a few days by a single hurricane is equivalent to that used by the entire world economy in a year.”
- “... the awesome power of nature, working sometimes over millions of years, to create some of the most fundamental and sophisticated systems on the planet. Because many of these systems operate in the background, we often see nature as passive. But it is not. Nature shapes our landscapes and maintains crucial processes on which we all depend—from photosynthesis to pollination.”

Viewed from another angle, the 400% increase in extreme events over the past 3 decades may be considered to be a warning from Nature. As I write this piece, Wayanad in our neighbourhood is trying to recover from one of the worst landslides on 2nd August 2024. Are we able to make the connection between these disasters and our lifestyle options?

Mother Earth is unable to take the load, we humans are exerting on her.

References:

[1] <https://www.overshootday.org/content/uploads/2023/06/Earth-Overshoot-Day-2023-Nowcast-Report.pdf>

[2] <https://www.wwf.org.uk/learn/fascinating-facts/bees>

[3] <https://evolution.berkeley.edu/mass-extinction/the-earths-sixth-mass-extinction/>

[4] <https://www.euronews.com/green/2024/08/01/earth-overshoot-day-humanity-burns-through-planets-yearly-resources-by-2-august>

[5] <https://lifeintegrity.com/Swami-Vivekananda-Complete-Works-Vol-2.pdf>

[6] <https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-insights/perspectives/power-of-nature/>

