

# Addressing the Ecological Crisis: A Brief Discussion

ENV222 - Pathways to Sustainability: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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The classic definition of sustainability is meeting our current needs without compromising the needs of future generations. Sustainability is not only keeping the environment clean and the climate stable for earth's inhabitants, it is also ensuring communities, human or not, can continue to thrive equally. There are different approaches to sustainability, which ranges from attempting to minimize human impact to earth systems, to effortfully restore or regenerate nature and its ecosystems (Wahl, 2016, p.48). With the worsening ecological crisis, sustainability is the key to the future coexistence of human civilization and earth's biosphere. This paper discusses three key approaches that have the potential to effectively address the ecological crisis, as well as significant barriers they face. The three approaches are: permaculture as a technological approach, bioregionalism as a political-economic approach, and cultivating a sustainability focused culture in replacement of the consumerist culture as a psychological approach.

Permaculture is a key technological approach that has the potential to effectively address the ecological crisis. Developed by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the 1970s, permaculture refers to a design system that includes a wide range of ecological technologies, practices and design principles (Hathaway, 2015, p.456). Permaculture have been most influential in agricultural practices (Vitari, & David, 2017), although its principles are not bound to agriculture (see appendix 1). Although ethics is an essential component of permaculture (Hathaway, 2015, p.456), permaculture is considered a regenerative technological approach (lecture 7, slide 13), as it outlines principles that not only guides technological innovations, but also rethinks the role of technology. Regenerative approaches are considered the most effective measure against the ecological crisis as it aims to not only eliminate damage done to ecosystems but also effortfully restoring them by "[appropriating] participation and design as nature" (Wahl, 2016, p.48). This differs from other approaches that only targets to make relative improvements instead of systematic changes, such as

ecological modernization or circular economy, which only aims to decrease or eliminate damage done to the environment respectively.

Despite its strengths, permaculture faces a significant psychological barrier: a problem with worldviews. Permaculture has the potential to effectively address the ecological crisis only if its goals and outcomes are shared with and valued by societies. When this condition is not met, effectiveness drops significantly simply because the scale of change is not large enough. In current societies, this turns out as few attempts on permaculture practices on small scales that are often limited to agricultural practices. The reason why permaculture has had little influence today is largely due to its incompatibility with contemporary worldviews. For instance, many still hold cornucopian or reformist views that nature is resilient enough that our current way of life may be sustained with minimal changes necessary. These views are incompatible with permaculture because they disagree on the extent of change in current ways of life that is needed to sustain humanity, and this incompatibility leads to resistance to adopt permaculture principles.

The concept of bioregionalism, which seeks to reform current political-economic structures, can also be a key political-economic approach to address the ecological crisis. The term bioregion can be roughly interpreted as 'life-place', each of which is categorized by unique ecological, geographic, or cultural features such as landforms or ecosystems (lecture 8, slide 57). Initiated in the 1960s, bioregionalism aims to re-localize economic processes by reconnecting economic actors with the local ecosystem and each other. This process can shorten the production chain, reducing the need of long-distance transportation of goods or off-shore services, thus allowing for a more independent and self-resilient local economy. The bioregional economy can also increase awareness on the consequences of our economic actions, which counters the psychological distancing effects of existing economic structures and can prevent ecological exploitation (Cato, 2012, p.26-8). This change in economic structure, if achieved, provides both the motivations for, and easier means to transition towards sustainable ways of life. Bioregionalism also seeks change in the political structure. In particular, the bioregional model envisions a decentralized, complementary, and subsidiary political structure that encourages diversity, empowerment of individuals, and reaching consensus – the opposite of the current corporate capitalistic view (lecture 8, slides 63). The political aspects of the bioregional model are consistent with its economical aspects by design, making it a wholistic and revolutionary approach to address multiple

aspects of the ecological crisis by seeking a full-scale reformation of our political-economic structure.

Alike permaculture, bioregionalism faces a similar psychological barrier of resisting the transition into a different worldview. For instance, consumer desire for goods or services found in other parts of the world can lead to resisting the shift towards local and self-resilient communities. Moreover, the values and goals of the bioregional model are incompatible and at odds with the predominate corporate capitalistic view (lecture 8, slides 63), which increase the resistance towards the acceptance of bioregionalism even more.

The psychological dimension of the ecological crisis is arguably the most difficult to tackle, an important psychological approach should be a whole-scale cultural transformation shifting away from many consumeristic values. As consumerism becomes evermore embedded into cultures across the world, there is an increase in association of contentment, acceptance, and even meaning with what one consumes (Assadourian, 2010, p.3; Smart, 2010, p.3). In turn, this drives consumption of natural resources to an unsustainable level. The consumerism model neglects the distinction between quantitative and qualitative growth and places quantitative growth above qualitative growth. Consequentially, this forms a psychological barrier that prevent us from seeing the importance of sustainable qualitative improvements and drives an endless thirst for qualitative growth. To counter consumerism, one must disassociate excessive consumption with meaning, and recognize the importance of qualitative growth. furthermore, a new culture that emphasises qualitative well-being and sustainability must be cultivated. In contrast to consumerism, this new culture should associate value with meaningful actions instead of possession. Cultivating such a culture can help us transition away from the consumerism paradigm (Assadourian, 2010, p.16). Moreover, it can also change worldviews and nullify significant psychological barriers and allowing other approaches – such as permaculture or bioregionalism – to take effect and help address the ecological crisis further.

Transforming cultures and shifting worldviews are no easy tasks, and the current economic structure is a significant economic barrier. Alike the psychological barrier for bioregionalism, this economic barrier relates to the problem of incompatibility between the current economic structure and the new culture as discussed previously. If value is associated with action instead of possession in the new culture, it becomes a challenge to put a price on objects, meaning that current market

systems cannot function as it is designed to put prices on objects. If transitioning to this culture requires a structural reform of existing economies, the transition would meet immense resist as redesigning and replacing nearly the entirety of the current economic structure is going to be strenuous.

In summary, the three approaches discussed all ties deeply with worldviews, cultures, and our mindsets. Consequentially, they face the barriers posted by the inertia of existing political-economic structure or other psychological influences. Despite the interconnectivity of these approaches, one may recon that our cultures and worldviews sits at the center of the ecological crisis. It is our worldviews that are stopping us from implementing effective solutions such as permaculture practices or transition to a bio regional political-economic structure. This is because until we can realize the psychological flaws in our cultures and worldviews – such that meaning is not derived from the consumption of resources – it would be difficult for us to be motivated to change to a more sustainable way of living. In brief, we cannot fully commit to sustainable lifestyles until we can think sustainably collectively.

## References

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## Cited lectures

Lecture 7, 27 Oct 2021

Lecture 8, 3 Nov 2021

Lecture 11, 1 Dec 2021

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Principles of permaculture (from lecture 11, slide 44)

