

Saving the World by Reconnecting People and Placeⁱ

John Ikerdⁱⁱ

We are living in perilous times. Climate change, fossil energy depletion, loss of biodiversity, and growing social and economic inequity are all threatening the future of human civilization. Only the most adamant deniers fail to accept the necessity for fundamental change. At a recent conference in Vancouver Canada, William Rees, who developed the concept of an “ecological footprint, was one of the speakers. He documented the negative impacts that industrial economic growth has had on the Earth. He concluded that the “ecological footprint” of humanity has already exceeded the Earth’s long-run carrying capacity. He believes a major change in global climate is likely inevitable and will have catastrophic effects on the future of humanity. Shifts to renewable energy and pollution mitigating technologies may slow the rate of ecological disintegration, but Rees believes a civilizational collapse is highly likely, if not inevitable.

At the same conference, Wes Jackson, a noted agricultural ecologist, pointed out that economic growth during the industrial era has been largely dependent on readily accessible, inexpensive, and relatively “clean” sources of fossil energy. Old growth forests, shallow veins of coal, and accessible pools of oil and natural gas fueled the early stages of industrial economic development. However, the old growth forests are gone and the remaining sources of fossil energy are less accessible and more expensive to extract. Far fewer calories of energy can be produced now relative to calories of energy required for extracting and refining the remaining stocks of fossil energy. In addition, the new fossil energy sources, such as fracked oil and natural gas, releases far more pollutants in the environment than did previous energy sources.

It’s becoming increasingly clear that we simply cannot continue doing what we’ve been doing. We cannot sustain continual economic growth in a world that is running out of natural resources. Ultimately everything of use to us, including everything of economic value, must come from the earth—from air, water, soil, minerals, energy. There is no place else. It takes energy to make the other things useful. So, whenever we use the earth’s resources to produce things of economic value, some usefulness and potential economic value is inevitably lost. This is the 2nd law of thermodynamics or the law of “entropy.” No matter how efficiently we use, reuse, or recycle the things of nature, we will not be able to sustain their ability to produce things of economic value. Infinite economic growth is simply not possible in a finite world.

This creates a fundamental problem because over time economic growth has become accepted as the primary measure of human progress. Income and wealth have become the primary means by which society assesses an individual’s usefulness or inherent worth. Power and fame also are accepted measures of success, but power and fame almost invariably lead to economic success—to money. People in the so-called less-developed nations need economic

ⁱ Prepared for presentation at the Tennessee Local Food Summit, Montgomery Bell Academy, Nashville, TN, November 29-December 2, 2018.

ⁱⁱ John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; Author of, *Sustainable Capitalism-A Matter of Common Sense*, *Essentials of Economic Sustainability*, *A Return to Common Sense*, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, *Crisis and Opportunity-Sustainability in American Agriculture*, and *A Revolution of the Middle-the Pursuit of Happiness*, all books available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com): [Books](#) and [Kindle E-books](#). Email: JEIkerd@gmail.com; Website: <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj/> or <http://www.johnikerd.com> .

growth just to secure the basic necessities of a life of dignity and self-respect. A future without continual economic growth is a prospect that many people simply are not willing to accept, let alone embrace as the path to continued human progress or betterment.

Complex societies are utterly dependent on their economies. Beyond self-sufficiency, or meeting our needs directly from nature, people must rely on other people to meet their needs. They may rely on people they know personally to meet some of their needs, through trading work, barter, or gifting—families, friends or people in their local communities. But, earning and spending money allows people to meet their needs through *impersonal* relationships or economic transactions—rather than through barter or gifting. By using money people can get what they need or want from people they don't know personally.

A problem is that economic value is inherently *impersonal*. If something can't be bought, sold, or traded, it has no economic value. Relationships with a spouse, children, or friends may be the most valuable and important aspects of a person's life. However, people can't buy, sell, or trade personal relationships; so they have no economic value. Some economic value may accrue as a consequence of such relationships, but purely personal or social connections with other people are of value only to those who share personal relationships. Our relationships with nature, fresh air, clean water, scenic landscapes, wild places, also are critical to our physical and psychological well-being but have no economic value unless they can be bought or sold.

Over time, reliance on the money economy diminished the necessity of personal relationships and weakened the cohesion or social fabric of families, communities, and societies. Reliance on working, buying, and selling rather than self-reliance has also weakened any individual or social sense of connectedness with things of earth—the ultimate source of all real wealth. Increasing economic inequity and social injustice, and relentless resource depletion and ecological degradation, during times of tremendous economic growth and individual wealth, are logical consequences of this growing sense of disconnectedness. The primary purpose of government has become creating jobs and promoting economic growth rather than protecting people and nature from economic exploitation. This is a legacy of the industrial era of economic development. Fundamental, transformational change is a logical response.

A rethinking and recommitment of people to *purpose* must be an essential aspect of this transformation, if humanity is to avoid a civilizational collapse. The existence of purpose cannot be proven through scientific observation, logic, or reasoning. As a result, the very existence of purpose – in any sense other than some innate desire to continue living – has been vigorously denied by scientists and is routinely ignored by contemporary society. Given no “logical” alternative, many people have accepted earning and accumulating money as their purpose—or at least as a proxy for purpose. They rationalize that since anything of economic value can be bought with money, wealth will give them an opportunity to pursue any purpose they might choose. They forget that many of the most precious things in life can't be bought with money.

The continuing pursuit of individual wealth aggregate economic growth dooms humanity to ultimate failure. Infinite growth in a finite world simply is not sustainable. Wes Jackson believes that humanity has reached the end of an era—the “neocaloric era.” The only solution will be a transformation to a new “ecozoic era,” a term coined by Thomas Berry in the book *The Universe*

Story to describe a new geologic era. In the new era, humans will live in a mutually beneficial relationship with the Earth and the other living and nonliving things of the earth. Regardless of what technological advances may come in the future, the well-being of humanity will be inseparable from the well-being of the Earth's integral community, of which humans are both members and caretakers. Life in the Ecozoic era will require an economic and social transformation rooted in a new understanding of purpose, people, and place.

Changes currently taking place in the global food system provide a useful metaphor for the transformational change essential in the larger economy and society. Nowhere is our critical interdependence with the earth and each other more obvious than in agriculture. The new, transformational farming systems go by various names, including organic, ecological, biological, biodynamic, sustainable, resilient, regenerative, and restorative agriculture, as well as permaculture, holistic management, and nature farming. The unifying principle of all of these systems is their recognition and respect for the inherent interconnectedness of agriculture with its natural environment—with the air, water, soil, and energy flow of nature.

The scientific concept of “agroecology” provides a unifying framework for these and other agri-food systems. Ecology is a study of the relationships of living organisms, including humans, with the other elements of their natural and social environment. The first principle of ecology is that “everything” is interconnected. Agroecology respects the agricultural “ecology of place.” Every agroecosystem is unique, in that unique relationships constitute unique wholes—even for wholes made up of the similar components. Agroecology also respects “the social ecology of place.” Farms and farmers are interconnected with the specific communities within which they function—economically, socially, and ethically. Their farms are sequestering carbon in the soil, capturing and storing solar energy in crops, restoring wildlife and biological diversity, and creating economic opportunities and caring communities around common interests in good food.

A “marriage” of economics, ecology, and sociology, as in agroecology, will be essential in meeting the civilizational challenges of the future. The global industrial economy must be transformed into a network of interconnected, sustainable local and regional economies. A sense of interconnectedness of people with specific other people and places must be restored. Learning or relearning the art and science of human relationships will one of the greatest challenges. People must feel a compelling purpose, beyond economics, for relating to other people in particular communities or places where they work and live.

There is no *economic* reason to care about anyone or anything else, unless we expect something of *economic* value in return. We truly care about others as people only because we see some potential goodness in them that we want to protect or encourage. We care about nature only because we feel a sense of goodness about being a part of nature. We truly care about specific people and places only if we believe it is our responsibility, our purpose, to somehow contribute to the goodness of those people and places. It is this ability to contribute to the goodness or betterment of humanity and of the earth that gives meaning to our day to day lives. Money, at best, is only a means by which we can express our concern for others. Here is no better place to reconnect purpose with people and place than in a local, community-based food system.