

Flourishing in a Resource Constrained World

God's hidden blueprint for his planet

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How can we possibly flourish in a resource constrained world? Just surviving seems a hard enough proposition given the challenges that face us. Businesses are being encouraged to design with sustainability in mind.

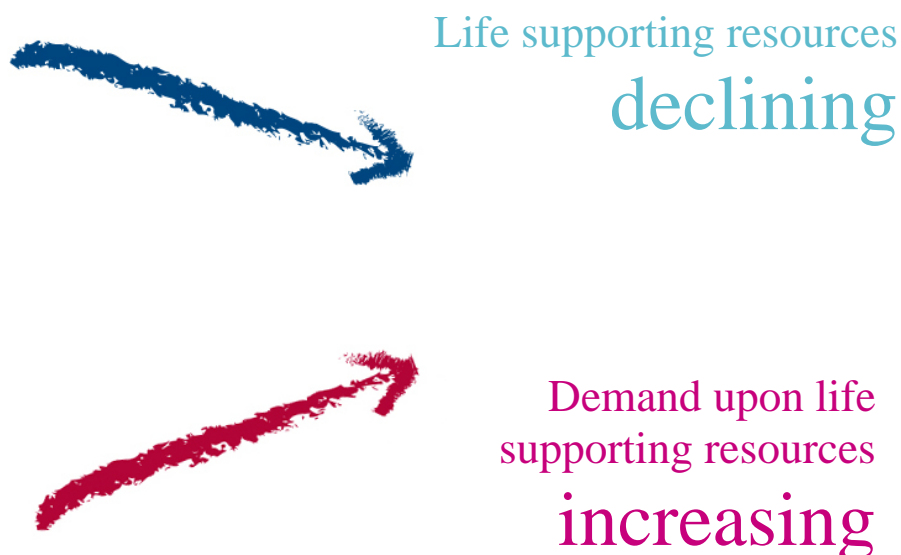
However, with the current externalities that exist within the economic system it will only get us so far. As for governments, would they ever bring in laws that reduced our standard of living? Indeed, would we ever vote for a politician who promised to? We all know that we need to act more responsibly and yet, for most of us, we do little more than tinker with our lifestyles.

If we are to create the change that is needed, it will have to be because at a deeper level we believe in it. Put another way, unless God is involved we will not see the restoration of creation that He yearns for. Christians therefore have a key role to play in helping to create a more sustainable world.

Resource constraints

People talk about an increasingly resource constrained world, but what do we really mean by that?

A simple way to describe it is that life supporting resources, such as clean air, clean water and topsoil are in decline at the same time as our demand upon those resources is systematically increasing as a function of population and consumption. You don't have to be a prize-winning economist to see where these trends will lead us.



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Over the next 50 years global population is projected to rise 1.5 fold. Consumption is projected to increase by 4-6 fold per capita. Therefore, just to stay at the same rate of degradation as currently we must become 6-9 times more efficient in how we provide service. Given this, how do we possibly start addressing the sustainability challenges that face us?

Moving upstream

Imagine that you have left a bath running and unbeknownst to you the overflow is blocked and the water is running out of the bath, onto the floor and into the hall way. What is the most strategic way to deal with this? Do you commission a study to look at the rate at which the water flows onto the carpet and if it isn't getting worse think, "that's OK"? Or do you sandbag up the doorway to stop the water getting out of the bathroom? Or lay towels across the bathroom floor to stop the rate of flow? Or build up the sides of the bath? Or pull the plug out? Or turn the taps off?

It seems pretty obvious that you would turn the taps off. Yet with many social and environmental issues we tend to try to tackle the issues downstream, for example trying to assess whether the rate at which pollution is being released into nature is acceptable or not; or focusing our efforts solely on building flood defences rather than addressing the causes of the flooding in the first place.

As mentioned in the previous section, two of the major drivers behind the current global challenge of sustainability are population and consumption. Most of the social or environmental issues that we face from deforestation to droughts can, mostly, be traced back to one of these two issues. So if we are able to tackle consumption and population, we are able to tackle a variety of different downstream challenges by tackling their upstream causes. This is much more strategic in the long run.

As Christians, we are able to go even further upstream by seeking to address the fundamental issues underpinning population and consumption - why do people consume? Why do people have large families? As Christians, we can have a very different conversation about this than we could in a secular context (The next section addresses consumption but the same questions can also be asked of population).

If you ask yourself 'why do I consume?' for most of us, it becomes readily apparent that it is not just to meet our basic needs. Indeed, if we are really honest with ourselves things that we wish were not there might start to come up, such as desire, temptation, fear and 'keeping up with the Jones's. But even when we are aware of some of these drivers, it is very difficult, even with the best will in the world, to do something about it on our own.

To really tackle the issues of sustainability upstream therefore, we must ask God into our hearts to help address these issues. If we get right with him, and cut off the causes that are not of him, it is likely that we will consume far less.

A simple guideline that may help is the next time that you are going to buy something that is non-essential just pause for a moment and pray about it. Do you really need it? If you have a peace, buy it. If you don't, maybe leave it. The challenge is not to fall into the trap of living in a poverty spirit, but rather to live in a responsible spirit.

It is not all sack cloth and ashes

So then, is a frugal lifestyle with small families what we are being called to if we are to overcome the sustainability challenges facing us? Thankfully, there is another aspect to this

equation, one that is not subject to resource constraints - our God given creativity and ingenuity. After all, there is nothing wrong with consuming things *per se*.

Rather, it only becomes a sustainability problem due to the manner in which we currently provide for our needs. For example, in the US approximately 99% of the materials contained in the creation or manufacture of a product become waste within 6 weeks of sale (Factor 10, www.factor10-institute.org).

But using our creativity it doesn't have to be this way. Given the resource constraints that we are faced with could we provide for people's needs in a manner that is far more efficient? Could we provide for people's needs at a global scale in a way that enhances creation rather than degrades it? This may seem like a pipe dream, but it isn't. Not only has God created such a system, he has also provided us with the blueprints for it if we care to look. The system in question is His creation.

Creation – God's hidden blueprint?

Where do you feel most alive? Where do you feel closest to God? Many people, Christians and non-Christians alike will say that it is when they are out in God's creation – be it on a mountain top, looking at a sunset or watching the waves crash in on a beach. And yet equally, where do we spend most of our time? Often far from it, be it an office, or a shop, or just in a congested town or city.

At the fall - the lie was sown that we are separate to nature, that we are 'other'. It changed our relationship with nature and it is interesting to see how our relationship with nature has changed over time.

Initially nature was seen as a threat, something to be tamed and subdued. Then it became a resource to provide us with raw materials to make our lives more comfortable.

In time we came to realise that it provided us with critical life supporting services such as regulating the climate, providing us with clean air and water. We came to value it as a place to go to become inspired, and maybe to draw closer to God. And now, I am suggesting that nature can also be treated as a blueprint to help us tackle the challenges that we face as a society.

Did nature really fall at the fall, or just our relationship with it? 'All of creation groans', but is that because of what we started to do to it? It is an interesting reflection that many of the environmental challenges that we currently face start with us, as humans.

Nature doesn't appear to suffer from many of the problems that affect society. In nature there is no such thing as waste, compared to our systems where 99% of materials end up in that form.

Or consider the efficiency of capturing energy from the sun, comparing that of a leaf photosynthesizing sunlight to the most modern photovoltaic cell. The differences in efficiency are many orders of magnitude, even excluding the energy/materials used to create them in the first place. Or the efficiency of water purification by a wetland in contrast to our massively resource intensive systems, let alone which system is more aesthetically pleasing.

Even in terms of how society could operate, nature provides us with examples. In terms of teamwork and self discipline, look at ants. As it says in Proverbs "Go to the ant you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food for the harvest" (Proverbs 6:6-8).

Consider the elegance and efficiency of an Arctic Tern, that annually flies from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back again powered by renewable resources and creating only biodegradable waste.

God created an extraordinary system and He directs us to it. It contains incredible design that bears His fingerprints and provides us with a blueprint for flourishing in a resource constrained world.

How?

You may rightly ask, but how do we use these blueprints? This will depend upon what it is that you are trying to do and whether you are acting as an individual or as an organization.

As an organization trying to deliver a product or service in a more sustainable manner, firstly ask the question of “what is the service that we are trying to provide?” Then get out into nature and see how God did it first.

Look to learn from what works in nature and apply it. And at the very least, design your product or service in line with nature – i.e. made from renewable resources, very efficient, recyclable or reusable and in a form that it never ends up as waste.

An example of this is the utility company in the US, who used to have to flush their pipes with a corrosive chemical to stop significant limescale build-up. They were encouraged to see whether nature could provide them with a better way of doing this.

Their solution was based on an enzyme that stopped a mussel shell growing too large. By coating their pipes with this enzyme once, they no longer needed to use corrosive chemical flushing (see Biomimicry by Janine Benyus for more examples like this).

If you are an individual, then the best thing that you can do is to support companies that provide products and services that use God’s blueprint as their design template and at the same time are socially responsible. If you are unsure, then ask a question. Your money and your questions are two of the most powerful ways to influence change.

Ten people asked the same question about CFCs in the Swedish supermarket chain ICA in a week. Ultimately this led to Electrolux, the largest global white goods manufacturer, developing a far less damaging form of refrigeration. Never therefore buy into the lie that what you say or do doesn’t make a difference – you are far more powerful than you realise.

Using God’s blueprint also helps avoid the law of unintended consequences, because everything has already been tried and tested within Creation. God has provided us with His blueprint. The enemy has tried to separate us from and indeed destroy it, but now God is encouraging us not only to use and be inspired by Creation, but to learn from it too.

Restoration

God yearns to see His creation fully restored through the redemptive power of Jesus. We can and should be part of that restoration, not least as that restoration can’t happen without Him. By involving God in the process, focusing upstream and using the blueprint that He has provided we can not only thrive, but truly flourish in a resource constrained world.

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