

# Playing to tie: adopting to a sustainable mindset

WHITEPAPER

**Sustainability in its current  
form cannot solve the global  
ecological crisis**

camunico

**We've all seen the messages of hope shown at the end of documentaries on how to save the environment. Turn off the lights. Plant a tree. Switch to a more energy efficient thermostat. Put your recyclables in your blue box. Together, we can change the world. We leave the movie theatre empowered and feeling good about the difference we can make. We go on with our lives.**

**W**e head out to a fancy restaurant, indulge in a carbon-intensive steak, and drink wine shipped from halfway across the world. No connections are formed that link our behaviour to global impacts. Cognitive dissonance is suppressed within our minds. We continue to live unsustainable lifestyles, attempting to sooth our conscience with token gestures of green consumerism. Everything runs shallow; nothing substantial is changed.

Nor are dire warnings particularly effective in driving change towards a more sustainable future. One can walk into a bookstore and see rows of bestsellers espousing the perils of runaway climate change, of oceans being emptied of fish, of rampant deforestation and the disappearance of biological hotspots. One rapidly becomes desensitized to these messages of doom; we can envision dystopic futures much more readily than hopeful and promising ones. We develop a sense of fatalism and sigh with an air of resignation when we think about the world that is left to the next generation.

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world

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The end is nigh. Be prepared for the post-apocalyptic world.

It is true that the modern environmental movement has achieved significant accomplishments over the past fifty years. The world recently celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day. Species such as the Californian Condor and the Whopping Crane have been brought back from the brink of extinction. Acid rain has been curbed in large portions of North America. The Montreal Protocol represented a unified global effort to curb damage to the ozone layer. Awareness surrounding the impact we have on our world has been raised. We congratulate ourselves on a job well done.

But environmental problems have continued to grow in scope and complexity in recent decades. As we head into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we are confronted with the end of cheap

fossil fuels, an uncertain climate future, and the rapid deterioration of our atmospheric, oceanic, and terrestrial systems. We face these challenges with an economy that is fundamentally untenable, an unstable system grounded in faith of ever-increasing growth and straining against the physical limits of the world. In hindsight, the majority of successes achieved by the environmental movement have only addressed the symptoms of the ecological crisis. The root cause that led us to exploit, alienate, and dominate others, our surroundings, and even ourselves, remains. This root cause is a result of a specific mindset that is cultivated by modern society: We are taught to play the game of life to win.

## **Winning at all cost**

If life is a game, humanity is on the verge of victory.

More than seven billion of us now inhabit the world; there are more people alive at this moment than at any other in human history. Our technological prowess is unparalleled; human ingenuity and brainpower are at an all-time high. We can now communicate instantaneously with anyone across the globe. The entire breadth of human knowledge lies at our fingertips. We have the ability to shape our surroundings to our liking to an unparalleled degree; we are continuing to make our lives safer, easier, better.

These achievements have been possible because we have been raised with the belief that we need to succeed at life. We are told that the road to a prosperous and meaningful life is hard and arduous. Starting out with nothing, we are taught to make something out of ourselves. Opportunities must be seized; grand feats must be accomplished in order to establish self-worth. We are pushed to compete with others and emerge as the better. To stand out and be differentiated from the masses is a great feat; to gain the ability to wield power and influence over others is an even greater one.

Today, it would appear that we stand in the golden age of human achievement. We can look back and look at the sum of our achievements, things that were unimaginable to anyone even a century ago.

But our need for victory has a price. In order to win, we must have someone or something to win against. We are winning the game of life at the expense of the other.

The other consists of all who are not us. It was formless, shapeless until we gave it form and shape. We identified it with our language and used our words to distance ourselves from it. There was connectedness with the other until we severed ourselves from it, interdependence until we walled ourselves off from it. The other is nature. It is the abstract notion of an ecosystem. It is the wilderness “out there”. It includes the culture we do not understand. It comprises the people who do not share our worldview, who do not understand our desire to win at life. They are all considered the other.

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We have become so enamored with our successes and accomplishments that we do not see or wish to see that we are winning at the expense of the other, which we wholly rely upon. We win at the price of the oceans polluted and emptied. We win at the cost of the forests logged and lost. We win while the indigenous cultures and languages that embody alternative ways of what it means to be human continue to vanish and become extinct. Our mindset to win and our drive to succeed blinds us to all else. The division and isolation we have utilized to guard against the other has made it easier to head down the road of exploitation, alienation, and domination. Uncontrolled greed inevitably waits at the end of that road, the insatiable desire for endless riches, unassailable safety, immortality itself. And when this greed is combined with knowledge and ability, ruin inevitably ensues.

It is possible to continue along the same path, to continue winning at life. Indeed, we as a global species are closer to "winning", of ending the game in victory in our favour, than ever before. But the price of winning is our diminishment. Our livelihood. Our diversity. Our relationships with the vast, immeasurably complex tapestry that is the life that clothes our world.

A pyrrhic victory of this nature is no victory at all.

## Thinking on the same level

Many environmentalists approach the ecological crisis with the same mindset of winning; I speak from personal experience. As environmental educators, professionals, and activists, we all wish to succeed at saving the world. After all, what nobler goal is there to win as David against the Goliath of faceless evil corporations? The thrill of victory as an underdog is exhilarating, the glamour of being hailed as a champion of the people impossibly alluring. There is no loftier achievement, no greater ambition. We dedicate vast amounts of energies and resources tackling issues of pollution, deforestation, overfishing, and climate change. We seek to be heard. We see acts of injustice and must act. We channel our energies into tackling each problem we see head on with the zeal and passion that is in our hearts.

Sometimes it works. Patches of forests are preserved. A species here or there is taken off an endangered species list. We celebrate those minor victories joyously. But our efforts and actions, however well intentioned, are borne out of the same source: A desire to win, to be right, to triumph over the other. People who do not subscribe to the ecological commandments we espouse become our enemies. We fight the good fight against them, opposing them until our voice rings out above theirs, until we emerge victorious. We forget that fighting fire with fire only ends in the destruction of everything worth protecting.

The magnitude of the problems we must face sets in. We become dismayed when people fail to respond to our outcry against blatant injustices and impending disasters. We become angry when they become resentful of our ecological declarations that were borne out of the best of intentions. Each defeat becomes personal, a grievous wound on our souls.

In the meantime, the consumption and greed remains. Damage to the life support systems of the world continues unabated. Resentment and resistance stymie any progress made. Genuine change remains illusive.

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This ongoing struggle to win at saving the world exacts a heavy toll on us. Many of us burn out, unable to cope with seeing lake polluted, forests destroyed, oceans emptied. Some resort to protect themselves with a blanket of cynicism. Still others become part of the system, attempting to work from within the institutions of power to leverage change. But these establishments, like ecosystems, are inherently resilient, designed to resist and buffer against the type of fundamental change required to address the ecological crisis. So while we do some genuine good, the majority of our efforts runs shallow and wanders and is wasted. We become tired, broken, and jaded; we cycle between the highs of small victories to the lowest depths of despair in defeat.

How can we as environmentalists talk about a sustainable future when we are internally unsustainable ourselves?

We must recognize the fact that we cannot address the current ecological crisis using the same level of thinking that caused the situation in the first place. We got to our current predicament by acting without regard for consequences. No matter how much energy and passion we bring to bear, no matter how well our intentions can change that. As long as we live our lives with a mindset of winning,

no solution is possible. Waging war against the other cannot bring about long-lasting and genuine change. What is desperately needed is thinking on a different level. We must have a different goal. We must walk a different path.

## Playing to tie: a different path

The path to a sustainable and prosperous future begins with the internal cultivation of a non-winning, non-opposing state of mind.

Instead of playing the game of life to win, we seek a tie. We go nowhere and seek no victory. We do not want the game to end. From this mindset, a different approach to life and living emerges. Getting too far ahead or lagging too far behind against the other becomes undesirable, for both courses of action lead to an unwelcome end. We begin to stay behind to get ahead; we start to get ahead by staying behind. Equilibrium is struck. Homeostasis is attained.

Playing to tie is the first and most important step towards the development of a sustainable mindset; one cannot hope to articulate or recognize the vision of a genuinely enduring and prosperous future without it. When we play to tie, when we perceive life and living as exercises in resilience and endurance, we can begin to appreciate thinking that considers the long haul over the short term; a slow burn is preferred over the scorched earth.

One of the consequences of playing to tie is that it forces us to recognize our opponent; we must stare across the abyss and accept the stare returned. It necessitates that we understand the actions and tendencies of the other; we accept responsibility for its creation. Instead of continuing down the road of isolation, alienation, and exploitation, we walk a healthier path towards awareness, integration, and cooperation. We realize that there is no strength to

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be gained from exploiting the other for victory, only weakness. In our dealings with the other, we seek understanding but not necessarily agreement. Differences are acknowledged and difficulties are negotiated.

When we find balance, when we accept our interdependence with the other, we are constructing a foundation of sustainability within ourselves. Because our end goal is not grounded in the need to forge ahead, less action is taken. We recognize that action caused the current predicament and that more action is not the solution.

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Slowing down, we do what is deemed needful, no more. We only do what we must and which we cannot do in any other way. Through our integration with the other, we begin to understand that our actions have consequences beyond ourselves. Therefore, we devote our energy towards determining what is needed and what is merely wanted.

Without an obsession with winning, we can afford to pause and simply be. We can rediscover the traits within ourselves that make us a successful social species: compassion, economy, and cooperation. They can be utilized to address the fear, greed, and wastefulness we see within and around us. In times of despair, we can draw upon those same qualities to give ourselves hope; they become our deep, clear, inexhaustible reservoirs of inner strength. It becomes easier to be content, centered, and prepared in the face of adversity. Unhurried, we have the time for introspection and for wonder. We consume less and appreciate more. We want less and are more.

Having a sustainable mindset is crucial to the development of an environmental ethic that is effective in addressing the ecological crisis. It shifts away from a mindset of anthropocentric domination that modern environmentalism is embedded in. But it is not

grounded in the biocentric egalitarianism of the Deep Ecology movement either; human beings are unique and cannot be and should not be valued equally with other life. Playing to tie strikes a balance between the two opposite ends of the spectrum. It recognizes the individual and the whole, the nuclear and the universal. Differences are recognized as fact; interdependence is accepted without shame or disdain. We who are blessed with the unique and cursed with the gift of self-awareness, must learn how to approach life as all other life on this world innately does. Possessing intelligence, we must not act in ignorance of the consequences our actions have. Having the power to shape the world, we must act in the best interests of all who live in it.

## **Sustainable from within**

A shift towards such a mindset may seem fantastically fanciful and impossibly impractical, especially in modern society. But in reality, examples of this way of being are all around us. Life as a whole innately plays to tie. The individuals, the groups, the species of the world are all equipped for survival, fanged for it, timid for it, aggressive for it, clever for it, poisonous for it. Life is endlessly complicated, hopelessly tangled, infinitely rich, tremendously resilient, but it thrives without the desire to dominate. It goes on without only one goal: to live on.

On a biological level, human beings are no different than all other life. The human body is a complex system that plays to tie from the moment we are born until we breathe our final breath; it seeks no victory and has no goal other than to maintain the conditions in which it can continue to function. The human body is also an active community and an ecosystem, the result of a dynamic pattern of relationships between us and the other. Only ten percent of what we think of as "us" is human cells; the remaining ninety percent of the cells that reside within our body are bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms. Our cells continuously rely on and are in turned

relied upon by them. Microbes help us regulate a myriad of bodily functions, ranging from assisting in harnessing energy from our foods to keeping our immune systems healthy. We cannot survive without this interdependence. Our minds would do well to learn from our bodies, and shift from the desire to win to a desire to sustain.

Fundamental change in thinking starts with the individual. It cannot be bought. It turns to resentment when forced. It is either cultivated from within, or it is nowhere. We must understand that only when we are sustainable in life and living before we can address the problems around us. Only when we move beyond our desire to win and dominate will we be able to address the ecological crisis. Only when we feel healthy and connected with others, our surroundings, and ourselves can we make a real difference. Only then can we begin to envision and create a lasting, prosperous, and hopeful future. The question of whether we can save the environment becomes irrelevant if we play the game of life with an intention to tie; genuine sustainability will arise spontaneously from that mindset.

*Text: Isaac Yuen*

*Isaac Yuen is an author and creator of the blog Ekostories. This essay is an edited version of his shortlisted essay in the wolfoundation.org annual essay competition that is published in the Camuncio annual I*



