

How fares the art of organic living?

After much talk about the Agenda for the 21st Century and new visions of the Baltic Region, inter-governmental agencies are sounding quite emphatic that inter-governmental policies for rescuing the Baltic Sea are in place. Are they?

Since the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm gave birth to the Commission for the Protection of the Baltic Marine Environment (HELCOM) in 1972, we have witnessed many attempts to launch plans and programmes to save the Baltic Sea.

There has been significant progress in raising public awareness. HELCOM itself took a long, long time to discover the 'ecosystem approach', but now it says it has. In theory that should clear the way for more integrated, sustainable policy-making. There has been some success with eliminating old 'hot spots', but the message remains much the same as it has been: water transparency continues to decrease in all sub-basins; the 10% of coastline that is now protected is losing biodiversity; holistic assessment reveals the situation to be critical; human pressure on biotopes is increasing etc. This overall message is similar throughout the world and grimly reported in UNEP's Global Biodiversity Outlook 3 (May 2010). In other words, mother nature is thundering '*Learn to live with ecosystems or perish*', and perish we will if we don't.

In recent years less ice has meant more wave action. Large areas of dead sea floor have been oxygenated with some positive effect on food chains e.g. in the Gulf of Finland and Gulf of Bothnia, but the stirring-up of nutrients and warmer water can also raise potentials for toxic algal blooms.

Our good scientists are out in their ships doing their high-tech best to make head and tail of it all, as they have been doing for decades. Monitoring is important but we the people must ask what is missing from the human development = sustainable development equation.

For a start, with all our comforts and privileges, we remain extremely reluctant to be honest about what we know is not sustainable. It has become abundantly clear that neo-liberal capitalism, the primary driver of global warming, cannot and will not eradicate poverty or terminate the raping of the planet. Voting for neo-liberal capitalism is like joining a rusting ship in a bankrupt port that is overloaded with calcium carbide and captained by a man, sick from ambition, who swears he knows how to repair the lost rudder.

Sustainable development depends on our readiness to accept and live with the fact that we never will be able to control ecosystem dynamics. The Baltic action plans and economic rescue packages that, in the name of the electorate, are formulated by non-elect supra-national agencies, continue to impose an out-dated paradigm of human-biosphere relations.

Yes, our wonderful planet has much to give, but we are sick of North-South, Baltic-global, double-standards, of being pushed and forced deeper and deeper, faster and faster, into mercilessly destructive competition. We are not pawns in a game of corporate monopoly. The vast majority of people do not want to be competitors in a corporate global market.

Herein lies the missing part of the sustainable development equation - the part that Baltic marine scientists cannot solve, the part that HELCOM dares not touch, the part that can kindle lurking potentials for violence. The democracy deficit that fuels ecosystem breakdown is a hard nut to crack, no less in societies trapped in over-developed, unsustainable (and thereby nuclear-powered) standards of living.

When a lot of people consume a lot of sausage meat millions more pay the cost, and so eventually does the climate and the sea. About 60% of the annual Finnish catch of herring and sprat (60 000 tons) is processed to feed mink, cows, pigs and chickens. Chickens world-wide consume 2 - 6 times as much fish as humans, depending on which of the westernised countries is in question.

The management of Baltic farming, forestry and fisheries has long been conducted in, more-or-less, outrageous defiance of common sense - in total denial of an integrated ecosystem approach.

We *must* release ourselves from the chains of the global cartels. Like the good workhorses that we are, we must shift down into bottom gear and cultivate our abilities to strengthen our organic markets and intra-regional trade. The Baltic Region is perfectly capable of feeding itself.

There are some ecological principles that need to be brought mainstream. For instance, produce is not 'free' to be traded on global markets until the eco-geographic region from whence it came has reached maximum, organic self-reliance.

In this era education has no real meaning if it fails to provide substantial increase in organic growth and productivity - in our own back gardens, fields, woodlands, wetlands, forests, lakes, streams and rivers.

Saving the Baltic Sea is all about opening new fields of productive employment, within the Baltic Region, that support and strengthen organic economy. Far too many good young people are floating around with little or no hope of being able to come to grips with sustainable development, which they desperately want to do. Far more incisive, public debate is still needed on the meaning of sustainable development: face-to-face dialogue in public places, schools, markets, villages, fields and forests, and within the regular employment agencies.

The concept of Local Agenda 21 must be revitalised because there is no top-down pathway to sustainable development. Way back at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 the UN agencies admitted they could not prevent ecosystem breakdown, or eradicate poverty, without the proactive participation of the regular citizenry. All countries were urged to develop LA21 strategies with agendas set by the community itself - rather than by central or local government. However, this presented (Orthodox, Roman and Hanseatic) bureaucracies with a challenge to their pride. Where the regular citizenry did manage to come up with ideas more often than not their proposals were skilfully moved to the shredder, or absorbed so as to disturb the status-quo as little as possible.

Overcoming democracy deficits that block pathways to organic economy usually does require courageous determination. Artists and scientists are needed as citizen-activists - to facilitate and engineer the socio-economic transition.

The task of government is to enable full-scale experimentation with organic life-styles by ensuring more horizontal, and still more horizontal, distribution of capital. The task of government is to foster and step away, foster and step away, not block and suppress.

Twenty years ago we were writing about the need to 'channel investment into environmental education'. We must ensure that profit is invested in building new, organic life-styles. Classical economists have always feared and opposed eco-logic because, in ecological terms, they knew their 'theories' were insolvent. Their possibilities to hedge future realities are dying fast, but they remain dangerous.

There is a general key to sustainable development called *sub-regional self-reliance*. Take it, turn it, unlock the secrets of eco-economics and release your human rights. The deeper you dive into sub-regional eco-economics the more possibilities you discover, but we don't all need to go scuba.

When Soviet state capitalism finally admitted having given up the ghost - waves of people-to-people interest swept across a blinking seascape. A wonderful woman appeared at a couple of early trilateral Gulf of Finland seminars. When her turn came she attempted to point-out to her audience that their demands for investment in marine research were missing the point. "My students" she said "can tell you all about what is happening to the sea - by walking along the beach." The male scientists smiled politely - almost all were scouting for money. The woman went home, to where marine life is still resplendent.

Competition is a necessary driver of human development, but sustainable development demands transformation in the manner in which humans compete with each other. With billions of feet struggling to hold their ground on our increasingly scorched and scarred planet, human self-understanding is facing a most critical, evolutionary threshold. We are sinking under the payload of long out-dated, mercantile-industrial patriarchy.

As members of our mature, gender-sensitive Baltic democracies, as stewards of the Baltic Sea, as citizens of the world, as neighbours, sisters and brothers, we welcome competition that demonstrates our abilities to find satisfaction through the lowest possible consumption of energy and natural resources - that our grandchildren, here and in the Global South, may live full lives.

Love is nothing if not a pro-active mixture of passion and compassion, but passion, thus also compassion, is hopeless if not dangerous in the absence of respect for ecosystems.

We love to build in good, local wood, with bricks from glacial mud. We love root tar, pine soap, soft boreal water, mats from old linen bed-covers and tractors that out-last their purchasers. We love living with the seasons. We love our berries and mushrooms, our own strong apples, plums and pears. And what about the Baltic Sea?

Like fresh bread, the price of fish is going up. Like the parched, degraded grasslands of central Russia, the Baltic Sea is producing less and less edible human food. Why?

What is happening in the mud at the bottom of the sea tells the story of love – the story of who and what is controlling our emotional and material input and output.

Every Baltic citizen can demand, has the right to demand and must demand fresh, organic food from within the Baltic Basin. We only need to demand just that and we will find that we are able, together, to correct the sustainable development equation.

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