

## THE GREEN CORNER by Gordon Bates

Among the serious problems facing us on the environmental scene today, not only in the U.S. but across the globe, high on the list would be the challenge of developing sustainable ways of life. In many ways, not just in the economic arena, our culture and that of others have been living beyond our means --- and doing so for a long time, not just for a few decades.

One definition of sustainability that has been around for a while went like this: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." That definition served a good purpose of trying to balance the future against the present use of resources. But it had a basic flaw. It assumed that "the needs of the present" could continue to be addressed without any real harm to the environment; and that "the needs of the future" would continue to mount on a straight, slow upward curve as populations grew. No matter what the difficulties, growth would solve them.

In the light of better information about the realities of our challenge, a new one has been proposed: "Learning to live off the sun in real time." It's a provocative view.

The point of the new definition is that any energy plan that continues to bank on finding more oil, coal, gas or nuclear fuel sources is on a collision course with the reality of their limitations. Research has proven that all combined are incapable of meeting the needs of either the present or the future ---especially if the rate of use continues to rise. In addition, each has major drawbacks that grow more apparent with wider usage across the globe. Hence the growing appeals for greater exploration of solar energy, which includes wind, wave and biomass energy as well as direct sunlight. It is the only fuel source that has always been around and will be around for millions of years, the only fuel that is naturally sustainable over the long haul.

In one way or another, **sustainability is at the heart of the changes that nature is forcing upon the world.** Not only our fuels but our water and our air are finite. Even the oceans are not beyond ruination. It is becoming an axiom that we cannot keep using the earth up faster than it can replace itself, heal itself or be renewed by better human stewardship.

Theologian Sean McDonagh wrote: "Much of what we commonly call progress today -- digging up the Earth, poisoning it and destroying natural diversity -- is retardation for the Earth community. We need to call things by their proper names in order to reverse the destruction which has taken place so extensively."

It has been our culture's assumption that unlimited growth in numbers of people and amounts of resources used should be possible for each new generation ad infinitum. That assumption is being challenged now every day. We have sometimes embraced it as "The American Dream." The current economic crisis has turned the dream into a nightmare for many. **But even before the economic crisis, the Christian Gospel, together with the whole biblical message, calls us to repentance for our prodigality.** Unlike the younger son in the story, we may not have reached the end of our rope, but we've spent a lot of our inheritance. Activist Bill McKibben once said that we won't fix the environmental mess until we stop seeing uncontrolled economic growth as the ultimate sign of progress. I have finally been convinced of that. Have you?

Stay tuned for some of the alternative visions of sustainable development in future Green Corners.

