

# voluntary simplicity

by Brian G. Henning

In their provocative essay “The Death of Environmentalism,” Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus contend that the modern environmental movement has failed because it has focused on narrow policy prescriptions grounded in economic models that define the good in terms of rational self-interest. Sullenberger and Nordhaus argue that this approach has focused too much attention on what environmentalism is against and not enough on what it is for. Environmentalism is against fossil-fuel-based transportation and energy, against polluting waterways, against species extinction, against the oil pipeline. But, they argue, environmentalists don’t spend enough time discussing what it is that they are for.

In discussions of the environment generally and climate change in particular, one often gets the impression that the best that can be done is merely to cause less harm, be less bad (e.g., by reducing one’s carbon footprint). In framing itself in this negative way, environmentalism has failed to create a robust, positive vision that might inspire a transformation of society toward more meaningful ways of living. ...

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Fear is a useful evolutionary development for addressing immediate problems. Fear saved human ancestors from being eaten by bigger and faster animals and has been successfully used to marshal countries to respond to an imminent military threat. Though the likely impact of climate change will ultimately be more significant than that of a war, the changes it brings will extend over decades and centuries. People simply cannot remain afraid for years. Like those who live in war-torn countries, after the initial shock has subsided, most people largely revert back to their ordinary habits. Similarly (though perhaps a welcome development), the sustainability paradigm advocated by many within the environmental movement shows moral neutrality; it presupposes an understanding of the good life, rather than providing one. That is, it presupposes that the good life is sufficiently defined by economic success and material acquisition. The environmental movement has done little to craft a compelling account of what a deeply sustainable life would look like; beyond the employment of new forms of green energy, the good life is assumed to be much the same as it is today. Some businesses have exploited the vacuum created by the failure to provide an

alternative vision for the good life. Many even imply that humans need not change their lifestyles at all but can keep on as before, provided they change some light bulbs and buy a hybrid car. Those who do advocate living more lightly on the land are often ridiculed as anti-technology. Marketers suggest that either one can choose to live within modern society and pursue the materialistic notions of success that it embodies or one can reject modern society completely. This is likely a false dilemma.



To live in harmony with the larger biotic community, it is likely that humans will need to pursue an alternative vision of human flourishing based on something more than fear of future harm and the perpetual pursuit of economic wealth. However, mixed reactions greet the suggestion that a shift in lifestyle is needed to successfully respond to the threats posed by global climate change. On the one hand, those in developed nations often live a fairly comfortable life, and giving up these luxuries sounds neither easy nor appealing. On the other hand, many of these same people also recognize that a life dedicated to the pursuit of wealth, prestige,

and physical beauty is ultimately unfulfilling. Those who take social and environmental challenges seriously recognize the need for a change of lifestyle but often do not have a clear sense of how to accomplish it. They realize that purchasing Energy Star appliances, recycling, changing to LED light fixtures, eating less meat, and buying an electric or hybrid vehicle are not nearly enough to keep the planet below 2°C (3.6°F) warming this century. Stabilizing the climate and avoiding the most devastating results of global warming requires more significant change. Those in the developed nations ought to change their lifestyle in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but what exactly would this new lifestyle look like?

Since the late 1970s, the social scientist and author Duane Elgin has conducted social scientific research on different models of human living. He has concluded that living a life of “voluntary simplicity” is not only necessary for avoiding catastrophic climate change but also can be much “richer,” if one is willing to expand the conception of riches beyond the pursuit of material wealth. ...

Leading a life of voluntary simplicity means focusing on what will bring genuine and more-enduring forms of happiness and success: meaningful work that is worth doing, time with family and friends, and time in nature. ...



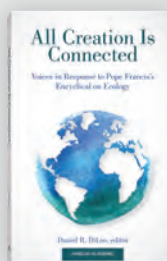


Discovering an elegant life of voluntary simplicity may be a critical element of successfully taking up the great work confronting humanity. If such a shift in attitudes and practices were to become prevalent, it might not only mitigate some of the worst consequences of global climate change but also lead to richer, more meaningful lives. In this way, voluntary simplicity is one among many ways that environmentalists might begin to move beyond the negative framing of our ecological challenges and frame positive visions of a better future. Being for a rich and meaningful life of voluntary simplicity goes far beyond just being against carbon pollution.

In sum, the concepts of deep sustainability and self-stewardship can be useful if they help push beyond a tacit anthropocentrism. The world does not exist solely for the sake of humans, and it does not need human caretakers to flourish. Given the scale of human impacts, humans must humbly become good stewards of themselves and seek forms of living compatible with a thriving natural world. We are at a pivotal point in the history of our species. The ecological crisis may create the needed catalyst for humans to begin to see themselves as a part of the wider Earth community.



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1. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*.
2. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 109.
3. Thomas Berry, "Reinventing the Human at the Species Level," in *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, ed. M. E. Tucker and J. Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 123.
4. This is also the work of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, <http://fore.yale.edu>.
5. It is important to highlight Francis's acknowledgement that his call for "ecological conversion" was first made by Pope John Paul II. See LS footnote 5, citing *Catechesis*, January 17, 2001.