



The Natural Step - In The Right Direction

A few weeks ago I treated myself to taking a one-day class in Everett on a technique called 'The Natural Step'.

I had already read a book on the framework and found it interesting - especially those hard to pronounce names of Swedish communities that had benefited. A lot of the communities sounded like coastal Oregon (where I spent many good years) and Western Washington where I have lived for the last twelve. Communities once prosperous with fish, trees and water. Now many of these communities are dead or dying and struggling to survive. Many of these communities also see environmental regulations as a barrier to their survival, not a help.

Yet many of the communities that adopted the Natural Step guidelines 'came back from the dead' and are now prospering - and in a way much more sustainable than the past. Reading the book was interesting (The Natural Step for Communities - Sara James & Torbjörn Lahti) but I couldn't quite 'get it'. So I took the class in Everett held by the Oregon branch of the US Natural Step.

The day started with discussion of the pioneering work of physician and oncologist Dr Karl-Henrik Robert. In the late 1980's he was concerned about a number of health issues particularly in children, and what we would today call 'cancer clusters'. Together with other scientists and environmentalist they came up with a remarkable set of four basic principles. Out of this came a TV show in Sweden and a copy of the basic principles was delivered to every household.

These principles are:

1. In the sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's Crust.
2. In the sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing of substances produced by society.
3. In the sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increased degradation by physical means.
4. In the sustainable society, human needs are met worldwide.

These may sound a little stilted since they are translated directly from the Swedish.

In simple terms these mean:

1. Avoid bringing elements (such as Uranium) out of the earth and building up concentrations of them - elements are in their simplest form and don't degrade any further. In some case they may oxidize or combine with other elements and eventually become safe - maybe eons later.
2. Don't create substances such as PVC that do not occur naturally in nature. Many are highly toxic to create (PVC) and dispose of.
3. Stop breaking down natural resources such as soil, trees, water and all the other resources we all depend on.

4. If conditions 1 through 3 are not met you can't expect many people to 'play along'. For example farmers in Brazil will chop down trees if they can't make a sustainable living another way.

All over in the first 30 minutes! I was half-expecting some complicated scoring system where you measured carbon footprints, compared them by some long-winded means, then announced specific goals to be met. Not so.

The Natural Step is a very simple framework, when you come across a problem you apply the framework to the problem and it can guide you to better solutions. How you achieve the better solutions is managed by then using other techniques such as LEED (green building scoring) and so on.

We then spent most of the day working through examples, the first of which was a fictitious health spa on the Oregon coast (sadly no site visit). We went through their brochure and started to highlight problems. How much fuel would be used getting there? Could a shuttle be provided from some more suitable location... would that reduce their parking needs? Could we eliminate some of the outdoor organized sports (such as Tennis) that need paving with beach walks? Where would energy come from? Could solar power be harnessed? Should kitchen food be mulched and then used on-site to feed food grown by themselves?

After about half an hour the teams had come up with at least 200 practical ideas that would not only lessen their impact on the land but would probably prove to be a draw to this location.

One interesting discussion involved politics and business. Especially in the USA environmentalism is seen as a cost - a regulatory burden that stops people from making more money. Some issues - such as climate change - are also viewed this way because of the people who support them. For the partisan people who think this I believe it is a serious mistake. In Europe especially there is a concept called the 'triple bottom line'. This is the idea that you can make a

profit while still benefitting social, economic and environmental goals.

The example discussed was Mc Donalds™ (Sweden). The fast food maker was getting a lot of negative PR over issues such as styrofoam containers. As such its growth was limited as fewer people chose to eat there. First it switched to compostable cardboard containers, then signed longstanding contracts with local farmers to supply seasonable fruits and vegetables for its ingredients. Then it started giving the compost to the farmers (free) which saved dumping fees. Finally it calculated that half its dumping fees were ice (from discarded drinks). So it installed separate trash cans for discarded drinks. Some of the ice was extracted for landscape irrigation and the rest melted and poured down into graywater systems. And it saved them money too!

This article was written by Steve Hussey, a Natural Resources Planner with the San Juan Islands Conservation District.