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From Selfish Sustainability to Selfless Sustainability

1.0 Introduction

With the ever increasing threat that is being posed by climate change, it is crucial to advocate practises of environmental sustainability to the public. One such practise is to promote a nonhuman-centric approach towards our environments, where the relationship is rather symbiotic than exploitative. While numerous papers have touched upon this aspect of environmental sustainability, none of them have explored it in-depth. Hence, this paper will explore the mechanisms that are crucial to such an approach. The paper will first explore flaws in current approaches to environmental sustainability. It will then elaborate on the 'appropriate' methods, explaining what a nonhuman-centric approach means, making reference to Ecocentrism. It will then look at a case study of The Walpole Island First Nation Community and assess why their approach works, and how it can be applied on a larger scale – to our governments and legal frameworks. The target government for the implementation of such practises will be the Government of British Columbia. The paper will look at how such an approach is crucial in the region and also give it context by reviewing the Kinder Morgan pipeline. Hence, this paper will argue that ideals and practises of First Nations can be replicated on a regional scale by raising eco-centric awareness.

2.0 The Current Climate Scenario

"Climate change is the change in global or regional climate patterns, attributed largely to the increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels. Such changes in climate can be highly co-related to the modernisation of our world" (The National Academies Press 1 & 21-22). While modernisation has aided humankind in coping with its needs, it has also created an ever-increasing demand for resources and hence increased environmental exploitation. A majority of climate scientists agree that the main cause of the current global warming trend is human activity. The increase in emissions of gases such as Carbon Dioxide, Methane, Nitrous Oxide, and Chlorofluorocarbons in the atmosphere, is intensifying the greenhouse effect, and in turn leading to a rise in global temperatures (What Is Climate Change?). In their study, the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) concluded that, "There's a more than 95% probability that human activities over the past 50 years have warmed our planet. The industrial activities of our modern civilization have raised atmospheric carbon dioxide levels from 280 ppm to 400 ppm in the last 150 years" (Pachuri 5).

Humankind has since been witness to extreme events all around the globe. With the increase in global temperatures, ice-caps are melting rapidly, and increasing sea levels. There is wide-spread drought and famine leading to millions of deaths each year. Weather systems are evidently changing, leading to intensifying rainfall and higher storm surges. While some plant and animal species are facing difficulties in carrying out their natural processes, some are already extinct (Climate Change Causes).

3.0 The Current Approach

Fortunately, these extreme impacts of climate change have served as a wake-up call to the public, governments, organisations, and other interest groups. Various strategies have been

adopted to conserve our environment, mitigate the impacts, and reverse the damage. Raising awareness has been a key aspect of dealing with climate change as the masses need to be convinced that the issue is real.

Awareness is currently raised through campaigns, rallies, PSAs - public service advertisements, News, talk shows, and a few government incentives and policies (Raising Awareness). While it is crucial to acknowledge that the current methods of raising awareness have worked to an extent, I believe that they do tend to have limitations. Current methods tend to have a 'saturation' point; The flaw lies in the fact that these approaches only elaborate on what is deemed as the 'right' and 'wrong' environmental practise. What they lack is the effort to change the fundamental ideology of people with regard to the environment. I classify the current approaches as 'controlling' methods – they only tell people what to do and work only if they are willing to listen. Even if the desired response is achieved, it does not provoke any introspection. I argue what would be effective is changing how people think - giving them the foundations to make their own choice. While this approach might seem manipulative, it will be far more effective. Hence this paper proposes an alternative approach to tackle this issue - a non-human-centric approach towards our environment, known as Ecocentrism.

4.0 Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism is a belief that places equal value on everything on our planet regardless of its utility to humans. It encourages the careful and respectful treatment of plants, animals, and resources (Zygmunt 273). Aldo Leopold, who is considered as the Father of Land Ethic, expressed, "we must begin to realize our symbiotic relationship to Earth so that we value the land for its own sake" (Leopold 119).

An opposing view is anthropocentrism, where individuals identify themselves as the only significant entities in the world while disregarding the value of plants and animals unless they provide life necessities such as nutrition, clothing, shelter and medical benefits (MacKonin 336). This selfish and utilitarian view is one that has prevailed for a long time. It is this ideology that is to blame for the abuse and exploitation of our environment. "Ecocentrism and anthropocentrism are recognized as one of the common ecological moral dilemmas" (Kortenkampn 9). Hence, it is crucial for the approach to be one that strives to bring about ideological change rather than just a short-lived, behavioral change.

5.0 The Walpole Island Case Study

The Walpole Island First Nations Community is a prime example of a society that has co-existed sustainably with its local environment for generations. The island is known for its ecological diversity that is now deemed to be at risk (Beckford 242). For generations, the community has been heavily dependent on their land. Although, it is their ecocentric philosophy and practices that have helped preserve their environment till date. The first nation, occupying only 0.002% of Canada's landmass, "is one of the last refuges for 12% of the country's designated species at risk and its 6,900 hectares of wetlands is one of the largest in the Great Lakes Basin" (qtd. in Beckford 242).

The continual existence of this diversity could be attributed to the territory remaining under indigenous control without external 'modern' influences. Community members express, "Our traditional native philosophies, values, and practices of interacting respectfully with the natural world and not separating ourselves from it, have directly contributed to the existence of the natural areas and many wildlife species both common and rare, found on the Walpole Island First Nation" (Beckford 242).

Although, Walpole Islands have now started facing environmental problems as well. The biggest threat that the community has been witness to are the chemical spills from the factories located upstream of where they reside. Current problems include water pollution, loss of habitats, and wildlife. A majority of the problems can be attributed to the inevitable urbanization around their region. There is an increasing fear that with the increasing exposure to modern ideals, the locals might lose their traditional beliefs and values (Beckford 242-243).

In spite of facing such externally-induced environmental problems, the community still advocates the responsible use of resources for its peaceful co-existence. Their ideals revolve around responsible stewardship and the belief that they have an obligation not to waste the resources and use only as much is needed.

6.0 The Applicability

The modern society tends to have lost this symbiotic relationship with nature. The Kinder Morgan Pipeline has been supplying British Columbia and Washington State with oil since 1953 (Kinder Morgan in Canada). It transports about 300,000 barrels of oil a day and the current proposal to triple the pipeline will increase this capacity to 890,000 barrels a day. With the expansion, there will be higher chances of oil spills and environmental degradation, while carbon emissions will increase due to the heavy use of machinery. The tripling of the transport capacity will also lead to an increase in the number of oil tankers shuttling, increasing emissions and also the risk of an oil spill (Kinder Morgan Pipeline).

The Fraser Valley is said to contain some of the most fertile land for agriculture. A major spill here would leave farmers jobless and cut food supply, as crude oil spills are known to increase soil acidity and toxicity. About 98,000 jobs in Vancouver and 320,000 jobs in BC are

said to be dependent on a healthy coast. 48% of these would be jeopardized by a major spill (Risks).

Kinder Morgan has reportedly had a poor safety record, having committed about 1800 violations already (Slattery). Hence, it is highly likely for environmental damage to occur. British Columbia barely uses even a fraction of the oil excavated by Kinder Morgan to meet its energy needs. Instead, a majority of the excavated oil is exported. B.C. actually depends majorly on renewable sources for energy. 87% of B.C.'s electricity comes from hydroelectric power (Whiticar). This goes to prove that Kinder Morgan merely contributes to B.C.'s energy needs and yet puts it at such a high risk. In 2007, 250,000 liters of oil spilled out in a residential area in Burnaby due to the rupture of a pipeline, forcing 250 local residents to evacuate. A further 70,000 liters of oil had washed into the Burrard Inlet through the sewer system. And a total of about $15 million was spent on the clean-up (Slattery). This is precisely why the approach of the First Nation community holds true, "We are obliged to not waste the products we harvest and to make use of as much of the harvested as possible" (Beckford 243).

7.0 Conclusion

At this stage, it is crucial for the world to develop an eco-centric mind-set. Governance plays a key role in the regulation, management, and enforcement of such policies. What is required is a change in the approach of creating awareness. Instead of telling people what to do, it needs to change their ideology.

Various academics have proposed how we could start working towards developing such an approach. For example, in his paper, Sharon Beder expresses how current policies that are devised by governments, scientists, and economists are fueled by monetary interests. He emphasizes on how the power of decision making has been lost from the public sphere and how

this has only added to the anthropocentrism (Beder Abstract). Many academics also believe that apart from social and economic justice, social work must also advocate for environmental justice (Plater 289).

It is imperative for us to think about our future generations as well. Intergenerational equity is, “A concept that asserts that humans 'hold the natural and cultural environment of the Earth in common, with the present and future generations” (qtd. in Beder 4). With this ideology in mind, it is high time for us to change our approach make our planet more sustainable.

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