

Sustainability: Terms and Questions (16 January 2022)

On this Martin Luther King weekend, thinking of how my teenage and early adult years in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements led to decades working for environmental protection and environmental justice; thinking and lamenting of where we as a nation (and in this Trump-Republican state and County) have come to in the culture wars of race, class and gender (voting rights gutted and gerrymandered, immigrants rebuffed, abused and deported, Roe v Wade in jeopardy); reading recent posts from various quarters (or octaves? there are so many), and recent talks in person and digitally with folks concerned about groundwater (which I caution us to think of not as "our" but less possessively, as "the" or, better, with no article or pronoun at all), I'm drawn again back to thoughts about sustainability and the many meanings, uses, misuses and abuses that term has undergone since it first became operative in environmental politics 50 years or so ago.

That was when the UN took up the term in the 1972 Stockholm Convention on the Human Environment and in some ways made its ambiguity inevitable by trying to meld it diplomatically with the antithetical term "development" (often, in later years, deliberately confounded with the slippery phrases "sustainable use" and "sustainable growth") postmodern hybrids made explicit in the follow-up 2012 Rio Convention on Sustainable Development (more popularly known as the Earth Summit), with its ancillary documents Our Common Future and Agenda 21 -- each of which was represented as a "blueprint for the future," the latter specifying 2021 as the deadline by which the aspirations of the Convention were to have been realized, goals which we know all too well in these days of climate emergency we have miserably failed to reach.

With that preamble in mind, and the ongoing unconscionable depletion of the aquifers in both major watersheds of our county, I suggest some questions to consider and to keep in mind while we figure out ways to save what we still have in the always less time we have.

* Why are we here? As someone who came here as a back to the land hippie in 1971, I'm well aware that I'm neither indigenous nor of pioneer or homesteader-law stock but, like most of you, part of a latter-day settler colonialism, refugees of the late 20th C (some say "late-capitalism" or "post-industrial") diaspora from high-density urban America.

As such, it behooves us to pay attention to our relation to this land we have moved to. Are we here to live "off the land" (in the sustenance sense of the much-clichéd notions of Five Acres and Independence or Forty Acres and a Mule and I'm the Mule); or is our intent to live "on the the land," "with the land," "despite the land," or "for the land"?

* Are we here making a living, having a life, or just keeping alive?

* Do we set our planning horizon at five years, ten (like many business models), at twenty-five, a hundred, a thousand? White America has been here for around 500 years, urban and post-urban sprawl for less than a hundred. How long is the natural life of a river, an aquifer, a watershed?

* Do we think of our tenure as use of the land and water or as stewardship, of land and water as resources or commodities, or as beings in their own right? In terms of property rights or of animal rights and rights of nature? Of legal rights or of justice, care and moral standing?

* Is our working model one of extraction and exploitation (be it of land, water or people) or of homeostasis and bio-community?

* Is water something to use until it's used up, and then we move on; or something we partake of and pass on when we are gone?

* Do we think of the land in terms of real estate, of plats, plots, acres and sections, or in terms of ecosystems, biotic communities and bioregions? What is the carrying capacity of each?

Do we think of the land in terms of conversion or of conservation, preservation, cohabitation and ecological integrity?

* Do we seek an economy and population of perpetual growth, steady-state or negative growth? Similarly, in regard to groundwater, do we seek net-zero withdrawal (stabilizing the rate of drawdown) or restoration and replenishment?

* How much is enough? How much is too much?