

Understanding the Sustainable Lifestyle

BY STEVEN COHEN



A sustainable environment and economy are possible only if they provide support to a sustainable lifestyle. This is a way of life that sees material consumption as a means rather than as an end and attempts to ensure that consumption has as little negative impact on the biosphere as possible.

What is a lifestyle? It's a peculiar word, but it is what people do with their time: work, recreation, entertainment, travel, social life, family life, religious life, education/learning, hobbies, and so on. It also includes the setting within which they undertake these activities – where someone lives, where they work, where they play, and where they pray (if they pray). What does lifestyle have to do with sustainability? It's not simply what you do, but how your lifestyle impacts natural systems.

It is clear that sustainable urban systems lead to a sustainable environment and economy only if they provide support to what we might call a sustainable lifestyle. This is a way of life that sees material consumption as a means rather than as an end and attempts to ensure that the materials consumed have as little negative impact on the biosphere as possible. Definitions of *sustainable living* in the literature generally refer to using as few resources as possible, reducing carbon footprints, and reducing environmental damage.^{1,2} The United Nations Environment Programme defines sustainable lifestyles as “rethinking our ways of living, how we

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buy and what we consume but, it is not only that. It also means rethinking how we organise our daily life, altering the way we socialise, exchange, share, educate and build identities.”³

Environmental advocates often focus on individual behaviour and say we need to develop lifestyles that consume less and do not damage ecosystems. On a worldwide basis with billions of people aspiring to higher levels of material consumption, individual reductions in consumption in the developed world will have little real impact. But I have hope that we can and are changing the *nature* of consumption just as we are changing the nature of work. To be clear, we cannot survive without food, air, water, clothing and shelter. But due to automation we need fewer people to make and manage those things.

As we examine the sustainable lifestyle, it is not only about what we are choosing to consume, but where we are choosing to live. Globally, more people live in urban areas than in rural areas, with 54 percent of the world's population residing in urban areas as of 2014.⁴ These ideas of closed systems of production and consumption are central to the concept of the sustainable city. As the mechanisation of agriculture reduces rural employment and as the Internet communicates the appeal and seductiveness of urban lifestyles, more and more of the world's population is moving to cities. Cities are culture hubs with dense populations, which means resources can be reused and shared easily and effectively.

Consumption and Work in the 21st Century

All of us inevitably consume resources in the course of our daily lives. We plug our computer into the electrical supply, we turn on the climate control, we turn on the lights; we bathe, dress, and eat. Some of us fill up the gas tank of our car. Rather than being defined by the size of one's home and the consumer items one possesses, the sustainable lifestyle involves a search for different values. For example, even a huge home could be designed with geothermal climate control, have a solar water heating system and could be designed to reduce its environmental impact. You can build a zero energy house on the outskirts of Houston and drive your electric car all over, or you can live in an apartment in Portland and bike, walk and take the light rail. These choices in homes, possessions and experiences are lifestyle choices, and they all have resource implications.

Contemporary lifestyle decisions are made possible by an economy where less and less of the GDP is devoted to the manufacturing of food, clothing and shelter. At one time, that was virtually all the economy did and it was how people spent all of their time. How we spend our time is changing. Today, we spend less of our time pursuing our basic needs, which means that more of our work and our time must be devoted to other pursuits. Part of this is due to the fact that work is no longer limited to the office or factory or to particular times of day. In the global economy the workday is always beginning somewhere. The Internet and cloud computing mean that analytic work and written work can take place anywhere at any time. So too can meetings. They can become Skype sessions or conference phone calls. While I remain convinced that humans require live interaction and in person contact to be effective, a high proportion

of communication is electronic and require few incremental resources to be undertaken. I am quite certain that we spend more time than ever communicating professionally and personally.

Peer-to-peer markets, known as collaborative consumption, or more commonly “the sharing economy”, also demonstrate changes in the way we consume and use goods and services. The sharing economy has become an appealing alternative for environmentally conscious consumers that are concerned about climate change and sustainability. With sharing, less energy is needed for transportation and production of goods, and less waste is created as everyday products and services are shared among a group of people.⁵ We are learning how to share autos, cabs, clothes, bikes and even homes when we travel. By allowing people to consume less and own less, thereby using fewer resources, the sharing economy promotes urban sustainability.⁶ According to the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, the sharing economy has the potential to “unite cost reduction, benefit augmentation, convenience and environmental consciousness in one mode of consumption”.⁷ It is a system built around the utilisation of unused or underused resources.⁸ Owning less invariably means less waste. The challenge these emerging companies face is proper management, and cities must strategise on efficient regulations for the sharing economy.

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Example: Sustainable Waste Management

One of the most unique sustainability challenges lies in managing material flows. Garbage, or what environmental engineers call solid waste, presents immense difficulty for communities and government officials. Any casual look at New York City's public recycling bins will provide a sense of the difficult road New York must travel to reach anything approaching the “zero waste” ideal of places like San Francisco. Paper bins are filled with bottles and the bottle bins are filled with a wide variety of unsorted waste. However, the city has proven in the past that progress is possible. New York City has eliminated indoor smoking in public places. New Yorkers have learned how to comply with alternate side of the street parking rules and some are even learning how to stop jaywalking. So it is possible that waste disposal behaviours could change. It is more likely that we will get better at automated waste sorting and so one waste stream can be subdivided when the waste is processed. Zero waste is an element of the concept of a circular economy. In a circular economy, all waste from consumption becomes an input into new production. Inevitably there is some leakage in the tightest circular production process. But the goal is to move from a linear model of production-consumption-waste to one more closely resembling a circular model. I don't think of zero waste as an achievable operational goal, but rather as a model and an aspiration. It is a way to think about resource use and waste management, rather than an absolute target. It requires a paradigm shift or a new way of thinking about consumption and garbage.

The Future of the Sustainable Lifestyle

So how do we transition to a sustainable lifestyle? We have already begun to

transform our energy, consumption and waste systems. It is not difficult to imagine continued progress, but the only way it will happen is if people are positively attracted to the sustainable lifestyle rather than punished for their attraction to unsustainable consumption patterns. This does not require a monolithic one-size-fits-all limited way of life. What unifies the people pursuing a sustainable lifestyle is that consumption is a means and not an end. The winner isn't the one who accumulates the most stuff, but the one who lives the fullest life, however that is defined. The key to the sustainable lifestyle seems to be the pursuit of a sustainable culture. According to researchers from the University of Groningen, by creating a dynamic in which pro-environmental behaviour is not only the "right" thing to do but also aligns with the




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"norm" of society, those behaviours become what is referred to as "normative goal framing". Observing others participating in a sustainable behaviour can encourage one to adopt those habits as well.⁹ Researchers who have examined interventions to increase environmentally friendly behaviours found that the key to success is linking those behaviour changes to shared values.¹⁰ Culture and values are far more powerful forces of social change and consumption patterns than regulation. In America, Prohibition didn't end drinking; if anything it might have encouraged the consumption of alcohol. If someone wants to buy 50 pairs of shoes and ride around in the water on their speedboat that should be their right, but hopefully the images of interesting and exciting work and play will reflect the growing understanding of the need to minimise the damage of our work and play on the planet that sustains us.

We are learning how to live more sustainably in our day-to-day lives. We are using bikes more, walking more, smoking less, and paying more attention to what we eat. Our cities are developing green

infrastructure to reduce the impact of flooding on our streets and waterways. Young people are increasingly interested in experiences and less interested in owning things like big houses and flashy cars. More and more of our time is devoted to the low impact consumption of music, movies, news, games, social communication and anything else that appears on our smart phones. Young people think about where their food comes from and its impact on their own health and the health of other living beings.

How we spend our time and what we do every day will continue to change. Human ingenuity guarantees it. What is not guaranteed is that our inventiveness will take into account the health of our natural systems. But the growing number of people determined to live a sustainable lifestyle will help ensure that this new chapter of economic evolution will not be the final chapter. 



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