

Sustainable Development and the Ecosphere

Concepts and Principles*

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Introduction, Purpose, and Scope

Since being popularized by Our Common Future, the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development,¹ the venerable concept of "sustainable development" has inspired the enthusiasm of people on all sides of the economy environment debate. In light of worsening global ecological trends, any concept that implies that we can eat our developmental cake and have the environment too, is bound to have a certain attraction. But there is little agreement as to the nature of future development. To some, sustainable development is a long awaited call for political recognition of environmental decay, economic justice, and limits to material growth. It, therefore, represents an opportunity for humanity to correct a historical error and begin a more benign, balanced, and stable relationship with the natural world.² This view of sustainable development also raises moral considerations such as the need in a finite world for an equitable sharing and conservation of its natural bounty.³

Other people read a different message in Our Common Future. The World Commission itself equated sustainable development with "more rapid economic growth in both industrial and developing countries" on grounds that "economic growth and diversification...will help developing countries mitigate the strains on the rural environment, raise productivity and consumption standards, and allow nations to move beyond dependence on one or two primary products for their export earnings."⁴ Accordingly, the Commission indicates "a five to ten fold increase in world industrial output can be anticipated by the time world population stabilizes some time in the next century."⁵

To those who see present levels of industrial activity as the cause of widespread damage to the biosphere, the Commission's appeal for a "revitalization" of economic expansion on this scale seems paradoxical at best. Nevertheless, the power of the growth paradigm is not to be underestimated. As sustainable development is gradually embraced by the political

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