Sustainability and the Social Collective

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Introduction

The way we travel through life is directly guided by the experiences we inherit from our direct and/or indirect contact to the people around us. We are as a social collective who has very strong ties to one another. What is a "social collective"? This is a body of people or minds that have similar and unspoken understandings that are accepted by everyone in the group. This bond is shown in all aspects of our lives, from the way we talk to each other to the way we treat the world around us. There are a few issues that we come across that impact the way we view and act on sustainability. We come across these activities every day, sometimes without our own knowledge. For example, it's not polite to talk about climate change with a group of people you've never met because it usually creates discord amongst the group and is taboo for light conversation. Light conversation is saved for these times when you break up the awkward silence with how interesting the weather has been lately. These social taboos and civil gestures also correlate with our actions as well. The way the environment treats us is directly correlated to the way we treat it. If we complain that there are mudslides on our favorite hiking trail, could it not be in part because people decide to walk off trail and take shortcuts despite numerous warning signs? It can be difficult to take agency over the faults we impart on that which we interact with. Now, would it not make sense that we are missing the point that, as a culture, we are so very changed by the thing we are trying to change? We are almost trained to automatically look for a recycling dispenser for our soda cans because if we throw them in the trash, people will give us dirty looks. In this paper, there are many issues that will be covered that include the social impacts our outlook on the world around us effects the way we live our daily lives. It should be brought to attention that respect and education should be implemented on all levels of society to bring light to the issues at hand. Without respect for the living things around us, how can we understand the true implications of our actions? We should not be treating any living thing with any less respect and understanding than we treat other human beings. Also, without education, we ourselves will be the blind leading the blind. Some people don't fully comprehend the resulting consequences that are

implied with the daily things we do, be that recycling our paper plates to walking on wildflowers that are on the side of a hiking trail. Education does not mean that we thrust information down the throats of those we deem less educated. This means having the resources available to anyone who is interested instead of the scare tactics that are shown on the media. There are clearly many ways that we can share these ideas of respect and diligence to education in our every day lives, it just takes time. Nothing can be changed by an individual mindset, but a social shift must occur to accomplish these goals.

This paper will discuss all the facets that come into play when the word sustainability arises. It has become such a word that many ignore it because it either brings upon stress of the unchangeable, or discomfort in knowing that this is an internal conflict rather than a physical threat. There will be three topics discussed within each subcategory of political influences, cultural implications, and collective implications. As a society, what are the ways sustainability is understood and recognized within the current culture, and what key preconceived notions should change that are already present in us? Regarding the socio-political environment, will these changes cause us to be more conscientious of the natural world?

Political

In the political world, "sustainability" and going green is a hot topic that is continually thrown around to support the interests of the people involved. There are so many facets to the argument made towards going green in one area or another. From political parties' agendas to laws and agreements, all these factors tie together to influence a larger issue. There are three societally understood subjects that circle sustainability in this realm: politician schemes regarding laws and natural rights, business tactics involving economics, and greenwashing that misinforms the public of the real issues that are occurring.

In the world of politics, people are pressured into either taking a hard or generic stance on their environmental views to be in office. It is common to see a political figure balking to answer specific questions on climate change for fear of excluding any constituents. This is apparent in the way they pass bills and laws, including treaties such as the Paris Agreement. The economic and social impact this agreement has on the way we react at the environment

is huge. From the very beginning, many nations participated in this because of their understanding of the issues involving pollution and welfare for their people. According to The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 175 states signed the Paris Agreement in New York in 2016.[1] It was shown that a very large group of people were coming together to try and make the difference that had been lacking since before the treaty was written. They wanted to be involved in changing the way we interacted with the environment around us. Many more environmental laws and nature rights have come after this. We as a people are trying to make the move and recognize the error in our ways to do something to change it.

The corporate side to this sustainability movement has huge underlying consequences for the general public as well as the business community. In some cases, businesses and the media are using these tactics to get ahead in their own careers. Not only is a constant barrage of scare tactics describing all the terrible things that are happening to us, making the population numb to the real problems, greenwashing is becoming more and more prevalent. In the article *The Sustainability Lability: Potential Negative Effects of Ethicality on Product Preference,* Michael Luchs et al. speaks about the prominent attention to sustainable products regarding greenwashing and marketing. In this article, they reference the United Nations Environment Programme by saying "… There appears to be a significant gap between consumers' explicit attitudes toward sustainable products and their consumption behavior. For example, one study suggests that though 40% of consumers report that they are willing to buy 'green products', only 4% actually do." [2] This is a telling statistic unveiling the real underlying biases that people have when they want to spend their hard, earned money. Usually these products are more expensive so they are not bought as often, but if the company promotes these types of goods, they are shown in a better light than other businesses. This in turn will bring in more business to their non-green items just because they are showing their support of this current industry. However, the people who choose to buy these more expensive or even organic products are now able and willing to tout their ability to purchase these items. At some points, having the means to buy these goods will elevate their status in the society

[1] United Nations Climate Change, *175 States Sign Paris Agreement,* (2016)

[2] Michael G. Luchs et al., *The Sustainability Liability: Potential Negative Effects of Ethicality on Product Preference*, (Sage Publications, Inc., 2010), 18.

which is more of an incentive to buy from that specific business. This is a success for the company that knows more clientele will buy something from them just solely on the basis of a status boost.

Greenwashing practice is also made apparent in areas where companies get a bad image from what they do every day. In his book *Hijacking Sustainability,* Adrian Parr discusses the British Petroleum (later BP Amoco) oil company and their greenwashing tactics. [3] He spoke about how this company wanted to redefine themselves and try to make them appear more conscientious to the environment after they withdrew from the Global Climate Coalition. They created a new branding scheme and heavily distinguished themselves as "Beyond Petroleum".[4] They knew that if they didn't change the face of the company, they wouldn't have much popular or political support from others. Therefore, their business would suffer against their competition. BP Amoco also knew that if anything happened and there was an oil leak or some other disaster, they would be more readily forgiven by the general public if they had already set a base of sustainability as their platform. To be fair, they may or may not have genuinely accepted these principals of respecting nature, but from the eye of business, this move was very calculated. These strategies allowed them to fall into favor among the general population compared to their opposition as well as find forgiveness for imminent incidents that may occur as a result of their oil collection. They had the money to rebrand themselves as a preemptive life raft for the future of their business.

While it has been said that one individual can change the world, really, a change in the social-wide mindset is really where transformation begins. Although Elizabeth Lunday was describing the higher education system, this quote is still applicable to everyone. "The entire culture needs to change to incorporate sustainability", she said in her article *The Economy's Influence on Environmental Sustainability and Energy.*[5] She is explaining that the students as well as the faculty need to have a different way of thinking, and that this concept is institution wide not just individuals.[6] There are many underlying similarities and beliefs that are present within

[3] Adrian Parr, *Hijacking Sustainability,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2009), 16-17.
[4] Parr, *Hijacking Sustainability,* 16.
[5] Elizabeth Lunday, *The Economy's Influence on Environmental Sustainability and Energy,* (Alexandria, Virginia, APPA, 2010), 8.
[6] Ibid,. 8.

members of a common society. The belief that politicians need to be more neutral with their stance on sustainability is troubling. If their whole goal is to serve the people they represent, are they not being hypocritical on their own moral beliefs if they are staying quiet to save votes? Politicians should be open to new possibilities from any side despite the number of votes. We as the public should recognize and asses the risks that these people are taking and not instantly shut ourselves down to the possibility that change may be a good thing within the political sphere. In addition to moral and ethical values, the way the media and some businesses portray the issues of climate change are not appropriate for this day and age. Greenwashing and false advertising not only hurts the economy but also the welfare of the people who are influenced by it. If these changed are addressed, sustainability can move forward in our culture. Understanding that the information is out there to see both sides of the story is critical to being educated on the correct decisions to make. We as a people need to realize that critical thinking will be a positive step forward into making the change that needs to happen. This paragrah ties back into the first sentence which described a shift in cultural ideas. The foundation of who we are strictly dictates the way we are involved in this. Culture in politics or in any aspect of our lives is what drives this notion of how we as a group can change our decisions and mindsets when it comes to the world around us.

Cultural

As a social collective we are trained at a young age to feel a certain way about how we approach sustainability, be that with social acceptance or personal validation. "The notion is that *social/human capital*, the social bonds, norms, and values in a society, are important to environmental sustainability because they, in part, determine the nature of the society's relationship to its environment…," explained Hoon Park et al. in their paper *National Culture and Environmental Sustainability: A Cross-National Analysis.*[7] It is so important that we are so changed by sustainability. Many of our actions are dictated by others' reactions and how they treat the natural world. Our culture is so driven that it could be hypothesized that we are in fact more drastically changed by this notion of "sustainability" than nature is of our impacts. There

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[7] Hoon Park et al., *National Culture and Environmental Sustainability: A Cross-National Analysis,* (Journal of Economics and Finance, 2007), 106.

are still so many things that we have molded ourselves into to cope with the cohabitation we have been placed into. Three main norms within the category of sustainability is: being forced to act the part of a sustainable minded person in front of others, understanding that it is hard to change something that is not a physical threat but really something within us, and the western collective mindset of treating nature as "property".

There are some people that feel like they need to either be very supportive of "going green" or being sustainable just to look good to other people, but this is a toxic preconception. Robert E. Park said it perfectly in his article, *Human Nature and Collective Behavior* when he stated, "We have a private and a public life. In seeking to live to the role which we have assumed, and which society has imposed upon us, we find ourselves in constant conflict with ourselves. Instead of acting simply and naturally, as a child, responding to each natural impulse as it arises, we seek to conform to accepted models, and conceive ourselves in some one of the conventional and socially accepted patterns."[8] We have been taught that if you are not 100% to be what you claim, then you are a fraud. This is not an accurate statement but typically people have a large feeling of guilt or anger when they are accused of being someone they are not. People are afraid of what others will think of them if they don't live up to the expectations that have been set by society. Karl Bonnedahl and Pasi Heikurinen spoke on this topic in their book, *Strongly Sustainable Societies: Organising Human Activities on a Hot and Full Earth*. They said that those who commonly identify with green ideals or themselves as "responsible consumers", must always walk the fine line of not being too radical. One must always stay between being "reasonable and credible" but not too "hippie or extreme".[9] This is the way society creates a fear around being a certain way for fear of what others will think of them. Therefore, their lack of freedom is restricted to what they are really wanting to pursue.[10] Since this is such a hard balance to keep in check, many people don't want to put in the effort into trying to become more sustainable. This is something that can be changed with the help of knowledge and understanding. If society as a whole can educate

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[8] Robert E. Park, *Human Nature and Collective Behavior,* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1927), 739.
[9] Karl J. Bonnedahl and Pasi Heikurinen, *Strongly Sustainable Societies: Organising Human Activities on a Hot and Full Earth,* (New York, Routledge, 2019), 220-221.
[10] Ibid., 221

themselves on the topics and be more considerate of those who have different views than themselves, it is possible to find solutions that will help everyone involved.

Environmental degradation and our direct impact on it is a difficult topic to discuss within our modern-day culture. Not only is it charged subject that is commonly disputed, it is also commonly an intangible entity that is always hovering over us like a dark cloud. Robert Sandford discusses this in his book *North America in the Anthropocene*. In his work, he references Roy Scranton and his book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* where it discusses the "hive" mindset. This is where, as a group of people, we have unspoken traits that are the same among various groups of people.[11] These traits add up from all the past experiences that we encounter as a people generally based on geography but sometimes moving even farther than that. It is often hard to accept that we are the main causes to the problems we are witnessing because it isn't a physical threat, it's an internal and social construct made by ourselves.[12] Finding fault within ourselves is the hardest to admit when the time comes but it is up to us to actualize it. Even though this is not a physical threat like a person holding a gun to our head, it is still just as threatening to our wellbeing. If we accept the fact that we are the ones to blame for at least some of the issues we are coming across, that will be the first step to understanding what we can do about it. Constant denial will get us nowhere, but the first step is the change to accept the consequences of our actions and make an effort to understand that with everything we do, we make a larger impact on that around us than we can anticipate.

Furthermore, those living in the western world or even influenced by it has the innate sense of treating nature as "property". While most likely prompted by past religious influences, we have a view that nature and the "wild" must be tamed by our hand. We as humans need to make it civilized and control it to make it usable to our will. This is apparent in the ways we have accepted these notions into our laws and common behaviors. In Bonnedahl and Heikurinen's book, *Strongly Sustainable Societies: Organising Human Activities on a Hot and Full Earth*, they say, "Current laws treat non-human nature as an object, never as a legal subject with

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[11] Robert William Sandford, *North America in the Anthropocene*, (Canada, RMB Rocky Mountain Books, 2016), 109.
[12] Ibid., 109

rights."[13] Now although this concept might seem like a foreign idea, this is something that is necessary. Let's think about it another way to put it into perspective. Back before the laws were changed, women and people of color were treated the same way, as property, so how is nature any different?[14] When we make any subject an "other" or in this instance, property, we do not think of it as an equal. Due to our implicit biases, we view the subject as less than us and thus treat it like it must be dominated and used in a way we see fit because of our "god given right." If we would treat every living thing around us with respect, these issues wouldn't arise. It must be understood that to cohabitate together, the planet and the people must live together as partners with equal footing. We must understand that everything we do has lasting consequences on the things around us.

Culture is deeply affected by the changes nature has on us and vice-versa. The word "Akrasia [means] knowing what is right and failing to do it." [15] That was a word Sandford described in his book. It is a clear representation of what is happening today. The issues of feeling trapped to act the part of what society wants you to be, understanding the real problem is within our communal norms, and the western idea of treating nature as "property", are huge hurdles to overcome. If the preconceived biases that cause judgmental ideations were eliminated, we as a social group could move more closely to a better way of sustainability as we know it. We must understand that doing what you feel is right despite the stereotypes is key to success. These actions could lead to real change without shame. Acknowledging that the fright of climate change isn't a physical entity but still a present threat will help move through the paralyzing fear that is holding us back. We are not able to do something about it because we don't know how to start. Also, giving rights back to all living things, whether they look like humans or not, could be a huge step in equality and the respect that is needed to revitalize the world around us. These changes could change the way sustainability is viewed as well as change our collective mindset to be more responsive to that which we cannot see.

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[13] Bonnedahl and Heikurinen, *Strongly Sustainable Societies: Organising Human Activities on a Hot and Full Earth*, 65.
[14] Ibid., 65
[15] Sandford, *North America in the Anthropocene*, 137.

Collective

"Culture and the resulting cultural imprinting of a society have a considerable influence on how a society deals with itself, with the environment, and with the future."[16] This concept is communicated about in Felix Wagner's piece, *A Culture of Sustainability.* He describes the total encompassment of how our social lifestyle is directly influenced by how we treat the world around us and the other way around. Norms, values, morals and attitudes are all characteristics that show up because of the circular nature that is our interaction with the things of this world.[17] We are surrounded by things that are ever changing and constantly being revised and revisited. The social collective can be defined as the shared experiences and biases that a group of people share and accept as normal. This can be addressed in three main ways: how we understand and recognize sustainability in the same mindset, what we try to do to preserve nature, and what these implications mean for the future of our planet and ourselves.

Let us dive quickly into what a collective nature is and how it pertains to the subject matter. Robert Park talks about this notion of human nature in his article, *Human Nature and Collective Behavior.* In it, he is describing how we identify an organism scientifically. An organism is just a whole to its internal parts. The individual parts come together to make up and control the thing we believe to be an organism. However, that is not to say that an organism is just a bunch of single parts but rather how those single parts stay and work together to make up the thing that it is characterized into.[18] Therefore our society is like an organism. The actions determine the general behavior of the whole. He talks about how the mental and social differences between a city and a village are not just size of numbers of people, but rather the degree to which those said people are organized or integrated to create and enact action amongst themselves. He says that a community is not immediately impacted by the size but by the "capacity for concerted action".[19] This ties in well with how we impact and focus on sustainability within our world. We naturally tend to act in a certain way based on our preferences, but it's not about us as parts of a whole but rather the way we

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[16] Felix Wagner, *A Culture of Sustainability,* (RCC Perspectives, 2012), 60.
[17] Ibid., 60.
[18] Robert E. Park, *Human Nature and Collective Behavior,* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1927), 734.
[19] Ibid., 735.

work together and see things through. So what does this have to do with sustainability? The answer is everything. We as a people may not realize the true collective nature we have on ecology. We are almost the byproduct of the thing we are changing. The actions we take to change the things around us, change us as well. As a society, we must realize that idea that we have no one else to blame but ourselves. This is what makes it so hard for change, as previously stated in the paper. It is hard to point fingers at what is deep inside of us.

Maurice Halbwachs explains the social collective phenomena in her article, *Individual Consciousness and Collective Mind* perfectly. She described how in the psychologies, people are typically researching the behaviors of people as individuals. They should instead recognize and record the other external influences. People are a product of the things around them and it is truly impossible for a human to be isolated from anything. Even when someone is removed from others, we are such social creatures that the person still retains the impression others made upon him/her. [20] This goes for sustainability as well. It has the potential to be good because more attention has been brought to this climate change problem at hand. With the use of new technology tracking the changes of Earth, we now have readily available accounts of what is happening around us. However, with media coverage comes another dangerous pitfall: complacency. Since we are constantly introduced to multiple scare tactics that show our impending doom, people have become increasingly numb to the fact that this is a current issue. Many have become desensitized to the fact that although we have made great progress towards reforming the way we live our every day lives, there is still a long way to go. Again, it really goes back to what people think of you and fitting into the norms that are previously set up. More and more shocking news headlines are shown to get people's attention because it sells. It is not one individual person's responsibility to change the world but rather the social collective of all.

Now the question really becomes, what do we try to do now about this issue? We clearly have norms that have been set up within our society that dictates much of what we do every day. It would be in our best interest to understand these biases and educate others about

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[20] Maurice Halbwachs, *Individual Consciousness and Collective Mind*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1939), 812.

these issues. There is no getting around our integration within nature so why not embrace it and try to change our view point of it. Jessica Brown and Nora Mitchell talks about this topic in their article and case study, *Culture and Nature in the Protection of Andean Landscapes*. They describe, "The stewardship approach emphasizes the integration of people and nature and addresses conservation on land that is not removed from human existence and commerce."[21] This is really explaining the coexistence that a group of people and nature can take. These people knew that privatizing something that is open for everyone is not the way to go. With this method of stewardship, people can take agency over their actions and respect that which has been here for millions of years. They described these as important characteristics to preserve the remaining landscape and heritage that has been created. They describe that with these strategies of conservation and cultural heritage, it creates opportunities for more life within the ecosystem that already exists and merging it with the existing culture.[22]

Clearly there are a lot of aspects at play here. The way that society imprints all of us is prevalent in everything that we do. What we say, what we don't say, and how we treat each other directly influences the stance we take on the natural forces around us. We are individuals within a larger system. The image of a social collective mindset is prevalent when it comes to what we believe in as people. Generally, when we think of "nature" we tend to think of green grass or trees on our lawn, but is that not man made itself? These are the constructs that we build to make sense of the world around us, for better or worse. That is why, in some places like the Andean landscapes, human beings are trying to find a better way to live respectfully with the environment in the same places that we are trying to conserve. These are the first steps that need to be taken in order to fully understand the underlying issues that are plaguing our society today. This is not an isolated issue but one that must be tackled head on by everyone. Undoubtedly what we do to preserve nature is really changing us more than we understand.

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[21] Jessica Brown and Nora Mitchell, *Culture and Nature in the Protection of Andean Landscapes,* (International Mountain Society, 2000), 213.
[22] Jessica Brown and Nora Mitchell, *Culture and Nature in the Protection of Andean Landscapes,* 217.

Conclusion

We as a society are shaped by what we try to do to prolong our impact on the environment. All the things we do to try and "save the earth" is with an unconscious selfish motive. We want to give ourselves as much time as we can to take from the world around us for as long as possible. Very often we are not trying to give back to the natural surroundings but rather place a temporary fix on the use of resources that will inevitably be depleted. We are slowing down the rate at which we use up the planet that we believe to dominate. This is another reason why we should understand the full impact the natural world is having on our society and accept that changes need to occur. It has been shown through many examples how much we have changed in regard to this phenomenon and how much we have yet to change. From the way our political system works to the way it trickles down to our cultural identities, sustainability has a huge impact on all our lives. In our political system, we see it time and time again where candidates are either leveraging their green ideals to their advantage or being very general in the way they speak about the world around them. Many jobs have been created to research the impact we have on what we produce. Shijie Li, et al. talks about the impression human activities, involving carbon emissions, really have on the air quality and ecology around us. In their article *Does Modernization Affect Carbon Dioxide Emissions? A panel data analysis,* they speak about the impacts that modernization has created in measurements of carbon dioxide emissions.[23] They are seeing the drastic change that is happening within China and the rest of the world. People like these are really the driving factor for all the data that is coming out to investigate this world wide issue.

This paper also discussed the cultural and collective implications as well. We have a certain mindset that has been passed down for as long as we have been in existence, and those preconceived ideas create a rigid structure that we call traditions and culture. These are generally difficult to sway because they are so deep seated in who we believe we are. These morals are these to help us navigate life with an understanding that we are not alone. For years we have believed religious texts that nature is something for us to tame but that may not be the case. They say it perfectly later in the book, *Strongly Sustainable Societies: Organising*

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[23] Shijie Li, Chunshan Zhou, Shaojian Wang, *Does Modernization Affect Carbon Dioxide Emissions? A panel data analysis,* (Elsevier B.V., 2019), 427.

Human Activities on a Hot and Full Earth, that, "Nature without human domination is not empty but full of life."[24] We should have the understanding that we must live in peace with both nature and ourselves. All anyone must be willing to do is respect that which is around us and alive. That includes people, animals, and plants. We must understand and educate others that the things we do have consequences. While they may not be as straightforward as we think, they will have lasting impacts on every living creature. Can and should we be "sustainable" or even "green"? Yes of course. We should strive to leave the earth a little better than we found it, but we should not do this for the selfish purposes of our own gain. We must realize that respect and education of all living things is the key to a peaceful and restful cohabitation between all living on planet Earth.

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[24] Bonnedahl and Heikurinen, *Strongly Sustainable Societies: Organising Human Activities on a Hot and Full Earth*, 74.

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