What has NATURE ever done for us?

This week, the Prince of Wales revealed that the prospect of being a grandfather has sharpened his anxieties about our environment. Here, he argues that it would profit us all to show the Earth more respect.

The services and countless benefits to the human economy that come from Nature have an estimated value every year of around double the global Gross Domestic Product, and yet this colossal contribution to human well-being is hardly ever mentioned when countries consider how to create future growth. As I have long been trying to point out, this situation cannot remain the case for very much longer. We are reaching a critical turning point when humankind has to realise that people and the human economy are both embedded within Nature's systems and bioculture.

To some extent, this awareness is slowly starting to gain ground in the mainstream of our collective thinking. In part, this is the result of recent scientific studies and discoveries which are being translated into many inspiring examples of practical action. Our dependence on Nature is also...
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Force of nature or market forces? City dwellers benefit both psychologically and economically from tree-planting in urban environments, and the Prince of Wales believes that more countries should follow the lead of Costa Rica, left and right, which has doubled forest cover – and the income of its citizens – rather than pursue intensive agriculture.

There is nothing in Nature's elaborate system which is not necessary.

...already being reflected more confidently in those economic policies which enable people to achieve a better balance between keeping Nature's systems intact and creating economic development that results in more jobs.

But if we are to deepen this commitment to Nature's needs, it is paramount that we adopt a different mindset: one that veers away from the focus that has dominated the past half-century or so. Essentially, we have to become far more joined-up in our thinking and behaviour.

For example, the so-called "Green Revolution" which began in agriculture during the Sixties and quickly enabled global food production to expand and keep pace with the accelerating growth in population has also, among other things, caused the dangerous depletion of fresh water around the world, made a huge contribution to climate

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The short truth is the oceans are basically inhospitable

Shallow truths: the resources of the oceans are not limitless

Finding common ground on the kinds of national and international laws and policies that promote and protect Nature, especially when the task depends upon a multilateral or global process. Some of the reasons for this are on a much deeper level of human experience where there now abounds a disturbing lack of sense of the sacred. This is very important, if nothing is wasted, most of all Nature, then we can create the potential for the perfect kind of storm, to which it will be virtually impossible to adapt, let alone mitigate. This is why I was so pleased to see Tony Juniper’s new book, for me, it is the nail firmly on the head when it explores how our economic system is so disastrously misaligned with the realities that enable it to exist in the first place.

Not only does it provide readers with a clear and compelling explanation as to what Nature does for us, it also offers some very strong examples of how that misalignment can be rectified and it includes ways in which Nature’s value can be carved into everyday decisions within our existing economic approach. It describes simple things, like planting trees in city centres which could help to cool the air while giving city dwellers that contact with Nature which has such intercontinental biological benefits. Thus, they would improve well-being and reduce the need for expensive air conditioning.

On a larger scale, it also describes radical schemes like the one to New York, where the city has been given a modern water treatment system that relies upon water-friendly farming and good forestry practice. This is no small scheme and it depends upon the integrated co-operation of many thousands of stakeholders.

The result of such joined-up thinking is the biggest ever unfettered public water supply system in the United States, one that naturally sawed the city some 8 billion dollars and has dramatically reduced the use in consumers’ water bills. They have grown up by 2% and are now 100 per cent.

On a larger scale still, the book explains how some countries have begun to integrate national policies onto their national accounts. One of the pioneers is the Central American country of Costa Rica, which has taken a much more integrated view of how Nature and the economy interact, seeing them as two sides of the same coin. As a result, the Eighties, not only has Costa Rica more than doubled its forest cover, it has also doubled the per capita income of its citizens.

But policies like this should encourage us to see new economic opportunities. There are a great many more things in a much more joined-up way, all around the aspiration and unlimited capacity of the human imagination to do so.

One very positive development I have seen in recent years, and towards which I hope I have made some small contribution via the various activities and projects I have initiated, is the increasingly prominent discussion about what is known in the jargon as "natural capital". This idea defines Nature as, among other things, the services of ecosystems and assets which, if managed well, can produce dividends that flow from three sources: land, air and water.

This is not what generally happens in the moment. As Nature is used as a potential energy, often the land and air are wasted and we need to be redefined or replenished. It clearly does not require a financial expert to point out that this is the fastest way for Nature to be lost.

This shift towards seeing Nature as the provider of a set of economically vital services, rather than resources that can be used to fuel economic growth, is, for me, one of the most important conceptual shifts in history. I am pleased to say that this is already happening and it needs to go much further and happen much faster.

I am not so naive as to imagine that this is an easy transition, especially in those economically challenging times, but perhaps our current great freight economic circumstances offer exactly the right moment for the world to force this new attitude to break through into the mainstream.

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