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23 Hawter Road
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FEEDBACK: PUBLIC SEMINAR/WORKSHOP 13 DECEMBER 2002

REDUCING AND MANAGING WASTE

The need to give you feedback on this session is important because the lady doing the scribing was particularly slow and inaccurate and the facilitator was not 'listening' to what the group was saying. She was 'hearing' in terms of what she, herself, thought and not what was being said. If something was said and was not clear, then clarification should have been sought.

Right from the beginning the facilitator had trouble because the group was not fitting into 'her' expectations. The group wanted to define 'waste' as this is what we were talking about. Getting the correct idea of what waste is was very important to the group, but this was ignored until it could be ignored no longer.

When the group was allowed to talk about the definition of waste, it was done very quickly and no real discussion was allowed because the facilitator perceived that it wasn't that important and a lot of focus had been lost because we didn't know what we were talking about right from the start.

I believe there were only two definitions recorded. One definition was very sloppy, but as it was allowed to go up with no qualifying comment, I will make comment here. It was not really a definition, but rather a cute little inane saying that did not have any agreement: "The solution to pollution is dilution".

This sort of trivial thinking is dangerous and misleads with its simplicity. Many of the traditional sinks such as the ocean are full and cannot do any more diluting. In the U.S. there are warnings of mercury in fish warning children under 6 and women intending to bear children not to eat certain fish. Simply dumping waste, especially toxic waste into the environment in the hope it will get diluted is madness. It just doesn't work. We are talking about sustainability in these discussions, not about short sighted solutions. Waste, which does not degrade harmlessly, may be diluted temporarily, but through the process of biomagnification the harmful waste will get re-concentrated and move up the food chain.

Waste is anything which cannot ultimately be used and/or broken down in the normal cycles of nature during normal time scales appropriate to all of life. $CO_{2\ is}$ a waste because humans have caused too much of it, beyond that which can be used up by photosynthesis, etc. The human infrastructure is pushing out and replacing the infrastructure of nature, but the human infrastructure is not performing the services that nature performs. With humans there is no natural recycling of all the "stuff" they make all the waste. Only a small proportion gets naturally used up.

In our discussion, more could have been mentioned about education. On the cover of Waste Management Board's Discussion Paper 'Education for a Waste Free Future' it has a quote from Albert Einstein: "No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We have to learn to see the world anew". How can we possibly "see the world anew" so we don't repeat the same old pattern of mistakes that has brought us to our present unsustainable predicament.

It might be useful to understand how we 'see' the world in the first place. Fritjof Capra tells us in his book The Hidden Connections: Integrating the Biological, Cognitive, and Social Dimensions of Life into a Science of Sustainability, that "this process of metaphorical projection is a crucial element in the formation of abstract thought and the discovery that most human thought is metaphorical has been another major advance in cognitive science" (p 63). Capra argues that in order to sustain life in future, the principles underlying our social institutions must be consistent with the organisation that nature has evolved to sustain the "web of life".

Using the correct metaphors to 'see the world' is especially important if we are to deal with waste holistically, and bridge the gap to nature's infrastructure. With the completion of the Human Genome Project, one of the greatest metaphors of our time and that has existed for the past 50 years, has been changed. It is now understood that the production of proteins by our cells is a holistic process of the entire cell and not some simple, linear reductionist process of DNA (ie the gene) as previously thought. Please see "Unravelling the DNA Myth" by Dr Barry Commoner. A copy is found at www.mindfully.org/GE/GE4/DNA-Myth-CommonerFeb02.htm. Also, see "Humbled by the Genome's Mysteries" by Stephen J. Gould: www.biotech-info.net/humbled.html.

To look at waste from a new perspective is very important. We need to move to a new paradigm. It is no good to throw in some new technology that has no connection to natural cycles and only ends up causing lower grade pollution. It is important to focus on thinking and not on technology.

It is important that organic waste gets returned to the farm as fertilizer. At Enviro 2002, Gerry Gillespie of Resource NSW mentioned that Australia compacts thousands of tonnes of organic wastes, and the minerals and trace elements they contain, into land-fills every year – even though 75% of the nations agricultural soils have less than 1% organic material. Gillespie said: "We are now facing the development of waste-to-energy programs which will see even more of this material burned to a contaminated ash then land-filled, this material can never be returned to the land". (I like to call it 'haste-to-entropy'). He said about 60% of all materials going to land-fill are organic.

Once we can see in terms of new metaphors, ideas such as demand management make a lot more sense. And ideas such as 'for some problems there are no technological solutions', the solution lies with the community as a whole. The community simply has to come to terms with not producing the waste in first place. Simple!!

To me, the whole crux of getting to the heart of sustainability is to deal effectively with what we humans do with out waste. And in making nature's ways, our ways.

We cannot change the laws of nature! We must co-operate and find out proper ‘fit’ in nature. At present we are ‘Too Fit To Fit’. We are too smart for our own good. I think this is known as ‘hubris’.

Thanks for considering this feedback.

Regards

Ed Nieman