

Subsistence means survival as a free people

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The subsistence lifestyle is for primitives, who are best saved from their own ignorance by being forced to assimilate into modern, industrial culture. The industrial culture of the Lower 48 is the wave of the future; and the sooner the Native population gets with it, the better off they will be.

The above thinking is not only wrong, but it is perhaps ironically wrong. For not only may the present values of the industrial culture be replaced, but the new values which replace them may likely be those of the earlier subsistence lifestyle.

The point of this article is to publicize the conclusions of a growing number of writers who believe that the old, modified, will become the modernized new.

That is, an ever-increasing number of informed people see subsistence values as the only values which will allow us to survive as relatively free people in the 21st Century.

The argument of these writers is not so much that in some moral sense we ought to change our ways (although this moral sense is to be encouraged), but that we will find good, self-interested reasons for doing so.

Indeed, much of the old subsistence lifestyle has a natural appeal: freedom from the

market economy and freedom from all the dependencies centering around a need to find the cash necessary to purchase the factory commodities of that economy.

There is also the satisfaction of seeing the product of one's work, and the sense of confidence gained in knowing that one's survival is possible working in harmony with the gifts of nature.

Perhaps no argument is needed here: many of these subsistence values have never been completely discarded. Urban dwellers, when they can break away from their routines — fish, hunt, grow gardens, and build — at least those do who still remember these skills and satisfactions. And, underlying their endless fascination for the movie Western is a deeper fascination for those apparently free days of yesterday when self-reliant men and women could always avoid unhappy conditions by picking up their camps and moving on, unconcerned about welfare checks, retirement accounts, or mortgage payments.

This subsistence lifestyle has come to an end for all of us — at least in its pure form. In Alaska many things hastened its death: foreign conquest, colonialism, external competition.

But, worldwide, perhaps the basic reasons for the loss of subsistence values were the interrelated effects of overpopulation and the introduction of tools which allowed us to pro-

duce and consume much more than we needed for a comfortable lifestyle. Perhaps these two factors doomed the subsistence lifestyle no matter where one lived.

Neither of these two factors which ended subsistence values are positive values. By its own definition, overpopulation is something to be avoided.

And, although the new tools seemed at first to bring us wealth, they also brought forth afflictions which were not foreseen. They destroyed the environment, they tore man from nature, and in doing these things they created a culture which negated many of the satisfactions which this new technology promised.

With the help of these industrial tools, we were able to produce more than was necessary for our own survival. But, once we produced more than was necessary, much of this surplus was siphoned away by taxes.

A loaf of bread, for example, bought today in California, brings with it an accumulation of 454 hidden taxes — taxes on the farmer, the baker, the grocer, etc. — all of which the consumer must pay. (Pure subsistence economies having no surplus, had no taxes).

These siphoned taxes, in turn, are used to finance the growth of specialists who claim to provide us with the commodities and services we are now incapable of providing for ourselves.

As our dependency on these

specialists grew, the former subsistence skills and values became lost, we became estranged from nature — and we too became specialists. The new tools instead of increasing our wealth have rapidly depleted the bounty of nature and have forced upon us an inhumane and oppressive lifestyle.

But now, just in the last few years, a great turning point seems to be occurring in our perceptions of this industrial culture. Our earlier technological optimism seems to be facing self-doubt, and increasingly our modern tools are seen to be creatures of destruction rather than wonders of production.

Erosion caused by the modern plow flush 40 acres of

cropland down the Mississippi every hour. This process multiplied over time resulted in, for example, the Sahara Desert, once a jungle where Hannibal gathered elephants for his war against Rome.

Diesel powered destroyers have slaughtered most of the great whales.

The amount of garbage produced every year by the United States alone is sufficient to fill a line of trailer trucks which if parked end to end would twice circle the globe.

The world apple is rapidly being eaten up, and we are fouling our own nests. Clearly life on earth is disintegrating, and it is doing so at a rapidly increasing rate.

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Greig: Subsistence is a future necessity

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We are beginning to see that the modern industrial ethic of ever-increasing growth and consumption is leading us in precisely the wrong direction, and that the values of this ethic will have to be rapidly abandoned if we are to survive.

An increasing number of informed people believe that the way out of this global dead-end is to make a U-turn back to earlier subsistence values. More and more people and machines all consuming more and more of a finite planet is clearly

an unsustainable way of life.

Whatever the solution for the population explosion, the headlong rush of heavy industry must come to an end, and inevitably so, either by its own self-destruction or by the enlightened self-interest of the planet's passengers.

The sooner we can understand that less is more, the sooner we can begin to rehabilitate ourselves.

In the 21st Century there will be at least four compelling reasons for an individual to return to subsistence values.

First, the experience of living through the collapse of our present industrial house of cards will be so painful in the form of unemployment, economic scarcity, social chaos, and loss of freedom, that we will naturally gravitate towards a lifestyle which provides a direct connection between labor, food, and shelter.

Second, many people already acknowledge the anxiety which is an inescapable part of living in the complex organizations necessary to operate modern society. Caught in a large web

of interlocking dependencies, a distant tug shakes all. This anxiety will end when these dependencies end. The subsistence lifestyle in its self-reliant economy offers an escape from these dependencies.

Third, as we devote more and more of our lives to one skill, we leave ourselves at the mercy of slight changes in the economic climate. Far out on a branch of specialization, as the tree dries and the limbs wither, many people will become as endangered as the flightless dodo. Being not spec-

ialists but generalists, those with subsistence skills will not face this fall.

Finally, a return to subsistence values in the 21st Century — or now — would not be a return to the more difficult subsistence life of our ancestors. There were some good, hard reasons for leaving that way of life — a life that should not be romanticized.

But there is no reason for returning to those often difficult conditions. Small, efficient power and hand tools owned and operated by the individual or by his immediate community could be used to house us, feed us, clothe us, and provide us with a quality of life both previously and presently unknown.

The point is not to return to the days of stone knives and bone hooks, but to develop efficient tools and organizations on a human scale which we control but which do not control us.

Such a way of life would not only be sustainable, but would recover basic human values and satisfactions now lost.

Those urging a return to subsistence values face an uphill fight. One generation often has little regard for the next.

As long as the world ecosystem holds together for their lifetimes (that is, for another thirty years), many of those in leadership positions will be satisfied.

And, the same folks who bring us the evening news are those most dependent on the present patterns of consumption. But the ideas presented here are rapidly gaining ground, and will perhaps arrive in time to prevent our lemming-like progress over the cliff.