

# The Bioanthropology of Sustainability in Modern Civilisation

By Roger A. Hicks (18 March 06)

**Summary:** Because we are immersed in and ourselves so much a part of the Problem (of achieving sustainability for 7-9 billion essentially *insatiable* human beings on our finite and vulnerable planet), we fail to recognise its roots within our own animal nature and the artificial *socio-economic environment* derived from it. With the advent of civilisation, this artificial environment has replaced the natural environment as the focus of our behaviour, causing us to prioritise economy over ecology, while sustainability and medium to long-term human survival demand the opposite.

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When tackling BIG problems, we encourage ourselves and others "to think outside the box", but when someone actually does so and comes up with insights and ideas that don't fit nicely into any of the existing boxes, they tend to be ignored or ridiculed, especially when there are consequences for the way we lead our lives and make our livings.

This is not surprising, in view of what is known about human cognition, the fact that we don't experience reality itself, but an interpretation of it, produced by our brains, which is adapted to be more-or-less consistent with the views and attitudes we already have, and is very strongly influenced by our own and others' vested interests.

Our view of the *socio-economic environment*, in which we are totally immersed as we live our lives and go about our business (even as scientists) is no exception, and because we depend on it so completely, we are not inclined to entertain any ideas that might seriously undermine it.

This is the cause of what can only be described as our *collective blindness* to the perilous impact that human activity is now having on our planet, and the threat it poses, if not to ourselves, certainly to our children and coming generations. Since, despite all the talk and concern about the environment, global warming and the need for sustainability, we have yet to face up to the true magnitude and urgency of a Problem (spelt with a big P), that we should have faced up to 30 years ago, when publications such as "The Limits to Growth" by Meadows et. al. first drew broad public attention to the fact that an ever increasing population of technologically empowered, but essentially *insatiable* human beings was placing an *unsustainable* drain and strain on Earth's finite resources and carrying capacity. Instead, because of the huge implications for our economy and way of life (including millions of jobs and trillions of dollars of vested interests), we went into *collective denial*. Which is where, collectively, we still are, many scientists at the forefront, struggling both to and not to face up to the situation as the effects of our increasing impact on the planet become ever more apparent and threatening.

However, before we can effectively face up to the Problem, we must recognise its *root cause* - something which up until now we have been avoiding, although once our eyes are opened to it, it's obvious: our *animal nature*, in which our behaviour and the socio-economic order which derives from it are both deeply rooted. Unsurprisingly, in view of what Charles Darwin taught us about human origins.

We need to remind ourselves that man's behaviour evolved over millions of years to serve the survival and advantage of individuals and their family groups in the *natural environment*; it has had little or no time to adapt to the much larger social units of civilisation, which only developed in the past few thousand years.

Far from being a *fallen angel*, we are Earth's *Greatest* (aspiring) *Ape*, who greatly and dangerously overestimate its powers of perception, understanding and reason; like a child, and misled, perhaps, by the scientific name we have given to ourselves (*Homo sapiens*, indeed!).

For modern humans, the *natural environment* has effectively been replaced by an artificial "*socio-economic environment*", where we ALL have, and depend on, our niches, which millions of years of behavioural evolution incline us to hang on to and defend as though our lives depended on them (which they do, of course). The clearest example of this is seen in the tobacco industry's unrelenting defence and justification of its business interests (niches occupied by shareholders and employees at all levels), despite all the harm it is known to do, while a bigger threat still, because it is the health of our planet and its ability to support us that they endanger, are the automobile and aviation industries (and the millions of niches they represent).

This shift of focus from the *natural* to an artificial "*socio-economic environment*" explains why, even now, we persist in giving priority to the economy (the household of man), rather than to ecology (the household of our planet), when it is obvious (were we not in a state of *collective denial* and afraid of biting the hand that feeds us) that for medium to long-term human survival it has to be the other way around.

The truth - which far from fitting into any boxes, threatens to rupture or sweep many of them away (thus, the massive resistance to facing up to it) - is that our growth-dependent economy and the grossly materialistic way of life it engenders are both rooted in our primitive, animal nature and *fundamentally* unsustainable.

The *Royal Society* bears a responsibility like no other institution, its founding members, with the noblest of intentions, having set us firmly on the path to where we are today. I've sometimes wondered what they would think (especially Francis Bacon) if they could see us now. They would be astonished, I'm sure, at how far we have come, but also terribly concerned for our future. We owe it to them and to all who strove to improve our, their descendants, lot; and even more, we owe it to our own children and future generations, to pause and take stock of our situation, of where we are heading, and what is driving us there.

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