

Some Ideas For A Common Agenda

by Peter Montague and Carolyn Raffensperger

[The latest draft of this paper is online with live links at <http://tinyurl.com/33zw6a>]

We could benefit if we had a few common ideas to guide our work. To provoke discussion about the elements of a common agenda, we have put together these initial thoughts. This draft is centered on the U.S. because it is the place we know best. The picture we sketch here contains elements that, to some, may seem remote from the traditional work of environmental protection, environment and health, or even public health. Perhaps few will want to engage all aspects of this picture; nevertheless we hope there is some value in painting with broad strokes on a large canvas. Everything really *is* connected. Furthermore, we believe that people of good will, sharing a few common ideas and goals – and willing to form surprising alliances -- can create a successful web of transformation.

First, we want to acknowledge some of our assumptions:

The Golden Rule

The wellspring of these ideas is a simple, universal ethic -- every culture and every religion endorses the Golden Rule [1, 2], which says, "Treat others the way you want to be treated." This tells us, first, to alleviate suffering. This, in turn, leads directly to human rights -- we all have a basic right to a life free of suffering, to the extent possible. The elements of such a life were laid out in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which the U.S. endorsed Dec. 10, 1948.

From the Golden Rule and the Universal Declaration: Justice

For us, the Golden Rule and the Universal Declaration together define justice. Justice is **action** that tends to manifest the Golden Rule and the Universal Declaration; injustice is action in another direction. It is unjust, unfair and therefore unacceptable to impose suffering on others or to stand by and allow suffering to go unnoticed or unchecked. It is unjust, unfair and unacceptable to deprive anyone of any human right as spelled out in 1948. Justice is not passive. Justice demands action, sometimes aggressive action, conflict, and struggle. Without justice, there can be no peace. We stand with Gandhi, advocating non-violent action.

In recent years, science has confirmed what people have always known: community is essential for human well-being. We humans evolved as social creatures[3, 4] who cannot thrive when separated from our circle of family, friends, acquaintances, and animal companions. Social isolation [makes us sick](#) and leads to [an early death](#). This is one reason why racism and [white privilege](#) are profoundly wrong. At a minimum, they create social isolation, which leads to illness and suffering, and so they are unjust and unacceptable.

We believe that people of good will, sharing a few common ideas and goals – and willing to form surprising alliances -- can create a successful web of transformation.

Peter Montague is the Executive Director of the Environmental Research Foundation.
He can be contacted at peter@rachel.org.

Carolyn Raffensperger is the Executive Director of the Science and Environmental Health Network.
She can be contacted at carolyn@sehn.org.

Furthermore, when we damage nature we diminish our own -- and everyone's -- possibilities for a life as free as possible of suffering. When we create havoc via global warming or damage to the Earth's protective ozone layer, or when we pave over fertile farmland, or exterminate the fish of the sea or the birds of the air, we [diminish everyone's possibilities](#) for securing life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (to quote the [Declaration of Independence](#) of 1776). This is unjust and unacceptable.

As [Jeremy Bentham](#) told us in 1789, animals too have a right to live a life free of suffering to the extent possible. As Bentham said, the question is not whether they can reason, or whether they can talk. Their right to live free from torment hinges on the question, can they suffer? Their suffering stands on a moral plane with ours.

However, we want to emphasize that humans are dependent upon **all** creatures, not just those that are sentient. Science now confirms the wisdom of indigenous peoples, that we are all interdependent, all humans, all species. We humans are part of, and are supported by, a biological platform of enormous complexity, which we cannot understand, but which we know with absolute certainty [nourishes and sustains us](#). Even a child can see that, without it, we are lost.

Because rights and justice cannot be secured if our biological platform is shredded, we all have a right to intact natural and social environments -- environments that enable us to provide for ourselves the essentials of air, water, food, shelter and community, which we all require to prevent suffering.

The earth is our home and we have to take care of it, for the reason that we absolutely depend on it. To preserve our home without understanding all its billions of inter-related parts, we can aim to preserve every part of it. No part of creation can be presumed dispensable. We can say we know what's dispensable, but what if we're wrong? In recent years we humans came close to making the surface of the earth uninhabitable for humans because we failed to understand how CFC chemicals were damaging the ozone layer. It was a close call. Our ignorance is vast. As Albert Einstein reportedly said, "We still do not know one-thousandth of one percent of what nature has revealed to us." [5]

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Because the biological platform, upon which we all depend, cannot be secured unless we are free to take action to protect it, human rights and justice are essential requirements for human survival.

Good health is a fundamental right

What is health? What conditions are necessary for health?

Aldo Leopold [defined](#) health as the capacity for self-renewal. The [preamble](#) to the constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO, July 22, 1946), defines health as "a state of complete well- being, physical, social, and mental, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." The WHO's [Ottawa Charter](#) says, "The fundamental conditions and resources for health are: peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources, social justice, and equity."

The WHO [constitution](#) also defines health as a basic human right: "The enjoyment of the highest standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition." This is consistent with Article 25 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) of 1948, which says,

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his/her family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care."

The [right to health](#) is crucial to all other human rights

Enjoyment of the [human right to health](#) is vital to all aspects of a person's life and well-being, and is crucial to the realization of all other fundamental human rights and freedoms.

Our health depends upon three environments:

- 1) The natural environment (air, water, soil, flora and fauna)
- 2) The built environment (roads, power plants, suburban sprawl, chemicals, etc.)
- 3) The all-important social environment (relationships of trust, mutual respect, and friendship but also poverty, racism and white privilege, sexism, homophobia, insecurity, the sense that life is out of control, and so on). The social environment creates what the United Nations calls "the [social determinants of health](#)." There is a very [large body of literature](#) indicating the importance of these determinants of a person's resilience in the face of stress.

All three environments are always intertwined in all "environmental" work and especially so in all "environment and health" work.

The basis of community and the economy is sharing the commons.

The commons includes all the other things that we share together and that none of us owns or controls individually. The commons has been described as a river with three forks:[6]

1. Nature, which includes air, water, DNA, photosynthesis, seeds, topsoil, airwaves, minerals, animals, plants, antibiotics, oceans, fisheries, aquifers, quiet, wetlands, forests, rivers, lakes, solar energy, wind energy... and so on;
2. Community: streets, playgrounds, the calendar, holidays, universities, libraries, museums, social insurance [e.g., social security], law, money, accounting standards, capital markets, political institutions, farmers' markets, flea markets, craigslist... etc.;
3. Culture: language, philosophy, religion, physics, chemistry, musical instruments, classical music, jazz, ballet, hip-hop, astronomy, electronics, the Internet, broadcast spectrum, medicine, biology, mathematics, open-source software... and so forth.

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Even the collective enterprise we call the “private sector” depends for its success upon the roads, the bridges, the water systems, the currency, the mercantile exchanges, the laws, the language, the knowledge, the understanding and the trust that all of us, and our ancestors, have built in common.

Government has three main purposes, which cannot be separated from each other:

- 1) to guarantee the rights of the individual, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of 1948;
- 2) to ensure justice, and
- 3) to protect and restore the commons, holding them in trust for this generation and for those to come.

Prevention is essential

The 20th century has left us with an intractable legacy -- toxic and radioactive wastes, proliferating weapons, global warming, nearly two million citizens imprisoned, rising rates of childhood disease and chronic illness (e.g., asthma, attention deficits, autism, diabetes, Alzheimer's). We have learned the hard way that managing large problems such as these is prohibitively expensive. Therefore, our best hope is to create a culture of prevention -- to develop a habit of always doing our best to prevent problems before they occur, rather than paying to manage them afterward. This is the [precautionary](#) approach, and it lies at the heart of traditional public health practice.

Just as our great-grandparents made slavery unthinkable, our challenge is to make it unthinkable to finalize any large decision without examining the alternatives we face, asking who bears the burden of proof, and anticipating ways to prevent and minimize harm.

Our goal together can be to permanently alter the culture

We can aim to permanently alter the culture, not merely its laws, though laws can play an important part in both provoking and institutionalizing cultural transformation. Just as our forebears made slavery unthinkable, our goal together can be to make unsustainable life ways unthinkable.

Historically, in the U.S. and Europe, culture has been changed by social movements -- the first of them being the anti-slavery movement in England, 1787-1838. [See Adam Hochschild, [Bury the Chains](#), ISBN 0618619070.] Therefore we believe that our goal of changing the culture can only succeed if it encourages, appeals to, and engages large numbers of people.

Accordingly, we believe a common agenda could be constructed from among the following ideas (plus others that we have not yet learned about):

I. Build a Multi-Issue, Multi-Racial, Multi-Ethnic Movement

1) We can make our work explicitly anti-racist. Because of European and U.S. history, it is essential that we take a strong position against racism and white privilege. This entails a relentless, ongoing effort to change the culture of the U.S. In addition to being a matter of simple justice, opposing racism is crucial politically because the New Deal coalition that governed the U.S. from 1940 to 1980 was divided and conquered using race as the wedge issue, beginning with Senator Goldwater's presidential platform opposing civil rights laws in 1964.[7] If we ever hope to become politically influential in the U.S., we will need to build a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-issue coalition. Understanding and confronting white privilege will be essential in any such effort.

It is worth pointing out that the various movements for health and justice in the U.S., taken together, make up a numerical majority in the U.S. by at least two to one, and on many issues by far more than that. Therefore, the only way our adversaries can prevail is by dividing us. Race (and to a lesser extent class, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, and sexual orientation) has been the dividing wedge that our adversaries have used most effectively. (What are some other issues that our adversaries use to divide us? This seems worthy of considerable discussion.)

II. Reform the system for choosing candidates for public office

2) We can get private money out of elections. In principle, our republican democracy rests on the bedrock of "one person, one vote," not "one dollar, one vote." In the modern day, this means getting the mountains of private money out of elections, which in turn requires that [elections be publicly financed](#) so that every qualified individual is eligible to become a candidate for office, regardless of his or her personal wealth. (Various eligibility requirements have been proposed, such as the requirement that prospective candidates must gather a certain number of signatures to qualify as a candidate deserving of public financing.)

3) We can adopt the election system called [instant runoff voting](#) (IRV). In this system each voter ranks the candidates, 1, 2, 3, etc. If one candidate gets a clear majority of first-rank votes, he or she is declared the winner. However if no one candidate gets a clear majority of first-place votes, then the candidate with the least first-place votes (let's call this the "least popular candidate") is eliminated and his or her votes are re-distributed to the remaining candidates in the following way:

Each ballot that ranked the "least popular candidate" as No. 1 is examined and the second-place choice on those ballots is the candidate who receives that particular "least popular candidate" ballot. This process of elimination goes on until there is a clear winner holding a majority of ballots.

The system has many advantages over the current system and it is catching on across the U.S.

III. Protect the Commons

- 4) We can explicitly give all individuals the right to a safe and healthy environment. However, this alone will not suffice. We can also give these rights far higher priority than they have under current law, where they are presently trumped (for example) by the right to use one's property as one chooses for economic gain.
- 5) We can designate or elect guardians [ad litem](#) for future generations.
- 6) We can conduct annual audits of the commons (using consistent measures) with public reports supported by action plans for preservation, restoration, and prevention of harm.
- 7) We can establish a public interest research agenda that has as its first priority protecting and restoring the commons.

IV. Develop an Economy Whose Footprint is Not Growing, or is Even Shrinking

- 8) We can create an economy whose [ecological footprint](#) is not growing, or is even shrinking. Sustainability cannot be achieved without this bedrock idea, so it needs some elaboration and discussion.

A sustainable society is one in which the human economy provides the basics of a "good life" for everyone but the "footprint" of the economy never grows so large as to overwhelm the planet's natural ability to renew itself. As we will see, a sustainable society is also one in which justice and equity continuously pursued.

There are two parts to the "footprint" -- the number of people and their individual demands on the ecosystem.

Our current way of thinking and being in the world -- premised on perpetual growth of the human footprint -- is not sustainable. At present, the [human footprint is simply too large](#) for the planet to sustain, and the evidence is emerging all around us -- global warming; destruction of the ozone layer; decimation of marine fisheries; industrial poisons in breast milk; increasing rates of chronic disease (attention deficits; asthma, diabetes, some childhood cancers); accelerating extinction of species; and so on.

Because the total human footprint is unsustainably large, both human population and individual consumption must shrink. However, the only proven way to curb human population is to (a) achieve economic growth to escape the chains of poverty and (b) achieve freedom and opportunity for women. The evidence is that, once the chains of poverty are broken, and children are no longer the only available old-age insurance, then most women with prospects choose not to bear large numbers of children.

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This implies that all societies need sufficient economic growth to escape poverty -- which implies the need for more roads, power plants, ports, and so on. However, given that the global human footprint is already unsustainably large, the need for growth in the global south requires footprint shrinkage in the global north. This, then, is the goal of forward-looking (precautionary) decision-making: to make choices that can shrink the footprint of the global North, to make room for growth in the global South, to end poverty and liberate women so they can choose small families.

An end to growth-as-we-know-it immediately raises the issue of a just distribution of available goods (and bads). In the traditional way of thinking (at least in the U.S.), poverty will be alleviated by economic growth -- the poor are promised that, as the pie grows, even their small piece of the pie will grow apace. They need only be patient. But if the size of the pie is going to remain constant, or perhaps even shrink in some dimensions, growth can no longer serve as the safety-valve for "solving" poverty. Now we must begin to ask, "What's a fair distribution of the pie?" Thus a sustainable society not only has a sustainable footprint, but it also will never abandon the active pursuit of justice and equity.

Therefore, we need an economy that can grow (in places where growth is needed today to eliminate poverty, for example in Africa) but is not required to grow as the present economy is required to do (so that "developed" nations can achieve a constant or shrinking footprint). By "growth" we mean growth in capital stock, or growth in "throughput of materials" ("stuff"). A steady-state economy will still be dynamic and innovative. What is needed is a constant (or shrinking) "footprint" for the human economy -- but within that footprint, technical and ethical innovation can be boundless.

One proposal envisions an economy based on competitive markets plus public ownership of productive facilities (factories, farms), renting them to producer co-ops, with investment capital raised by a flat tax on productive assets and distributed each year to all regions of the nation on a per-capita basis. (See David Schweickart, [After Capitalism](#); ISBN 0742513009). No doubt there are other ways to achieve the steady-state economy -- all we know is that a steady-state economy (or an economy with a steady-state footprint) is essential. Perpetual growth on a finite planet is a certain recipe for a failed future.

Perhaps the nub of this issue is money lent at interest – [usury](#) in the original meaning of the word. It is payment of interest on borrowed funds that creates the requirement for economic growth. So the question could be framed as, “How can a society provide interest-free investment funds to replace and modernize infrastructure as it decays?”

9) We can organize our economy around the concept of zero waste. The present one-way torrent of materials out of the ground for single-use (or nearly so), followed rapidly by re-entry into the ground, will be recognized as an unsustainable absurdity. In a sustainable economy, every product will be designed for repeated re-use and the cost of its reprocessing for re-use will be included in the original sale price. [See Paul Palmer, [Getting to Zero Waste](#); ISBN 0-9769571-0-7]

10) We can guarantee full employment with decent wages to end poverty. The Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978 [P.L. 95-253] can serve as a model, with the added proviso that the federal government can serve as the employer of last resort. Everyone who wants to work has a right to a place in the shared enterprise

A steady-state economy will still be dynamic and innovative.

V. Prevent Illness, [Eliminate Health Disparities](#), Provide Universal Health Care

11) We can create a single-payer universal health care program, modeled on Canada's. This will be a health care program that seeks first to prevent illness and relies on "cures" only as secondary measures.

A central goal of any health system will be the elimination of health disparities - including disparities based on race and ethnicity, gender, and geography.

Health disparities are a human rights violation because they indicate that someone has been deprived of their right to health; therefore health disparities are unacceptable and must be eliminated and prevented.

NACCHO (National Association of County and City Health Officials) has [defined](#) "health disparities" as "differences in populations' health status that are avoidable and can be changed. These differences can result from social and/or economic conditions, as well as public policy. Examples include situations whereby hazardous waste sites are located in poor communities, there is a lack of affordable housing, and there is limited or no access to transportation. These and other factors adversely affect population health."

VI. Make Decisions to Prevent Harm

12) We can adopt the precautionary principle to avoid trouble and prevent harm, rather than clean up messes.

VII. Expressing an Anti-Racist Intention

13) From its early beginnings, European society has been based on racist assumptions that have produced unacknowledged systems of white privilege. Racist ideology predates capitalism and has been fundamental to the creation of much of the modern world. The U.S. has been caught up in this mindset to an even greater degree than most European societies. The first step is to openly acknowledge the problem in its many dimensions.

14) Expressions of an explicit anti-racist intention are needed throughout the culture to counteract hundreds of years of silent violence against people of color. Anti-racism can be expressly practiced in the courts, the schools, our elections, the media, the churches, NGOs, in our funding priorities, our public health goals and practice, and on and on. Racism is not limited to individual acts of meanness, as much of the culture would have us believe. Racism is a largely-invisible, embedded system of privilege that gives white people unearned assets that they can count on cashing in each day, but about which they remain largely oblivious. As Peggy McIntosh [has described](#) it, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." White privilege is difficult for some people to acknowledge because its pervasive nature means we do not, in fact, live in the meritocracy. The deck is stacked at birth by skin color.

Please contribute your ideas. Together all of us can be wiser and more successful than any of us alone.

VIII. Restoring Justice: A vision of the courts for the 21st century

15) We can develop a vision of the courts for the 21st century. Elements of this could include:

- a. Eliminating racist outcomes from court proceedings, with a goal of vastly reducing the number of people in prison;
- b. Ending the status of corporations as persons entitled to the same rights as individuals under the Constitution, to restore individual responsibility and accountability. The term "person" in the 14th amendment should not include corporations. The goal here is democratic control of the nature and behavior of corporations, as was the norm in the U.S. at an earlier time.
- c. Reversing the burden of proof, giving the benefit of the doubt to ecosystems, to future generations, to the luckless and the downtrodden;
- d. Taking seriously our commitment to future generations, to pass along to them undamaged the world we inherited from our forebears, and establishing our priorities in the courts to allow this to happen;

IX. Free Education for All

14) We can provide free education from pre-school through college. Investment in education -- whether Head Start or the GI Bill of Rights -- is an investment that demonstrably pays enormous dividends, generation after generation.

X. A Foreign Policy free of Imperialism or Colonialism

16) We can adopt a foreign policy that brings an end to imperialism and colonialism. Bretton Wood institutions can be abolished and new institutions of international finance invented. The aim of military dominance of the planet and of outer space can be discarded.

XI. Organize Society to Provide Time for Democratic Engagement

17) Society can be organized to give everyone time to participate in democratic decision-making. This will require a work-week shorter than 40 hours, living near the workplace to minimize travel time, and partners sharing child-rearing and household tasks. [See Gar Alperovitz, [America Beyond Capitalism](#); ISBN 0471790028.]

18) Gender equity can be made a priority as a matter of fairness and justice, and because, for many people, having time for democratic participation depends on sharing child-rearing and household tasks with a partner. Furthermore, worldwide, gender equity accompanied by opportunity and education, is the only proven formula for limiting human population, as discussed above.

19) We can establish as a goal that everyone can walk to work, with incentives for city planners, urban developers and local decision-makers who meet this goal. This is important for personal health, for gender equity (couples must work near home if they are to share child-rearing and household tasks), and for democratic participation (time not wasted on commuting can become available for community engagement).

XII. The Future of These Ideas for a Common Agenda

20) This is just a beginning. Please contribute your ideas. Together all of us can be wiser and more successful than any of us alone.

[5] Einstein quoted in [The Sun](#) (June 2006), pg. 48.

[6] Peter Barnes, *Capitalism 3.0* (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler, 2006), pg. 5.

[7] Four books support this point with considerable historical detail:

1. Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (1996; ISBN 0-8071-2366-8).
2. Thomas and Mary Edsall's *Chain Reaction; The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (1992; ISBN 0-393-30903-7)
3. Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion; Right Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (N.Y.: The Guilford Press, 1995); ISBN 0-89862-864-4.
4. Jean Hardisty, *Mobilizing Resentment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); ISBN 0-8070-4316-8).