

# choices for sustainable living

## DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

### ABOUT CHOICES FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING

The *Choices for Sustainable Living* Mini Session is an excerpt of the 8-session book. Used in many corporate employee engagement programming, this session, as well as the full book, are designed to create critical thinking, collaboration, and action around our biggest environmental issues today.

### Our Home on Earth

By Winona LaDuke



Giiwedining means “going home” in the Anishinaabeg language – it also means North, which is the place from which we come. This is a key problem that modern industrial society faces today. We cannot restore our relationship with the Earth until we find our place in the world. This is our challenge today: where is home?

Anishinaabeg is our name for ourselves in our own language, it means “people.” We are called

Ojibwe, referring to “ojibige” (meaning “to write”) on our birch bark scrolls. Our aboriginal territory, and where we live today, is in the northern part of five U.S. states and the southern part of four Canadian Provinces. We are people of lakes, rivers, deep woods and lush prairies.

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### GUIDELINES (45-60 MINUTE MEETING):

1. Send participants the mini-session to read prior and use the first 10 minutes for review.
2. Next, work on the Circle and Discussion Questions and have someone moderate time. Break into groups of 3-4 for large gatherings.
3. Use the Circle Question as an icebreaker with no followup or commentary. Then work through the Discussion Questions allowing everyone to offer their insights or pass. During discussions, active listening is another way to participate. It's OK to pass on a question.

### FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Meeting your sustainability goals will happen best when employees are engaged. In addition to this mini session, the entire book, *Choices for Sustainable Living*, is a great tool to further your progress and engage employees on issues that matter to us all.

### For more ways to partner, contact:

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On a worldwide scale there are about five thousand indigenous nations. Nations are groups of indigenous peoples who share common language, culture, history, territory and government institutions. It is said that there are currently about five hundred million of us in the world today, depending on how you define the term indigenous. I define it as peoples who have continued their way of living for thousands of years.

Indigenous peoples believe fundamentally in a state of balance. We believe that all societies and cultural practices must exist in accordance with the laws of nature in order to be sustainable. We also believe that cultural diversity is as essential as biological diversity in maintaining sustainable societies. Indigenous people have lived on Earth sustainably for thousands of years, and I suggest to you that indigenous ways of living are the only sustainable ways of living. Most indigenous ceremonies, if you look to their essence, are about the restoration of balance — they are a reaffirmation of our relationship to creation. That is our intent: to restore, and then to retain balance and honor our part in creation.

I would like to contrast indigenous thinking with what I call “industrial thinking,” which is characterized by five key ideas that run counter to what we as native people believe.

1. Instead of believing that natural law is preeminent, industrial society believes that humans are entitled to full dominion over nature. It believes that man — and it is usually man of course — has some God-given right to all that is around him. Industrial society puts its faith in man’s laws: that pollution regulations, allowable catches, etc. are sustainable.
2. In indigenous societies, we notice that much in nature is cyclical: the movement of moons, the tides, the seasons, and our bodies. Time itself is cyclical. Instead of modeling itself on the cyclical structure of nature, industrial society is patterned on linear thinking. Industrial society strives to continually move in one direction defined by things like technology and economic growth.
3. Industrial society holds a different attitude toward what is wild as opposed to what is cultivated or “tame.” In our language we have the word *indinawayuuganitoog* (all our relations). That is what we believe — that our relatives may have wings, fins, roots or hooves. Industrial society believes wilderness must be tamed. This is also the idea behind colonialism: that some people have the right to civilize other people.

4. Industrial society speaks in a language of inanimate nouns. Things of all kinds are not spoken of as being alive and having spirit; they are described as mere objects, commodities. When things are inanimate, “man” can take them, buy and sell them, or destroy them. Some scholars refer to this as the “commodification of the sacred.”

5. The last aspect of industrial thinking is the idea of capitalism itself (which is always unpopular to question in America). The capitalist goal is to use the least labor, capital, and resources to make the most profit. The intent of capitalism is accumulation. So the capitalist’s method is always to take more than is needed. With accumulation as its core, industrial society practices conspicuous consumption. Indigenous societies, on the other hand, practice what I would call “conspicuous distribution.” We focus on the potlatch — the act of giving away. In fact, the more you give away, the greater your honor.

Modern industrial societies must begin to see the interlocking interests between their own ability to survive and the survival of indigenous peoples’ culture. Indigenous peoples have lived sustainably on the land for thousands of years. I am absolutely sure that our societies could live without yours, but I’m not so sure that your society can continue to live without ours.

In conclusion, I want to say there is no such thing as sustainable development. Community is the only thing in my experience that is sustainable. We all need to be involved in building communities— not solely focused on developing things. We can each do that in our own way, whether it is European-American communities or indigenous communities, by restoring a way of life that is based on the land.

The only way you can manage a commons is if you share enough cultural experiences and values so that what you take out of nature doesn’t upset the natural balance — *minobimaatisiwin*, as we call it. The reason native cultures have remained sustainable for all these centuries is that we are cohesive communities. A common set of values is needed to live together on the land.

Finally, I believe industrial societies continue to consume too much of the world’s resources. When you need that many resources, it means constant intervention in other peoples’ land and other peoples’ countries. It is meaningless to talk about human rights unless you talk about consumption. In order for native communities to live and teach

the world about sustainability, the dominant society must change. If modern society continues in the direction it is going, indigenous people's way of life will continue to bear the consequences.



## The Earth Is Full

*By Paul Gilding*

The Earth Is Full. Full of us. Full of our stuff. Full of our waste. Full of our demands. Yes, we are a brilliant and creative species. But we have created a little too much stuff.

So much in fact, that our economy is now bigger than its host, our planet. This is not a philosophical statement. It's just science — based in physics, chemistry and biology.

There are many science-based analyses of this. They all point to the same conclusion — we're living beyond our means. The eminent scientists of the Global Footprint Network for example, calculate we need about 1.6 earths to sustain this economy — so to keep operating at our current level, we would need [more than] 50% more earth than we've got.

What this means is our economy is not sustainable. I'm not saying it's not nice, or pleasant. Or that it's bad for polar bears or forests, though it certainly is. I'm saying our approach simply can't be sustained. This is those pesky rules of physics. When things aren't sustainable, they stop.

Economic growth is an idea so central to our society that it is rarely questioned. While growth has certainly delivered many benefits, we sustain a belief that is crazy — that we can have infinite growth on a finite planet. A belief that somehow, markets can overcome the laws of physics.

Well, I'm here to tell you, the emperor has no clothes, the crazy idea is just that — crazy. And now, with the earth full, it's game over.

Mother nature doesn't negotiate — she just sets rules and explains consequences. And these are not esoteric limits — this is about food, water, soil and climate — the practical and economic foundations of our lives.

So the idea, that we can smoothly transition to a highly efficient, solar powered, knowledge based economy, transformed by science and technology so that 9 billion people in 2050 can lead lives of abundance and digital downloads is a delusion.

It's not that it's not possible to feed, clothe and house us all, and have us live decent lives. We certainly could. But the idea that we will smoothly grow our way there from here, with a few minor hiccups, is just wrong. And it is dangerously wrong because it means we're not getting ready for what's really going to happen.

See, what happens when you push a system past its limits, past the margin for error and then keep on going, at an ever accelerating rate, is that the system stops working and breaks down. That's what will happen to us.

Many of you will be thinking, but we can still stop this. If it's really that bad, we'll react. Let's look at that idea. We've had 50 years of warnings, thorough science proving the urgency of change, economic analysis that shows not only can we afford it, but it's much cheaper to act early. Yet, the reality is we've done pretty much nothing to change course.

We're not even slowing down. On climate change for example, last year we had the highest global emissions ever. The story on food, on water, on fisheries is all much the same.

So when does this breakdown begin? In my view it is well underway. I understand that most people don't see it. Although the world is an integrated system, we rarely see it that way. We see individual issues — the Occupy protests, various debt crises and growing inequality; Resource constraint, financial system overload and spiking food prices. Recessions, money's influence in politics or accelerating climate chaos. But we mistakenly see them in isolation, as individual problems to be solved.

In fact it's the system in the painful process of breaking down. Our system — of debt-fueled economic growth, of ineffective democracy, of overloading planet earth — is eating itself alive. I

could give you countless statistics and studies that show this. I'm not going to, because, if you choose to see it, that evidence is all around you.

Imagine our economy, when the carbon bubble bursts — when the financial markets realize that if we are to stop the climate spiraling out of control, the oil and coal industries are finished. Imagine war between China, India and Pakistan as climate impacts spark conflict over food and refugees. Imagine the Middle East without oil income, and collapsing governments. Imagine our just-in-time, low-margin food industry, and our highly stressed agricultural system, failing and supermarket shelves being empty. Imagine 30% unemployment in America and a real debt default as the global economy is gripped by fear and uncertainty.

Imagine what you will tell your children. When they ask you: "So, what was it like? When you'd just had the hottest decade on record, for the third decade in a row, when every scientific body in the world told you we had a major problem, when the oceans were acidifying, when food and oil prices were hitting record highs, when people were rioting in the streets of London and Occupying Wall St. When the system was so clearly breaking down, mum and dad - What did you think? What did you do?"

We need to act like the future depends on it. We need to act like we only have one planet. We can do this. I know the free market fundamentalists tell you, that more growth, more stuff and 9 billion people going shopping, is the best we can do. They're wrong. We can be more. Much more.

We have achieved remarkable things since working out how to grow food some 10,000 years ago. We have a powerful foundation of science, technology and knowledge — more than enough to build a society where 9 billion people can lead decent, meaningful and satisfying lives. The earth can support that. If we choose the right path.

We can choose this moment of crisis to ask, and answer, the big questions of society's evolution. What do we want to be when we grow up? When we move past this stumbling adolescence, where we think there are no limits and suffer delusions of immortality. Well, it's now time to grow up. To be wiser, and calmer and more considered.

We can choose life over fear. We can do what we need to do. But it will take every entrepreneur, every artist, every scientist and every communicator. Every mother, every father and every child. Every one of us. This could be our finest hour.



## What Isn't for Sale?

*By Michael J. Sandel*

We live in a time when almost everything can be bought and sold. Over the past three decades, markets — and market values — have come to govern our lives as never before. As the Cold War ended, markets and market thinking enjoyed unrivaled prestige, and understandably so. No other mechanism for organizing the production and distribution of goods had proved as successful at generating affluence and prosperity. And yet even as growing numbers of countries around the world embraced market mechanisms in the operation of their economies, something else was happening. Market values were coming to play a greater and greater role in social life. Economics was becoming an imperial domain. Today, the logic of buying and selling no longer applies to material goods alone. It increasingly governs the whole of life.

The years leading up to the financial crisis of 2008 were a heady time of market faith and deregulation — an era of market triumphalism. Today, that faith is in question. The financial crisis did more than cast doubt on the ability of markets to allocate risk efficiently. It also prompted a widespread sense that markets have become detached from morals, and that we need to somehow reconnect the two.

Why worry that we are moving toward a society in which everything is up for sale? For two reasons. One is about inequality, the other about corruption.

First, consider inequality. In a society where everything is for sale, life is harder for those of modest means. The more money can buy, the more affluence — or the lack of it — matters. If the only advantage of affluence were the ability to afford yachts, sports cars, and fancy vacations, inequalities of income and wealth would matter less than they do

today. But as money comes to buy more and more, the distribution of income and wealth looms larger.

The second reason we should hesitate to put everything up for sale is more difficult to describe. It is not about inequality and fairness but about the corrosive tendency of markets. Putting a price on the good things in life can corrupt them. That's because markets don't only allocate goods; they express and promote certain attitudes toward the goods being exchanged. Paying kids to read books might get them to read more, but might also teach them to regard reading as a chore rather than a source of intrinsic satisfaction. Hiring foreign mercenaries to fight our wars might spare the lives of our citizens, but might also corrupt the meaning of citizenship.

These are moral and political questions, not merely economic ones. To resolve them, we have to debate, case by case, the moral meaning of these goods, and the proper way of valuing them.

This is a debate we didn't have during the era of market triumphalism. As a result, without quite realizing it — without ever deciding to do so — we drifted from having a market economy to being a market society.

In hopes of avoiding sectarian strife, we often insist that citizens leave their moral and spiritual convictions behind when they enter the public square. But the reluctance to admit arguments about the good life into politics has had an unanticipated consequence. It has helped prepare the way for market triumphalism, and for the continuing hold of market reasoning.

A debate about the moral limits of markets would enable us to decide, as a society, where markets serve the public good and where they do not belong. Thinking through the appropriate place of markets requires that we reason together, in public, about the right way to value the social goods we prize. It would be folly to expect that a more morally robust public

discourse, even at its best, would lead to agreement on every contested question. But it would make for a healthier public life. And it would make us more aware of the price we pay for living in a society where everything is up for sale.

### **CIRCLE QUESTION:**

Use three or four adjectives to describe the future you'd like to see for our world.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. How would you define sustainability using your own words?
2. LaDuke says that, "most indigenous ceremonies, if you look to their essence, are about the restoration of balance — they are a reaffirmation of our relationship to creation. That is our intent: to restore, and then to retain balance and honor our part in creation." Why is balance important to sustainability?
3. Sandel describes how the U.S. has evolved from being a "market economy" to a "market society," in which market values infiltrate most aspects of our lives. How could we as a society be more intentional about the decisions we make and the world we create?
4. How could encouraging people to envision who they want to be and the future that they want help move people past political debates and into real action? What challenges might arise?
5. What is your role in creating the future you described earlier?

### **ABOUT ECOCHALLENGE.ORG**

Building a more sustainable world and healthier planet can't be done alone. Ecochallenge provides the programs and resources to transform behaviors at work, school, and beyond. Our online challenges are fun, educational, and engaging, while our discussion books go a bit deeper and teach participants how to reflect and act on environmental and social justice conversations. With these programs, we support individuals in connecting daily actions to science-based solutions that affect climate change to create a more sustainable world.

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