

Abandon hope: Live sustainably just because it's the right thing to do

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Do you "hope" that everyone will see the light and start living more sustainably to save the environment? If so, you may be doing more harm than good.

So say an environmental scientist and an environmental ethicist in a provocative essay in the March 2009 issue of the international journal, *The Ecologist*. John Vucetich, assistant professor of animal ecology at Michigan Technological University, and Michael Nelson, associate professor of environmental ethics at Michigan State University, challenge the widespread belief that hope can motivate people to solve overwhelming social and environmental problems.

"Is hope a placebo, a distraction, merely sowing the seeds of disillusionment?" they ask, in an opinion piece titled "Abandon Hope." The authors, co-founders and directors of the Conservation Ethics Group, an of environmental ethics consultancy, examine the proper role of hope in environmentalism. They suggest that hope's alternative is not hopelessness or despair, but rather the inherent virtue of "doing the right thing."

For decades, say Vucetich and Nelson, we have been hammered by the ceaseless thunder of messages predicting imminent environmental cataclysm: global climate change, air and water pollution, destruction of wildlife habitat, holes in the ozone. The response of environmentalists—from Al Gore to Jane Goodall—to this persistent message of hopelessness has focused on the need to remain hopeful.

But hope may actually be counter-productive, Vucetich and Nelson suggest. "I have little reason to live sustainably if the only reason to do so is to hope for a sustainable future, because every other message I receive suggests that disaster is guaranteed," they explain.

People are hearing radically contradictory messages:

- Scientists present evidence that profound environmental disaster is imminent.
- It is urgent to live up to an extremely high standard of sustainable living.
- The reason to live sustainably is that doing so gives hope for averting disaster.
- Yet disaster is inevitable.

"Given a predisposition to mistrust authorities, such contradictions justifiably elicit mistrust," say Vucetich and Nelson.

If hope for averting environmental disaster is not the right reason to live sustainably, what is? The scholars say we must provide people with reasons to live sustainably that are rational and effective, based on virtues rather than consequences. That means equating sustainable living not with hope for a better future, but with basic virtues such as sharing and caring, virtues that we recognize as good in themselves and fundamentally the right way to live in the present, they explain.

One advantage to such an approach is that it can motivate even people who do not believe that we are on the brink of environmental disaster, Vucetich and Nelson point out. It also clarifies the connection between environmental and social problems, a connection many people fail to grasp.

"Instead of hope, we need to provide young people with reasons to live

sustainably that are rational and effective," they say. "We need to lift up examples of sustainable living motivated by virtue more than by a dubious belief that such actions will avert environmental disaster."

Source: Michigan Technological University

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