

Opinion: Indifference to wrongheadedness

By Garry Bowen

An earlier column, “Indifference a Threat to Our Existence”, written several years ago, describes the difference between environmentalism and sustainability, both as a refrain and review of our current world situation, and as a beacon to a more contemporary look at the local situation, in light of the global.

It is now no longer indifference that’s our main threat – it is wrongheadedness. At least due to movements like LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability), 70 million strong, there is growing awareness across a number of levels of the necessity for fundamental changes in the way we produce and consume things that are no longer beneficial to anything other than corporate bottom lines. Sustainability is at essence a top-line issue, to which major corporate entities (WalMart, McDonald’s, Dow Chemical, Fairmont Hotels, on and on) are now tuning in, to the increasing betterment of communities they serve, although by no means overnight.



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Great top-line awareness results in great bottom lines as well, enjoyed by all. Tahoe can thus benefit greatly.

Locally, on both sides of the issue, we have awareness like

Ray Nutting of the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, on a recent presentation on the Lake Tahoe Basin Prosperity Plan: "You guys have nothing but beauty. Everything else has been taken away. There's no logging, no grazing, and no mining. And without government money, you'd be gone." And, along with the introduction of SB271 in the Nevada Legislature, sponsoring the demise of Nevada from the TRPA Compact, one of the local sponsors, James Settlemeier, says, he "believes the Compact should be changed completely" to one with a "focus on those areas where you can make the most environmental gains."

There is only one answer.

That brings the circle back around to the difference between environmentalism and sustainability. Even the League to Save Lake Tahoe has, at various times, thought of their work as "getting the lake ready for sustainability". From all these perspectives dancing around the issue of sustainability, isn't it about time for an appropriate mid-course correction in light of where the globe is heading? As Mark Hertsgard, author of "Hot: Living through the Next 50 Years on Earth" says, "At this point, all that's clear is that our civilization is entering a storm. There is no way around it." And, "As a journalist, you are supposed to be a watchdog. Now I'm a father. I know how dire the outlook is."

Denial is no longer an option, and denial is but a form of wrongheadedness – another is our current politics.

At each end, we have Mr. Settlemeier and others calling once again for dropping out of the TRPA Compact (purportedly the seventh time), and at the other, county supervisors with their own opinion still out of touch with the realities of the Lake Tahoe Basin, whether calling back the representative who doesn't toe their line, to those who think that the macho industries will somehow save the day. They won't.

In the middle of this, we have Norma Santiago, with dual

functions as both a county supervisor and board chair of TRPA, saying in defense, "It's more of a planning entity ... that recognizes the importance of economic development to reverse degradation."

Joanne Marchetta, TRPA executive director, thinks her agency is "caught in the middle" of two opposing state philosophies. Think instead about the opposing views of the TRPA and the League, and a third issue exists very much in the middle, yet is still not acknowledged by those mainly preoccupied with the co-dependent need to counteract each others' work.

Marchetta described the agency change since she took over as "redefin(ing) the intent of the agency from lake police to regional planner." Problem is, this may be too little, too late, as there appears to be a disconnection among parties as to how to accommodate today's realities, moving as fast as they are.

The key to a quicker fix is the third, structural, issue.

In 1995, when Steve Wynn was on the board, he commissioned his aide Monique Laxalt (yes, of that family) to do a needed review of the societal issues that justified the creation of an agency like the TRPA. The title of her white paper, "The Need for A Core Statement of Policy at the TRPA," alludes to the famous Alice B. Toklas quote, "There is no there, there" with regards to the existing TRPA structure under which they are not functioning. An infrastructure that essentially allows each entity within to operate with the weakness of thresholds, however strong they think they were at the outset, will be eaten alive in today's realities. The League and others are easily given the ammunition they use to counter or confront, in the earlier definition, the structured confusion.

I now apologize for not seeing earlier that when sustainability is sometimes mentioned in the company of those who still think of it as some sort of buzzword, even though I

work with a strong global framework, I recently realized that it is a positioning problem for Tahoe, given their ongoing distraction.

Sustainability is not on the outer fringe of environmentalism, making it much more daunting to absorb; it is actually the correct purifying filter between confrontational efforts and needed global realignment.

Confrontation is actually a last resort, when not enough attention is paid to important environmental issues.

Sustainability is in fact very simple, elegant, and scientifically profound enough to answer most of man's need to realign himself with the world around him; Tahoe is certainly no exception.

Tahoe's main problem at this time is that most of the TRPA solutions presented are hubristic in nature that automatically places them in defensive positions, when a lot of what they do is not defensible, especially if it alienates the very people and region they are charged to serve.

This is not only wrong-headed it is unsustainable. Sustainability can correct the course, easily – now.

Garry Bowen has a 50-year connection to the South Shore, with an immediate past devoted to global sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water efficiencies, and public health. He's also in the process of planning with his classmates their 50-year South Tahoe High reunion. He may be reached at tahoefuture@gmail.com or (775) 690.6900.