

What if the crux of the environmental sustainability problem is change resistance? ¹

A. Our thesis is fairly simple and centers on the process used:

1. When addressing challenges, all social groups evolve and settle on a central problem solving process.
2. **But what if a problem appears that doesn't fit the process?** Solution failure is the probable result.
3. Analysis shows the global environmental sustainability problem does not fit the current process.
4. It follows that to solve the problem, we must change the process.

B. Why does the current process fail?

1. Environmental activists see *proper coupling* as THE problem to solve, so that's what they've long been doing. ²
2. This traditional perspective defines their problem solving process. It's the (old) paradigm they live in. Most can see no other way forward.
3. However, analysis shows the proper coupling part of the sustainability problem cannot be solved because *systemic change resistance* is high. ³
4. **Therefore the crux of the problem is change resistance, not proper coupling. This is why traditional efforts have failed for the last 30 years.**
5. Until environmental activists acknowledge this fact and move away from the old process and toward a new one that sees change resistance as the crux, we will remain as stuck as a mule train in mile deep mud.

Proper coupling occurs when the behavior of one system affects the behavior of other systems in a desirable manner, using the appropriate feedback loops, so the systems work together in harmony in accordance with design objectives. For example if you never got hungry you would starve to death. You would be improperly coupled to the world around you. In the environmental sustainability problem the human system has become improperly coupled to the greater system it lives within: the environment.

C. What would the new paradigm look like? How would it work?

1. The new process would decompose the sustainability problem into two sequential subproblems: (1) How to overcome change resistance and (2) How to achieve proper coupling. **Until the 1st is solved, the 2nd is insolvable.** This fundamental law cannot be changed.
2. Environmental advocates would shift over 90% of their efforts to solving the first subproblem, because once that's solved the system will "want" to become properly coupled. This will cause the second subproblem to essentially solve itself, since the system's dominant social agents will now be competing to solve the problem, rather than reinforcing the high level of change resistance we see now.
3. Presently activists are attempting to resolve intermediate causes (rather than root causes) with symptomatic solutions. This will not work, because powerful social agents will invariably delay, circumvent, block, weaken or even rollback symptomatic solutions as systemic change resistance dictates they will. **Instead, one must strike at the root!** ⁴
4. This can be done by modeling the social systems involved. The human system is too complex to be understood intuitively.

¹ If this new perspective is intriguing you may want to follow up by reading "Change resistance as the crux of the environmental sustainability problem." This paper will soon be published in the System Dynamics Review. Until then, a pre-print is available at: <http://www.thwink.org/sustain/articles/009/ChangeResistanceAsCrux.htm>.

² For example, activists may promote The Four Rs of reduce, reuse, recycle and repair in order to properly couple the human system to the environment.

³ The need to overcome change resistance applies to any social problem. For example, currently in the U.S., conservatives and portions of industry that are benefitting from the status quo are exhibiting a high degree of resistance to efforts to overhaul health care. This resistance threatens to derail the entire change.

⁴ For example, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts attempt to resolve the intermediate cause of individual social agent resistance. But these efforts have failed to have more than a minor impact because the corporate life form as a whole remains committed to its fundamental goal: maximization of the net present value of profits.