

Tony Juniper on How Thriving Ecosystems Sustain Prosperity

by Randy Kambic

Leading environment advocate and author Tony Juniper has been an Earth champion for three decades, imploring humanity to urgently understand that we need nature to thrive. His recently reissued book *What Has Nature Ever Done for Us? How Money Really Does Grow on Trees*, first published in 2013, won the Independent Publishers Living Now gold medal. It warns about the severe environmental cost of poor land planning; informs how birds, coral reefs, rain forests and other flora and fauna help preserve and sustain our quality of life; pushes for new recycling laws; and seeks to make children early enthusiasts.

Formerly executive editor of Friends of the Earth, he serves as president of the Wildlife Trust, in Great Britain, teaching faculty of the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership, and is sustainability advisor to Prince Charles, a noted conservationist.

Why do you believe that economic growth and conservation can coexist?

We are measuring economic growth crudely with no sense of quality. One country can have 2 percent gross domestic product growth and at low environmental cost, whereas another measuring similar growth might be both causing massive environmental destruction and concentrating the generated wealth among small numbers of people.



We need to grow economies in ways that protect the environmental services that create opportunities for growth in the first place. It's a major challenge for a world hell-bent on simplistic, crude measures of economic performance.

In the Ivory Coast, where I recently visited, many poor rural people grow cocoa. One way to expand its economy is to produce more cocoa at the expense of tropical rain forests, which ultimately destroys the economy because forests are a major source of rainfall. Extended droughts caused by deforestation reveal that kind of growth is self-defeating. We need a more sophisticated approach, with the economy becoming a wholly owned subsidiary of ecology, not the other way around.

Are true eco-cities and eco-suburbs feasible?

We can design much more livable areas for the protection and health of wildlife, nature and residents. Nature also has a major bearing on the costs of a country's healthcare system. A number of population level studies, including from the Netherlands, reveal how people with access to green space feel better and experience higher levels of well-being, especially in mental and psychological health. Many Western countries are seeing increased incidences of depression, anxiety and other psychological

problems that can be reduced through greater access to open areas, green spaces and wildlife.

We can expect massive increases in urban areas worldwide in the next 40 years. There's an opportunity now to plan in integral ways to make these places better for everyone. Failing to integrate nature into them will ramp up the public health costs later on.

What can citizens do to strengthen U.S. environmental policies?

First, every election has candidates we can vote for that are more or less knowledgeable and clued into environmental issues.

Second, we can exercise power in our purchasing choices. Some companies take leadership positions on environmental and sustainability issues; others don't. With some research, shoppers can find the best companies to patronize, like those that prioritize low-carbon emissions, resource efficiencies and environmental protection policies. Many of them are advocating for more sensible, long-term environmental policies.

In the U.S., one of the biggest push-backs to the new administration will be from progressive companies that know the future has to be green; buying from these businesses strengthens their role and influence.

Third, we can add to the people's collective voice by joining campaigns and backing Earth-conscious organizations like the National Audubon Society, Greenpeace, Rainforest Action Network and Sierra Club.

Why do you believe it's important to instill basic ecological principles in youngsters?

In the future, if fewer people understand the implications of climate change, ecosystem degradation, loss of wild animals and rampant toxic pollution, it'll be even harder to embed adequate responses. The next generation should know how this planet works. Our world doesn't succeed just on the basis of technology. It's being run on microorganisms, the actions of forests, seas, soils and everything in the natural world. People that don't know this can do a lot of damage.

When more young people know the basics, it's more likely they'll behave in ways that reflect them. Progressive urbanization, with ever fewer people having direct experience of how nature works, is already an issue, so investing in our youth now will pay dividends in their future.

Randy Kambic is a freelance writer and editor in Estero, FL, and regular contributor to Natural Awakenings.