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Crafting a sustainable future for humanity

Date: April 1, 2016

Source: Lancaster University

Summary: Global efforts to protect the planet will fail unless we take concepts like equality and wellbeing into account, according to a new article.

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Grazing cattle.

Credit: Image courtesy of Lancaster University

Global efforts to protect the planet will fail unless we take concepts like equality and wellbeing into account, according to a new paper published today in the journal *Science*.

From flooding and crop failure to air quality and water pollution, governments around the globe are grappling with the challenge of shaping a sustainable future for both people and nature.

"Our quest to achieve a healthy and sustainable environment utterly depends on understanding how human wellbeing is linked to the environment and impacted by our management of it," said Dr Phil Levin of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, who is the Principal Investigator on the project.

The paper, led by Dr Christina Hicks of Lancaster University, argues that we need concrete engagement with key social concepts as well as science if we are to make fair and lasting changes to the environment.

The authors, who also include social scientists from the University of Northumbria and the University of Washington, identify seven key social concepts, which are often marginalised in efforts to meet sustainability goals.

The concepts identified are: wellbeing; culture; values; inequality; justice; power and agency (a sense of self-determination). The authors argue that these concepts are critical to informing decision making and shaping policy to make it more fit for purpose

They suggest that, while these concepts are harder to quantify than GDP or carbon emissions, they can be measured. The paper highlights methods already being developed by academics and policy makers to quantify some of them, including well-being, self-determination, values and inequality.

Without these perspectives we risk going down a road which protects the planet but is incompatible with human wellbeing.

Dr Hicks said: "Human wellbeing is dependent on healthy ecosystems but short term pursuit of wellbeing may negatively affect those same ecosystems.

"For me it all comes down to creating a more fair world -- we can act to protect our environment but sometimes those actions can increase inequality and that approach is not going to be sustainable in the long term. For example we have created marine parks and terrestrial parks to protect nature and biodiversity and quite rightly so, but in doing that we have sometimes taken away people's livelihoods, moved people off their own land. People have suffered. Lasting sustainability will hinge on fair and just solutions."

The paper highlights the importance of social scientists working alongside environmental scientists and policy makers.

Co-author Dr Sarah Coulthard, from Northumbria University, said: "Social science is fundamental to unpacking how people interact with their environment, but often the complexities of that relationship and the languages in which it is expressed can become a barrier to how it is used by other sciences and policy."

Story Source:

The above post is reprinted from materials provided by **Lancaster University**. *Note: Materials may be edited for content and length.*

Journal Reference:

1. C. C. Hicks, A. Levine, A. Agrawal, X. Basurto, S. J. Breslow, C. Carothers, S. Chamley, S. Coulthard, N. Dolsak, J. Donatuto, C. Garcia-Quiljano, M. B. Mascia, K. Norman, M. R. Poe, T. Satterfield, K. St. Martin, P. S. Levin. **Engage key social concepts for sustainability.** *Science*, 2016; 352 (6281): 38 DOI: 10.1126/science.aad4977

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