

Systems Blindness

Overcoming blind spots in planning for sustainability : spatial and temporal systems blindness



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"In a time of universal deceit - telling the truth is a revolutionary act". George Orwell

Tags: Culture/worldview-Reconnecting with Nature; Social - Politics and Influencing (Social Justice; Environmental justice); Whole System - Whole System Design

Challenge:

Humans have two deep-seated limitations in our make-up: we have difficulty in seeing the effects of our actions on people or places outside of our immediate vicinity, and we struggle to realise that delays may cause the effects of our actions to appear in the future, not right away.

The first problem is exacerbated because problems like atmospheric pollution are increasingly caused by millions of small, incremental damaging contributions to the biosphere (eg aerosols, car exhausts) rather than large scale, more obvious ones (like oil spills, factories). It is a death from a million tiny cuts. We see the parts but not the hole: out of sight is out of mind. This is spatial blindness

The second issue, temporal systems blindness, is caused because problems are often only noticed once an invisible, unknown bio-toxic threshold has been crossed and natural systems begin to break down. We have limited time horizons and often forget lessons from the past and also through the use of forecasting as a planning methodology in complex systems, take problems with us into the future, growing as we go. By the time we see the problem, the damage has been done.

Solution:

Change is possible if we are aware of the traps and our shortcomings and try to avoid them in our planning. Many of the changes we need to adopt are integral parts of systems-based thinking, circular economics, and Natural Capitalism and permaculture approaches.

References:

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