

Geoffrey Palmer: backing sustainability and development.

What kind of a non-sustainable world are we bequeathing to our children? Future generations will not forgive us if we continue to allow native forests to be plundered and to end up as woodchip piles waiting to be shipped to Japan. Photo: Gerard Hutching

sured in terms of their economic worth.

It is an ethic that native cultures have always known, expressed most eloquently by Chief Seattle in 1855 to US President Franklin Pierce:

"How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the memory and experience of my people. If I decide to accept your offer to buy our land, I

will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I am a savage and do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairies left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of the spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts will also happen to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth."

There is a strong linkage between the concerns of the environmental movement and the spiritual beliefs of many native peoples.

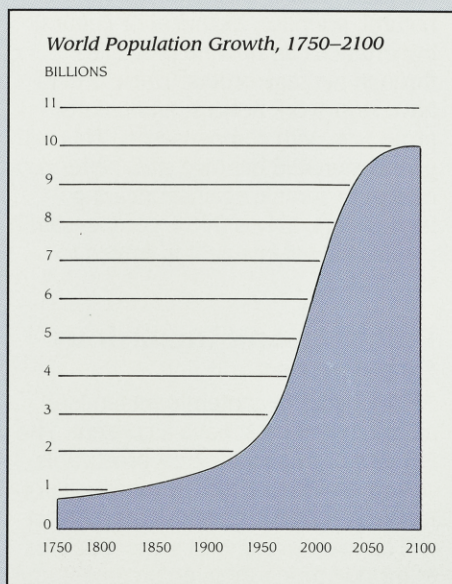
The beginning of the growth of that new ethical movement by Westerners can be traced back to last century, with the creation of the first national parks, and in the last two decades the trend has accelerated.

The Numbers Game

One of the keys to sustainability is the growth of human population, and that population's consumption of resources. It took a million years for the population to reach 2 million at the end of 1945. It soared to 5 billion in the 1980s and current predictions are that by 2050 there will be approximately 10 billion people. The United Nations estimates that the human population will eventually level out at 14 billion.

The present growth rate is clearly unsustainable as in perhaps 300 year's time it would leave only one square metre per person.

Effective birth control programmes for all societies must be clearly to the fore of any international moves towards environmental sustainability. Yet even in New Zealand there are those who argue for a dramatic increase in immigration to boost our economic growth.



Barriers to Sustainability

As the *Economist* magazine pointed out recently, given the right incentives and political will, humans could fashion a sustainable future. For example, in the field of energy, we are on the threshold of a revolution, where more will come from less (see article on energy). However, says the *Economist* "there's the rub. The reason that countries do not pursue sensible economics is that powerful lobbies benefit from the foolish kind."

In the end, if countries do not become clean and green, environmental collapse will provide a check to growth, but at the risk of unimaginable suffering.

Ecological sustainability is a potent concept if set in the context of the limits to growth and the rights of future generations and other species. 