



Balance

Good for trapeze artists and beer drinkers, seeking balance won't lead us to a more desirable and durable future.

BALANCE is helpful for bicyclists, knives and the Flying Zambezi Brothers' high-wire act. For many other purposes it is overrated. For sustainability, it's a mistake.

The idea often sounds good, in a low-expectations way. Balance is preferable to falling down, spilling the beer, or becoming mentally unhinged. Balance of power is better than tyranny. Balance of terror is better than war.

As a metaphor, balance promises calm or at least relief from disruptive extremes. But balance requires the even tension of opposites. It presumes a world of opposition and conflict. It implies that our best hope is neutrality, perhaps stasis. Sometimes the metaphor is appropriate – in some situations all we have is conflict and the challenge of balancing the opponents. Often, however, the tensions are superficial, unnecessary and only part of a larger and richer story.

The usual image underlying balance metaphors is the playground seesaw. One kid goes up as the other one comes down. The ups and downs continue unless one kid is heavier, in which case the fun ends in a physics lesson.

For our purposes, and for the kids, it is significant that the joy of the seesaw is in the motion, not in resting at the point of balance.

That reality also undermines the balance-of-nature metaphor. The idea of inherent balance in nature is a hoary old concept dating back at least to Herodotus,

who thought that predators and their prey were naturally in balance. And it remains popular to this day. But ecologists have found nature, even without human interventions, to be a good deal more lively than balanced. Rather than inherently stable, it is marked by complex and dynamic cycles of growth, collapse and reorganization at many intersecting scales. The joy of nature too is in the motion.

The balance metaphor oversimplifies other matters as well. In news writing, the standard story is framed as a conflict – one side against the other, perpetrator versus victim, proponent versus critic. Balanced reporting gives each side its column inches or its newscast mention, even if one side is the assembled elite of global scientific expertise mobilized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the other side is the US coal lobby and its pet contrarians.

Looking for balance in a world of opposing forces is especially problematic when the important story is not the conflict but the prospects for reconciliation, collaboration and mutual gain. Balance gives us even-handed stories on jobs versus the environment when what we need are routes to a green economy. Balance gets us advice on allocating sufficient separate space for work and life when what we need is to integrate useful and fulfilling work into lives that celebrate community and creativity.

In the pursuit of sustainability, strategies for balancing ecological, economic

and social objectives may get decision makers focused on profits and growth to pay some attention to communities and ecosystems. We may get subdivisions that cost a bit more but pave a little less farmland, and mines that hire a few more local people and leave less poisonous tailings. We may get more bike lanes, recyclable packaging and weatherstripping for low-income housing.

But we won't get a more desirable and durable future.

On a planet where human demands on biophysical carrying capacity are already too high and rising, and where billions of people lack material basics, the fundamental trends of growing damage and deepening inequity must be reversed. Balancing won't do that. Because it treats ecology and economy and society as competing priorities, balancing can deliver only compromises and trade-offs. At best our ship will sink more slowly.

The only hope for sustainability is seeing ecology, economy and society as interdependent, and finding ways to serve all three at once in ways that are mutually reinforcing. That is not a matter of balance. It is a whirl of motion, spiralling upward. 🌱

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