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# Treading Softly

Paths to Ecological Order

Thomas Princen

The MIT Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
London, England

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This book was set in Sabon by MIT Press. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Princen, Thomas, 1951–

Treading softly : paths to ecological order / Thomas Princen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01417-5 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Human ecology—Economic aspects. 2. Nature—Effect of human beings on. 3. Consumption (Economics)—Environmental aspects. 4. Sustainable development. 5. Environmental policy. I. Title.

GF41.P73 2010

304.2—dc22

2009034032

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Preface

In an essay on water in his classic book *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey poses a question: Is there a shortage of water in the desert? No, he says, there's no shortage of water in the desert. There's just the right amount.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, the wisdom in such an observation could be ignored. A great nation had to be built, an industrial economy created, foes of democracy defeated. Resources—timber, minerals, oil, water, soil—were virtually unlimited, and waste sinks—where the residues and runoff and combustion gases went—an alien concept.

That time is over. What was perfectly normal in the past—harvesting a resource until it was depleted, then moving on—is fast becoming abnormal. What were once strictly local environmental problems now quickly bump up against global constraints. Yesterday's living well is today's living well beyond our means.

Imagine, though, if back then the building of a great nation and the creation of a dynamic, growing economy had to be conducted so as to fit a resource-constrained continent, indeed, a resource-constrained planet. Or imagine that the early settlers actually arrived on a small island, more were coming, and there was no going back. In either situation, the economy

would have to be supremely sensitive to excess—excess extraction, excess consumption, excess waste. They certainly could strive for a better life, they could experiment and solve problems, but they couldn't strive for more and more stuff. Rather, they would have to strive to live within their means, including the regenerative means of forests and grasslands and fisheries and water supplies.

With a history of seemingly endless resources and innocuous waste deposition and great economic wealth, imagining such scenarios is difficult today. But not impossible. This book aims to spur similar thought experiments precisely because we have no choice but to actually live within our means. It is time to build a material system of resource flows, what we might call an “economy,” that operates as if we have just the right amount of resources. The goal, then, would be to live well by living well within the capacities of those resources.

## Images

So this book creates images of the possible. All too often, I find in my experience as researcher and teacher and citizen, people discover that the planet is in serious jeopardy and that life as we know it, especially in the affluent North, will be changing, and changing dramatically. They strain to see into that future. Yet all they see are (1) extensions of the present, only greened up and made more efficient; or (2) collapse scenarios, courtesy of Hollywood, gloom-and-doom scientists, environmentalists, and some prominent writers.

The problem is not that these images are entirely unrealistic or lack hope. Rather, they are not imaginative. The proponents of techno-green apparently only see the superficial overlay of modern life, its cars and buildings and parks, its commodity exchanges and energy supply networks, which are contribut-

ing to the problem and will have to be improved. Similarly, the gloom-and-doomers can only see the present minus a whole lot of energy and material. Since the only knowledge we have of such an existence, indeed, of such deprivation, is from the past, presumably a dark and miserable past, then collapse is sure to be, well, dark and miserable.

These images are certainly compelling. But they are not helpful, let alone hopeful, and most important, once again, not imaginative. Their proponents seem unable to imagine that humans, for all their frailties and abominations, tend to rise to the occasion. When challenged, they cope and they adapt. And they do not much appreciate autocrats and technocrats solving their problems for them. In fact, my long-standing view, one at least as plausible and as well substantiated as the views of the techno-greens and the gloom-and-doomers, is that humans are at their best when

1. they help themselves and help others;
2. they are productive, creative, and self-directed;
3. they have problems to solve.

Or, as my colleague Ray De Young reminds me, humans are not well adapted to affluence. We may go for the conveniences and comforts. But we are designed to explore and experiment and solve problems, and to occasionally struggle, and to do so mostly with others, as a clan or a team or a community. However, we are *not* well designed to deal with continuous abundance, including cheap food, cheap drugs, cheap water, and cheap oil.

So in this book I offer a “third view,” one that is, I claim, positive, though fundamentally different from contemporary, mainstream views. Some of the images in this view are conveyed by *stories*—vignettes, anecdotes, histories, case studies, even a parable and a fanciful dialogue. Others are conveyed by ideas,

concepts, words—in short, *language*, the bread and butter of a social theorist. My position (and that of countless philosophers, linguists, critical theorists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and many others) is that it is through language that we *see* and *construct* our world. The scientific, industrial, and financial trends all point to a new world; for that we need a new worldview and new language. So I ask you the reader to bear with me on this academic score. This is not an academic treatise, but it does spew out terms, what I like to think of as *nominations* for that worldview and that language.

This work, then, is intended to be both more helpful and more hopeful than the green-it-up-and-keep-it-all-going view and the gloom-and-doom-woe-is-us view. I will have more to say about hope at the end. Meanwhile, I urge you readers to do a bit of exploring and re-visioning yourselves, in these pages (though certainly not every chapter will be helpful) and in your daily lives, however big or small. See if you can find the new in the familiar, the stories and the words that help us all innovate and solve problems and adapt. See if you can do good work, however hard it may be, without an endless stream of goods coming from afar.

## Tough Questions

In my graduate class on sustainability, students often grill me (though I keep telling them I am supposed to be grilling them!). They ask hard questions like, If we consume less, won't it hurt the economy? Or, how can we really do things sustainably when our leaders don't have the political will to act? Or, what we really need are sustainable technologies, more efficient ways of using resources, right? And so on. One year, a student with considerable business experience, Mark Rabinsky, was particularly annoying. He just kept asking such questions,

and re-asking them. I'd declare dire trends and he'd express his skepticism. I'd raise my eyebrows and he'd remind me of the power of markets and technology. Trying to be the ever-patient and responsive teacher, I'd answer his questions—not always effectively, I'm sure.

But at one point my exasperation must have come through. Mark said, "I'm sorry to keep asking you these questions. I'm trying not to be obnoxious. But these are the questions I get. And I don't have good answers." Others in the class nodded. They too, I discovered, were looking for responses to well-worn questions and claims and assertions. They were already well versed in the environmental facts and the need to act. Their biggest problem, on a day-to-day basis, with fellow students and relatives and employers, was answering these tough questions.

So, much of what follows are answers for Mark and countless other students and readers and editors and audience members. These answers hopefully act as two-headed hammers, one head to knock down assumptions about what is normal in an unsustainable world, and the other to nail down new ideas, new principles, new language for a sustainable world, a "new normal." I hope Mark approves. And I should add that much of this was worked out through conversations and writing with two colleagues, Ray De Young and Michael Maniates, both of whom deserve more than a nod in this entire work, indeed, in all of my thinking on such matters. I hope they too approve.