

Quest for a Sustainable Society

Edited by
James C. Coomer



**Quest for a
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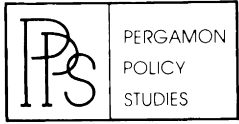
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ON BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

Quest for a Sustainable Society

Edited by
James C. Coomer

Published in cooperation with
The Woodlands Conference

Pergamon Press

NEW YORK • OXFORD • TORONTO • SYDNEY • PARIS • FRANKFURT

Pergamon Press Offices:

U.S.A.	Pergamon Press Inc., Maxwell House, Fairview Park, Elmsford, New York 10523, U.S.A.
U.K.	Pergamon Press Ltd., Headington Hill Hall, Oxford OX3 0BW, England
CANADA	Pergamon Press Canada, Ltd., Suite 104, 150 Consumers Road, Willowdale, Ontario M2J 1P9, Canada
AUSTRALIA	Pergamon Press (Aust.) Pty. Ltd., P.O. Box 544, Potts Point, NSW 2011, Australia
FRANCE	Pergamon Press S.A.R.L., 24 rue des Ecoles, 75240 Paris, Cedex 05, France
FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY	Pergamon Press GmbH, Hammerweg 6, Postfach 1305, 6242 Kronberg/Taunus, Federal Republic of Germany

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Woodlands Conference on Growth Policy, 3d, 1979.
Quest for a sustainable society.

(Pergamon policy studies on business and economics)
Selection of papers from the conference held
Oct. 28-31.

1. Economic development—Congresses. 2. Stagnation
(Economics)—Congresses. I. Coomer, James C.,
1939- . II. Title. III. Series.

HD73.W66 1979a 338.9 80-24158
ISBN 0-08-027168-5

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Printed in the United States of America

For Jane and Alice.

Daily reminders that quality is better than quantity.

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Foreword

In 1974 George P. Mitchell, President and Chairman of the Board of Mitchell Energy & Development Corp., resolved to set in motion a ten-year process to encourage the rethinking of growth policy, by sponsoring five biennial conferences and, with his wife Cynthia, offer the Mitchell Prize "to those individuals demonstrating the highest degree of creativity in designing workable strategies to achieve sustainable societies."

The first such Conference, in 1975, was the product of the quite sudden concern, in the early 1970s, about the physical limits to growth. The question posed was: ". . . how might a modern society be organized to provide a good life for its citizens without requiring ever-increasing population growth, energy resource use, and physical output?"(1) In the autumn of 1977, the Second Woodlands Conference, still viewed as a part of a continuing effort to define a "steady-state society," focused on alternatives to growth.

Meanwhile, academic researchers, business analysts, and government planners - in both industrial and developing countries - were asking hard questions not only about the consequences of indiscriminate economic growth, but also about a "no-growth" philosophy based on the prospective exhaustion of nonrenewable resources. By this time, renewable "biore-sources" and expandable "information resources," added to new estimates of the future availabilities of even the nonrenewable resources, made some continuing economic growth possible - and the fairer distribution of wealth and income made it clearly necessary.

The United States and, indeed, other industrial societies seemed already to be in transition toward a new concept of growth policy that would be neither indiscriminate material growth (measured by GNP) nor "no-growth" (also measured by GNP). Public attention, therefore, shifted toward the more

complex and integrative questions of purpose and human needs - "Growth for what?" "Growth for whom?" - and toward the apparent incapacity of social institutions to cope with the complexities of affluence, inflation, and fairness.

In planning the Third Woodlands Conference, responsibility for management was placed in the hands of the University of Houston. David Gottlieb, sociologist and dean of social sciences, became its chief administrator and James C. Coomer, political scientist and professor in the Future Studies program at the University's Clear Lake campus served as executive officer for the Woodlands Conference.

The original sponsors (Mitchell Energy and Development Corporation and the University of Houston) then brought into consultation and cosponsorship John and Magda McHale, whose Center for Integrative Studies had been moved to the University of Houston, and the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, whose Program in International Affairs had been collaborating with the McHales in a series of studies on basic human needs, supply potential, and the dynamics of development.

The Third Conference, held at The Woodlands (near Houston) from October 28 to 31, 1979, was the culmination of an eighteen-month process that generated ten commissioned Mitchell Award papers, nine winning open-competition Mitchell Prize papers, and eight advance workshops. These included consultations in Europe, Japan, and Mexico; meetings in Houston of experts on bioresources, work and education, information and communications, the economics of the future and the future of economics; and a summer workshop on "The Limits to Government," held in Aspen, Colorado. In 1978 and 1979, this was certainly the nation's broadest, deepest, and most exciting nongovernmental inquiry on growth policy.

The present volume(2) brings together the nine prize-winning papers from the 1979 Mitchell Prize competition and three papers that were finalists in the competition but did not win a cash award. The editor of this volume is grateful to those who served as judges for the 1979 Mitchell Prize competition: Robert Cahn, Environmental Writer; Murray Comarow, Distinguished Adjunct Professor in Residence, The American University; Robert W. Crosby, Department of Transportation; Victor C. Ferkiss, Professor of Government, Georgetown University; Peter Henriot, Director, Center of Concern; Michael Michaelis, Authur D. Little, Inc.; John M. Richardson, Jr., Center for Technology and Administration, The American University; Bruce Stokes, Worldwatch Institute; Albert H. Teich, Graduate Program in Science, Technology, and Public Policy, The George Washington University; Irene Tinker, Director, Equity Policy Center; and the Right Rev. John Thomas Walker, Diocese of Washington.*

It is not to be expected that a book authored by 13 strong-minded scholars from a variety of disciplines and from different parts of the world could, or would, present a monolithic view of what is wrong with the world's growth policies and what should be done about them. There is, however, a striking agreement on the propositions that sustainable growth is physically attainable and morally imperative.

The theme of these papers is diversity: diversity in approaches; diversity in priorities; the need for continued diversity in culture, values, and economic and political systems; and diversity on how to maintain diversity.

The hard part, all seem to agree, is managing ourselves. The quest for the sustainable society is finding ways to make complex decisions that do not require government to handle all aspects of governance for a necessarily pluralistic society in an increasingly interdependent world. Lao Tzu said it centuries ago: "Ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish," i.e., too much handling will spoil it.

James C. Coomer
Harlan Cleveland

NOTES

- (1) Dennis L. Meadows, ed., Alternatives to Growth-I: A Search for Sustainable Futures (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1977), p. xvii.
- (2) In a companion volume edited by Harlan Cleveland, the key commissioned papers, together with two keynote statements, are published with a contextual introduction by the editor. That book is entitled The Management of Sustainable Growth, and is also published by Pergamon Press.

*Affiliation is for identification purposes only.

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1

Introduction: The Nature of the Quest for a Sustainable Society James C. Coomer

One of the unique qualities that separates man from the other animals on this planet is his capacity for self-transcendence: the ability to make himself his own object. Man can stand "outside himself" and evaluate where he has been and a direction in which he is moving. He can assess his impact upon those things which are around him and he can adapt to changes, either self-generated or externally imposed. Those changes in man's environment that are self-generated can be examined to determine if the changes are beneficial or detrimental to his existence. If beneficial, the change is held to be an advancement; if detrimental, a catastrophe. In his capacity to transcend himself, man has learned that some changes in his environment which were once embraced as beneficial have, over time, become catastrophic. Upon learning this, man has attempted to find an equitable relationship with the physical environment so that he will not generate changes that may seriously impair that which sustains him. Seeking that equitable relationship is the perpetual quest for a sustainable society. That sustainable society is one that lives within the self-perpetuating limits of its environment. That society, contrary to some popular opinion, is not a "no-growth" society. It is, rather, a society that recognizes the limits of growth. It is not a society that continues to seek alternatives to growth. It is, rather, a society that looks for alternative ways of growing.

The sustainable society recognizes that there is one primary environment - the physical environment - within which all other environments function. All other environments - political, social, economic, to name three major ones - exist within and act upon the primary environment.

The quest for the sustainable society entails a continual evaluation of a variety of social, economic, and political