

[Home](#)

Dear Reader,

We read and hear a lot about saving the planet. This month we want to share an interesting take on this stance. What if this is the wrong point of view? What if the planet was fine, but the problem was — us? Sophie Constance, a sustainability journalist based in Australia, invites us to expand our thinking in this provocative article.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

***"Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards."***

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)



Issue 129

 [Send by email](#)

 [Share on Facebook](#)

 [Tweet it](#)

May 2011

Save the World, Not the Planet^[1]

By Sophie Constance

With Friday April 22 marking the 41st anniversary of Earth Day, we need to stop being consumers of the planet, and start being citizens of the world.

"Save the planet," we hear endlessly. But a planet is just a rock orbiting a star. It's a self-correcting

system and it will be here for a long time after we're gone. The world, on the other hand, is the interlocking community of people, the environment and millions of species of plants and animals. The planet doesn't need saving. The world absolutely does.

This isn't an artificial, academic distinction: it's crucial to climate change arguments, how we react to disasters, how we approach solving the problem and how we see our place on earth.

Anti-climate change arguments get a lot of gut level support by confusing the planet with our world. The planet is 4.6 billion years old; heavy industry started 200 years ago. "Two hundred years versus four and a half billion years and we have the conceit to think we are a threat," joked the late US satirist, George Carlin. He's right: our carbon emissions won't kill the planet. But human-caused climate change will alter the world we depend on for survival. (It's worth remembering the so-called "climate-change controversy" is in the press, not academic journals.)

On the opposite side, sustainable living is painted as a duty that's "good for the planet." No, the planet's fine. It's good for us. It's not a moral issue, but a survival issue, and that should galvanise us.

The threat we face is real. When we think about the world, not the planet, we can face up to this. It also stops us quibbling about what's human-caused and what's not. The focus of our attention and efforts should be on the major risk to humanity and our world's amazing biodiversity — whether it's the 2010 floods in Pakistan, 2011 floods in Queensland, wildfires in Russia and Texas, landslides in China, or the recent earthquakes in Christchurch and Japan; whether it's definitely, maybe or not at all caused by climate change.

It also broadens the issue to everything that affects us. "Saving the planet" is a green issue, but saving the world means addressing social, environmental, economic and cultural issues that would allow for total sustainability.

Finally, talking about the world, not the planet, changes how we see our role here. In "saving the planet," humanity gives itself the role of custodian. It implies the planet is ours to use—and that's exactly the attitude that got us into this mess.

If we want to save our world, then we need to remember it is the many communities, not just of human beings, but of plants and animals (ecosystems). Instead of behaving like citizens, we've behaved like consumers. Even the projects to change our behaviour still frame us as consumers.

This is unsurprising, since we've reframed the whole idea of citizenship as a commercial relationship. There's a crucial difference between being a "taxpayer" (a consumer) and a citizen, a member of society, contributing. Governments referring to citizens as "clients" is equally wrong: a government is not a service provider in the same sense. This consumer approach to democracy encourages passive citizenship.

The same dichotomy crops up with green initiatives. Fiddling about with plastic bags and tin cans won't solve the problem, because it leaves the core vision of humans as consumers untouched.

Pricing carbon or an ETS^[2], whether right or wrong, still reinforces the commercial transaction as king. We need to be more engaged in deciding the direction of our future from the beginning.

Being citizens means we don't leave it up to our governments, but we don't go it alone either: we work as members of society. Although thousands of individuals and not-for-profits are working

globally, they can't do it alone (and there are effectiveness issues there), especially when it comes to governance and policy issues. We need to reclaim our power as citizens to engage with our governments and each other to build our capacity.

At the moment in Australia, we do this through "debate," but the debate is often simply about means: how can we continue to live to consume? Moreover, it's dominated by powerful interest groups. For example, as Peter Martin recently wrote in the Australian newspaper *The Age* many people with expert knowledge on the carbon issue are being stonewalled by the government. Effective representation goes far beyond specialized roundtables of business elites.

Dialogue and deliberation prove much more effective than debate. Australian governments aren't yet comfortable with this, fearing they'll lose control. They need to trust the process, and trust how insightful the public can be given the chance. This is the only way to create a proper engagement program that takes every aspect of our world into account—the environment and businesses, but also the needs of society, communities and cultures.

We need to reconnect the different environmental and socio-political issues that face us and the different departments dealing with them, reconnect governments and their citizens, and reconnect our needs with the world's.

In overcoming oppression and deprivation such as predators, hunger and disease, we gave birth to a new world: a world at once beautiful and terrible. Let's unlock the greatness of humanity again.





About Sophie Constance

[Sophie Constance](#) is a leader in the field of "societal management" and its integration with corporate strategy. She is Director of Societal Business - Corporate Social Leadership, a strategy and research advisory that helps businesses create value through sustainability management. Sophie is also a convenor of reframing issues with multi-sectoral organizations that represent the whole system of society, for longer lasting solutions. She lives in Australia

[1] "This article has appeared on [CSRwire Talkback](#)." With permission of author

[2] ETS: Emissions Trading Scheme. An Emissions Trading Scheme is a means by which Government can set a cap on what quantity of climate changing emissions are permitted.

 Send by email

 Share on Facebook

 Tweet it



LIM News is published by LIM LLC
 Editor: Isabel Rimanoczy
 Editing Support: Tony Pearson
 Ph:
 E-mail: newsletter@LIMglobal.net
<http://www.LIMglobal.net>

ARL - Action Reflection Learning™ and Earning While Learning™ are registered trademarks, owned by LIM LLC.
Copyright © 2011 LIM LLC. All rights reserved.