

## The Oil Drum: Campfire

### Discussions about Energy and Our Future

#### Towards 'The Greatest Good'?

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on January 15, 2009 - 10:31am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Tags: [campfire](#), [gifford pinchot](#), [greatest good](#), [original](#), [sustainability](#) [[list all tags](#)]

Below the fold is a guest post by [Cornelius](#), a scientist at an East Coast university (with whom I spent some time with when studying in Vermont).

[Here are the guidelines](#) for the Wed night/Sat. Campfire slot - please consider submitting a post if you have expertise/experience/big ideas on either the supply or demand side of our energy future to: [todcampfire@gmail.com](mailto:todcampfire@gmail.com) or [campfire@theoil drum.com](mailto:campfire@theoil drum.com).

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## The Greatest Good

As events seemingly continue spiraling out of control with each passing week, we find comfort in the routines we have come to know, until those routines themselves are disrupted. Food, education, transportation systems, entertainment are all functioning despite the economic malaise. Many of us, genetically predisposed towards a new happy etch-a-sketch each morning, look on the bright side of things - we listen to optimistic rhetoric that new technology, better leaders and the human spirit will solve the myriad problems facing humanity. Others, schooled either in hard knocks, or in hard science, see the upcoming clash between natural resources and natural growth in human material demand.

Since I had an open invitation, I decided to take a step back in addressing the problems we face and just asking a question. All this education, banter and effort on the website [theoil drum.com](http://theoil drum.com) (one of my favorite destinations when I'm online) is for a purpose. The writers seem to believe that by pinning down the date of peak and future decline rate of oil and articulating the pros and cons of various energy alternatives that somehow the world will be made better. Perhaps so. But towards what end?

Famed conservationist Gifford Pinchot is oft quoted saying 'the greatest good for the greatest number' and in forestry circles it is a philosophical question to 'define' what he meant. (The actual quote is "*Conservation is the foresighted utilization, preservation and/or renewal of forests, waters, lands and minerals, for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time.*"). But I think this is a worthwhile line of questioning/defining to pursue, especially as difficult choices are going to be made with increasing occasion, and to know ones purpose before a decision is made is basic strategy.

In my field there are definitional differences regarding sustainability. "Weak form Sustainability" is centered around an assumption that human-made capital can effectively substitute for natural capital and the services from ecological systems. "Strong form sustainability" is related to the

carrying capacity based on Net Primary Product (NNP) derived from the amount of vegetation produced annually over a given land area.

With this as a backdrop, we have a new, hopeful, science leaning administration in Washington, who will soon be making important decisions; ostensibly to create jobs, bail-out certain 'key' industries, stem the advance of climate change via reduced carbon emissions, etc.

But what is the **goal** and what **should** it be? Using Pinchots tag-line 'greatest good':

Greatest good for the greatest number of people? (Happiness? 'utility'?,etc.)  
Greatest good for greatest number of Americans (in direct contrast to those in other countries)  
Greatest good for greatest living biomass?  
Greatest *near* term good?  
Greatest good for greatest long term number of people on planet?  
Greatest 'perceived' good - reality be damned?  
Greatest good for those in power?  
Greatest good for the advancement of one species (ours) over others, even if subconscious?  
Greatest good-will?  
Greatest proximity to steady state?  
Greatest number of genes into next generation of family and friends or like-minded folk?  
A multicriteria matrix of all the above?  
None of the above?

There seem to be cracks in the mortar of 'greatest economic growth' mantra, and things are going to change whether our politicians will them to or not. But sorting through the answers to the above questions, either outwardly spoken or inwardly felt will precede our actions. Our new president has voiced that Americans will have to think differently on how we use energy. Before that he/we might have to think on some bigger questions. What is 'the greatest good' and how should we dispassionately arrive at it?



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