

Can we walk the “Middle Path” in coping with global environmental change?

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Abstract

Global man-made environmental change is occurring alongside cultural change. In different cultures, value systems are the foundations of different knowledge systems, defining man-nature relationships. The dilemma we are confronted with today is that we cling to value systems which either have been the source of technological progress and wealth in the so-called “developed countries” or the guarantor of social cohesion in relatively closed, traditional or indigenous societies, mainly in the so-called “developing countries”. Both value systems adapt too slowly to rapid environmental and social change. The tradition of a value-free economics developed in the West has brought technological progress and wealth but is unable to satisfactorily tackle the degradation of environmental functions. Recognizing that it is tempting to look at Eastern and traditional knowledge systems, in which values, norms and beliefs are an indispensable part. The question arises whether there can be “a middle path” between both which leads to sustainability in the use of our natural resources. We develop the argument that in order to do so it is necessary but not sufficient to improve technology and efficiency of methods. Given the scale and speed of change, it is questionable whether Eastern knowledge systems, like Buddhism are capable to do so alone as well. The key towards progress in this respect is an initial act of cognition and awareness building, triggering adaptive institutional change at all levels. Apart from creating new markets, new laws and new organizations, like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or an Intergovernmental Panel on Land Degradation it is necessary to analyse and understand individual motives and values, which are critical to solving global environmental threats.