a guide to radical sustainability in grand rapids
Green is the new black. It's sexy. It's fashionable. It's the new way to distinguish one's self as socially responsible. It can be as simple as the swish of a credit card for a reusable shopping bag, or more extensive with the signing of an online petition or holding of a sign at a rally. Either way, we have something tangible to tout to others that we've done our part and can sleep at the end of the day.

But this consumption and “political action” is disingenuous at best, and more darkly, perpetuating our culture’s horrific destruction of the earth at worst. As with so many social movements, environmentalism has become a victim of ruthless, insincere commodification. But the ironic twist is that commodification and consumption are exactly what drive the destruction. And despite how often we've been told to vote, write letters, and show companies with our money that we won't stand for this devastation, these actions, this “consumer activism,” these safe-inside-the-lines political actions, are not tempting the powers-that-be to reverse the course. It is time to stop sitting around waiting for things to change, and take action in our own hands.

We believe that the realities of global warming are real and very urgent. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which consists of thousands of the top climate scientists from around the world, estimates that humanity needs to collectively and globally reduce current levels of carbon emissions by 80% by 2050. There is no indication that this reduction is happening, in part because the US and other wealthy nations are blocking any real efforts to have global standards put in place immediately.

In addition, most of the so-called “solutions” operate on the assumption that humanity can achieve necessary carbon emission reductions within a capitalist framework. We wholeheartedly reject this framework and believe we need a radical restructuring of society in order to avoid further ecological catastrophe. For us, a “Green Jobs” plan will not work because it does not challenge the current economic system and it enables the worst polluters to continue to make incredible amounts of profit. If there were a massive redistribution of wealth we would not need a “jobs program.”
Imagine if people could spend more time with their children, growing their own food, making art, learning new skills and building community rather than working at a job that they despise for companies that are fundamentally part of the problem. We don't have a definitive plan for what society will look like when we truly live in harmony with all life, but we firmly believe that the current economic system is NOT sustainable. We want to resist both the current system that is destroying life on this planet and we want to collectively create viable solutions and models for how we can live in such a way that does not require all the destructive practices inherent in contemporary industrial civilization.

While Grand Rapids has been touted in many circles as a “green city”, it is our concern that this is just another shallow label that we cannot afford. We came together out of mutual concern for the state of our city and our environment, and with a desire for a truly, radically sustainable Grand Rapids, free from the capitalist buzzword conceptualization of sustainability.

The result is this zine, meant as a guide to radically rethink our priorities and to invite others who want to do the same. In it we look at different actions to take in the areas of radically sustainable food, energy and transportation within the timeframe of the next year, two years, five years and ten years. We invite you to join us or move forward on your own. This zine is an open and organic document. We want to hear your voice.
points of unity
(adapted from the Shadbush Collective)

**Our Work**
We work to confront the root causes of ecological destruction, climate change and oppression. We are committed to building community-based, radically sustainable solutions that foster local autonomy and self-sufficiency in Grand Rapids, Michigan and its bioregion.

**Our Principles**
We utilize practices and forms of organization that are anti-authoritarian, horizontal, self-organizing, decentralized, and directly participatory.

**Toward Environmental Justice**
We acknowledge and seek to expose the intersection between oppressions of humans and the destruction of the earth. Environmental hazards and disasters and the ways in which people respond to them often reveal and reinforce the injustices inherent in an oppressive society. We must respond to these disasters in ways that do not reinforce and further oppression including respecting peoples’ livelihoods and ensuring a just transition for workers.

**Toward Radical Sustainability**
We believe that as a matter of survival we must build and evolve physical and social infrastructures that meet our needs in ways that are deeply ecological, community-controlled, locally integrated, and autonomous from oppressive, centralized institutions. We support and actively participate in this work of radical sustainability.

**Against False Solutions, Against Green Capitalism**
We believe that the ecological crisis cannot be addressed without fundamental changes to present-day economic and technological infrastructure. We resist and reject band-aid solutions that serve only to put a green face on the destructive systems driving these crises in the first place.
In Defense of Ecological Integrity
We acknowledge that all living things and their environments have inherent value in and of themselves, regardless of their instrumental value to humans, and that human and ecological health are inextricably bound together. We oppose the disturbance of further wilderness and work to stabilize damaged ecosystems. We consider political boundaries and borders irrelevant when defining healthy ecosystems and bioregions. We work to build solutions that are ecologically regenerative and that extend ecological health into the indefinite future.

Strategy and Tactics
We seek to act for environmental justice and radical sustainability in ways that maximize respect for life and oppressed peoples’ rights. We believe that the struggle must occur on multiple fronts and employ a diversity of tactics consistent with these values and our points of unity. We recognize that grassroots organizing, direct action, education, logistical and emotional support are all essential and complimentary pieces of social movement towards change, we support individuals’ choices in determining their own best path of involvement, and we value all work towards our shared goals.

Solidarity
We acknowledge the devastating social and economic impacts of ecological disasters and resource extraction on our local communities, and are deeply concerned with environmental racism and classism. We seek to work in solidarity with and follow the leadership of impacted communities to confront not only ecological destruction, but also all forms of social and economic oppression. We recognize the important role both rural and urban communities play in our bioregion, and the tensions that can arise between those communities based on resource use, resource extraction, and cultural differences. Instead of letting these tensions divide us, we seek to bring people together around the power of our collective need for healthy, sustainable ecosystems.
Respect and Mutual Aid
We seek to build relationships of respect and mutual aid and freely share knowledge, tools and resources. We are committed to building our own skills and abilities and actively encourage other organizers, resisters, activists and community members to join us in these educational efforts. We situate our work within the larger context of local and bioregional struggles for health, justice and the environment, and support other organizations' work in ways that affirm our principles.

Anti-Oppression
We acknowledge the potential within our movements to manifest forms of oppression and domination. We strive to create an anti-racist, anti-sexist, class conscious, and queer and trans-positive organizing space. We attempt to challenge oppressive behaviors whenever they arise, and to hold people accountable for their behavior.

Support and Accountability
We seek to build mutually supportive relationships with one another, and to share work and knowledge in a way that feels good for everyone so that we can realistically sustain this work. We create space for talking openly about process, power, and group dynamics when necessary so that problems can be addressed as they arise.
Our current system for providing food is severely unsustainable.

I grew up in Sparta Michigan, the self-proclaimed Apple Capital of the Midwest; it’s a small country town about 20 minutes north of Grand Rapids. A faint smell of cow manure trailed the halls behind kids kicking mud off their boots. Many students worked on the family farm while attending school with plans of inheriting it when they graduated. For lunch at school there was often a choice of pre-packaged burritos or burgers. To drink there was Country Fresh milk, juice, or soda. The salad bar had iceberg lettuce with bits of cabbage and shredded carrots from a bag labeled Sysco. At the end was the fruit: oranges, bananas, and, of course, apples. Where was this stuff coming from?

Growing up in an apple producing community I knew what good apples tasted like. The ones at school lacked flavor and were often tinted green on the inside (signifying they were picked too soon). The apples were always a deep burgundy, high-glossed, thick-skinned, and lacking flavor with a sticker from Washington state or Chile to peel off. Why were we not eating Sparta apples? Does it make sense to ship an apple over 2000 miles to a school in the “Apple Capital of the Midwest”? Is this logical?

Apples are just one example of an entire food system in crisis. Our current methods are depleting our topsoil, which can take up to 500 years to form a single inch. Each year the United States loses 2 billion tons of it, costing environmental damage exceeding $40 billion. Without this nutrient rich soil, our food cannot be grown. The fields growing our food are dependent on large machines; the fields are too large to be harvested without them. The plants growing no longer produce seeds, as they have been engineered to be sterile, requiring farmers to purchase seeds every year from a large agribusiness.

The chemicals used in pesticides and fertilizers come from non-renewable and polluting petroleum, which is also used to make the package the food comes in. An average American meal travels about 1,500 miles before it makes it to a plate, and ten kcal of fossil fuel energy is required to transport a single kcal of food energy.

We face a great lack of knowledge, access, and connection to our food that our very recent ancestors had. Many people no longer know how to grow their own food and/or have no opportunity to choose healthy food, and many more have little real connection to the natural world. We have created an age of dependency on non-sustainable practices based on depleting non-renewable resources. Is something wrong here?
Objective
Complete independence from the current unsustainable and destructive food system and creation of a local, sustainable, healthy alternative.

Strategies
Dramatically reduce the amount of food we import from other countries and surrounding states, therefore decreasing our carbon consumption and curbing the effects of climate change. Empower local leaders, farmers, community members and neighborhood organizations with the necessary tools to grow and obtain their food near its source. Work to create the smallest amount of distance from farm to fridge by working with farmers in the greater Grand Rapids area and neighborhoods as we de-escalate our consumption from industrial food practices.

Tactics

Year 1: Food classes; potlucks with neighbors to discuss food issues; boycott fast food chains; eat seasonally; learn food preservation techniques, such as canning

Year 2: Urban gardening; classes and workshops on native plants; allow native plants to grow in yards; ban new fast food chains within Grand Rapids; reclaim unused space for gardens; legalize chickens and composting in Grand Rapids; demand local produce and other food products at area businesses

Year 5: Increase pressure on fast food establishments and big box supermarkets with tax increases on existing ones, bans on building more, etc.; incentivize decreases and bans on chemical lawn fertilizers and pesticides; promote removal of grass lawns and create incentives for urban gardens; begin planning and executing removal of concrete to re-establish usable soil for growing food; establish community kitchens in neighborhoods; lengthen growing season by building hoop houses for community use; initiate harsh restrictions on tree removal (trees keep soil in tact); begin ban on non-local produce, re-claim space for bee boxes; establish really really free stations in parks for surplus food

Year 10: Community root cellars for food preservation; make community kitchens commonplace, provide schools with locally grown produce and eliminate Sysco/GFS “foodservice distributors”; re-claim paved space for gardens, remove concrete in the center of street blocks; create laws that make tree removal illegal unless proven to be need based; replace large scale agriculture with perennial permaculture systems of growth
We recognize that the current global energy consumption is the main contributor to global warming. The extraction and burning of fossil fuels not only contributes to global warming, it devastates the environment and has a major impact on human communities, whether we are talking about Indigenous people in the Amazon or people in the Appalachians.

However, much of the emphasis on sustainable energy from green capitalists is on personal consumption – making your home more energy efficient, driving electric cars, etc. We believe that such actions are often an illusion and that the real culprits are industry and the military.

Disproportionately large amounts of fossil fuels are consumed by corporations within a capitalist economy that rarely gets discussed until “accidents” like the BP Gulf disaster.

However, these incidents are just one symptom of the daily destruction of fossil fuel extraction, transportation and burning that keeps the current engines of for profit capitalism moving forward.

We believe that the “business as usual” approach to energy must be resisted in order for humanity to have a viable future. We propose collective resistance to corporate capitalism and militarism, which are the 2 major forces of ecological destruction on the planet today. We also believe that there cannot be a simple shift to wind and solar energy unless there is a massive restructuring of our economy, which would include serious reductions of energy use. There is no way to maintain the current economic and military systems on the planet no matter how much wind and solar energy is generated.
**Objective**  End the extraction and burning of fossil fuels; drastically reduce the human contribution to global climate change, eradicate the notion of solving environmental problems through consumerism (i.e. “green capitalism”), transfer control of existing and future energy institutions from elite/corporate entities to users/consumers/real people.

**Strategies**  Challenge Green Washing and “green capitalism” in the local community, enable individuals and neighborhoods to create energy on a locally owned/controlled level, encourage autonomy from the current energy system, or encourage people to go “off the grid”, work to reform laws that foster dependency on the current energy structures and institutions and prohibit energy autonomy, dismantle institutions that consume copious amounts of energy.

**Tactics**

**Year 1:**  Target local industry that are large consumers of fossil fuel with boycotts, blockades, media education campaigns, and underground acts of resistance; allow neighborhoods to develop their own renewable energy systems (wind, solar)

**Year 2:**  Heavily tax polluters and reinvest the money in truly sustainable energy solutions; expand neighborhood energy systems to include biomass and the reuse of waste

**Year 5:**  Charge polluting energy companies reparations and reinvest the money in truly sustainable housing, ban expansion of the fossil fuel industry, radically expand mass transit, begin deconstruction of paved surfaces and impose moratorium on any new paved surfaces

**Year 10:**  Transfer control over energy companies to the public; source all food locally; declare a moratorium on private automobiles and utilize mass transit systems, walking, and biking; expand green spaces in formally paved spaces, including community gardens and parks; massively reduce the US military budget; use the money currently going to the federal budget for the military for sustainable local energy
The Christmas before I turned 16 there was a set of car keys under the tree for me. I couldn’t even drive alone for the next five months, but I already owned a car. It wasn’t anything fancy; a “beater” is what we called it, but I had a car and in my mind I had my independence. Being from Flint, nearly everyone in my family worked in a car factory at some point in their lives. My dad owned a car body shop. Cars were a way of life, our bread and butter. They were our claim to fame and what gave us a sense of pride. They meant freedom.

This idea of freedom was fed to us by the car manufacturers. The truth is cars are smothering us, literally. The toxins they emit into the air and soil are life altering. A 2002 study estimated 30% of childhood asthma stems from air pollution in the US. Rising air, water and soil pollutants have contributed to the development of asthma and cancers in once healthy adults.

Fossil fuel-burning vehicles are a major contributor, emitting more than 1,000 pollutants.

How can something that we have been taught gives us freedom and pride be so devastating to so many people?
Objective
Increase human health and biological diversity in Grand Rapids by drastically decreasing greenhouse gas emissions through a transition away from transportation powered by mineral extraction. Refocus residential needs for frequent long-distance travel and work together to empower alternative modes of transit. Mobilize transportation-reform environmentalist groups in Grand Rapids and align with other radical community organizations into a common front to transfer transportation policy away from the state and corporations to the people of the area for meaningful, positive and autonomous policies and actions.

Strategies
Create smaller, easier steps to help people transition into using less fossil-fuel, offer opportunities for people to determine the difference between work and a job, help people create community near their homes, to allow for sharing of resources and less travel, host forums for people to brainstorm ideas of alternative forms of transportation, raise awareness and gain social power through radical actions, displace private and public sector institutions from running transportation

Tactics

Year 1:
Revamp the current city bus system so that it is free and have buses come every 8 minutes; create a public bike system like those ones in Europe or Bixi in Montreal; employers offer incentives to employees for riding the bus; business owners offer incentives to patrons for riding the bus; offer carpooling incentives and turn empty parking lots into carpooling lots; declare moratorium on new roads/parking lots; offer community classes on safety for bikers and education for motorists about bikes on the road; advertise with billboards that let people know it’s illegal to ride a bike on a sidewalk or what hand signals mean

Year 2:
Find more ideas for self-propelled transportation; offer free safety gear: blinking lights, reflective vests; introduce a tax system for driving in the city to pay for the bus system; create more bus and bike lanes, ban the use of gas lawnmowers
Year 5:
Coordinate with other radical sustainability groups; organize city-wide general strikes in solidarity with: other groups in the common front, those working for polluting transit-related businesses, and the poor whose health is disproportionately affected by emissions and pollution; boycott businesses that don’t adhere to community standard of zero/lower emissions; transport food and goods from no more than 100 miles away; boycott sales of new cars in city; organize mass protests of businesses, city leaders and organizations that don’t take up sustainable policies; perform civil disobedience such as: critical mass bike ride of 100s or 1000s of cyclists clogging major streets and freeways (S curve), and encircle gas stations and prevent people from getting gas or businesses from selling gas.

Year 10:
Organize communities into autonomous, democratic collectives; remove gas stations, parking lots and roads; put control of transit paths in Grand Rapids into the hands of the community (re-route transit paths in Grand Rapids, make them bike and pack-animal friendly); refuse to pay taxes to city and put money to collective; use neighborhood ride-sharing, skill-sharing boards to continue to organize.
The charts above show the exponential increase in human activity responsible for the degradation and environmental destruction of various Earth systems from 1750-2000.

resources

mutualaidgr.org
http://thebloomcollective.org/
http://sproutac.org/
http://www.foodnotbombs.net/
https://www.facebook.com/groups/44453750154 [Grand Rapids chapter]
http://oktjustice.org/
http://www.bartertowngr.com/
http://goodmorningrevolution.org/
http://banmichiganfracking.org/
http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/fq/emissions.html
http://www.zcommunications.org/environmentalism-as-if-winning-mattered-by-steve-darcy
http://deepgreenresistance.org/
http://shadbushcollective.org/
http://www.beehivecollective.org/
(cover art by Alynn Guerra)
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