

Steps to Sustainability

Part 8 of a Series: Origins of Sustainability in the USA – Emerson and Thoreau

By [Richard W. Franke](#)

Professor Emeritus of Anthropology: Montclair State University, New Jersey

Resident: [Ecovillage at Ithaca](#); Board Member of [Sustainable Tompkins](#)

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The true ancestors of sustainability in America are the Native Peoples of the Western Hemisphere. As we saw in earlier articles, they developed the state-level environmental policies of the Inca, the managed sub-climax forest successions in the Eastern Woodlands and the Three Sisters method of high-output low-soil-loss agriculture exemplified in the Finger Lakes area by the Haudenosaunee people. The European conquerors and immigrants paid little attention to the land management skills of their victims and it was only in the 1980s that modern science began seriously investigating the Native achievements and their relevance for the wider society.

The sustainability movement in the USA found its earliest inspirations in the 19th Century writings of two intellectuals of European origin. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) was a founder of Transcendentalism, a philosophy which includes the proposition that the supernatural is revealed through nature and that all plants and animals partake in some way of the supernatural (Elgin 1993:52). Emerson wrote that

“Nature is a language... I wish to learn...that I may read the great book that is written in that tongue.” Emerson’s views were considered heretical by many traditional Christians of the time who saw transcendentalism as an attack on the Bible.

Emerson’s chief protégé and colleague was Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). Thoreau infused Emerson’s intellectual beliefs into his daily life, arguing that by simple living and direct contact with nature we can discover the transcendental life-force otherwise obscured by materialistic urges. In 1845 Thoreau moved into the woods on a piece of property owned by Emerson. Thoreau lived there for a little over two years, building himself a 10-foot-by-15-foot cabin for about \$28.50, mostly producing his own food, heating fuel and other necessities and keeping a detailed journal of his experiment which he published in 1854 under the title *Walden or, Life in the Woods*. The approximately 250 pages of *Walden* include detailed descriptions of the geology, the plants, animals, visitors, sunsets supplemented with ruminations about civilization’s

impact on the natural world. He especially loved and studied one of several ponds on the property. *Walden* is considered the founding "nature book," now a literary genre associated especially with American writers (Webster 1965:viii). Walden Pond eventually became famous and is now the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Walden Pond State Reservation at Concord, a few miles outside of Boston. Emerson and Thoreau are viewed by many as originators of "voluntary simplicity," a concept now much in vogue among sustainability activists. They saw simplicity as a rejection of excessive accumulation of goods and a search for a richer inner life (Elgin 1993:51–52).

Like Emerson, Thoreau combined his connection to nature with a powerful sense of social justice – something modern advocates realize is essential for sustainability to be achieved. Thoreau was an ardent anti-slavery abolitionist. In 1859 he wrote "A Plea for Captain John Brown," calling him "a man of rare common

sense...and action." Thoreau went on to criticize the newspaper hysteria surrounding Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. Most famously, however, in 1849 Thoreau published "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience." In this essay of about 20 pages, he explained his refusal to pay taxes that would be used either to support the war against Mexico or to acquiesce in the institution of slavery: "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave's* government also" (Thoreau 1965 [1849]:254). He also criticized the wrongs against Native Americans. Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King among others have stated that this essay had a great influence on their political development. In April of 1871 Emerson was on a tour of the Western US and stopped at Yosemite where he was introduced to a young naturalist named John Muir who would go on to found the Sierra Club. And thus the story of American environmentalism continues.

Richard W. Franke is a resident of Ecovillage at Ithaca and a board member of Sustainable Tompkins.

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