

Emerson, Thoreau and Sustainability

By Richard W. Franke

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompkins.org.

The true ancestors of sustainability in America are the native people of the Western Hemisphere. As we saw in earlier articles, they developed the state-level environmental policies of the Inca, they managed subclimax forest successions in the Eastern Woodlands and used 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. 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 U.S. found its earliest inspirations in the 19th-century writings of two intellectuals of European origin: Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) was a founder of transcendentalism, a philosophy that includes the proposition that the supernatural is revealed through nature and that all plants and animals partake in some way of the supernatural.

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 (1817–62). 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 a 10-foot-by-15-foot cabin for about \$28.50. He mostly produced his own food, heating fuel and other necessities and kept 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 and 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.

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 accu-

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mulation of goods and a search for a richer inner life.

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 antislavery 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." 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 1871, Emerson was on a tour of the western U.S. and stopped at Yosemite, where he was introduced to a young naturalist named John Muir, who went on to found the Sierra Club. And thus the story of American environmentalism continues.

This is one of a series of articles on the origins of sustainability. Richard W. Franke is a resident of EcoVillage at Ithaca and a board member of Sustainable Tompkins.

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