

The Collapse of American Society

The notion that American society will collapse, especially within the next few decades, borders on heresy. America has the largest economy, the largest military, and one of the highest material living standards in the world; our society is simply too big, too powerful, and too robust to fail.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes obvious that America is also the greatest overexploiter of natural resources in the world; and that many of the most critical of these natural resources, upon which our society depends, are becoming increasingly scarce—a trend that will continue going forward.

The truth is that our American way of life—300+ million people enjoying historically unprecedented material living standards—has been extraordinarily successful within its historic ecological paradigm of “continuously more and more”, but it will fail—in the not-too-distant future—within its new ecological paradigm of “continuously less and less”.

America’s Ecological Paradigm Shift

We are at the moment in America’s evolution when our historic ecological paradigm, which was characterized by “continuously more and more”, is giving way to an ecological paradigm that is characterized by “continuously less and less”. The natural resources that enable our American way of life, which were once abundant and cheap, are becoming increasingly scarce and expensive¹—a Nature-imposed geological phenomenon over which we have no control.

America’s Ecological Paradigm Shift



As our natural resource mix and levels decline continuously going forward, our economic activity level—the mix and levels of goods and services derived from the natural resource inputs to our economy—will decline continuously as well, as must some combination of our existing population level and material living standards.

From this point forward, there will be, at best, only brief respites from our overall downward trajectory in terms of societal wellbeing; this is our “new reality”.

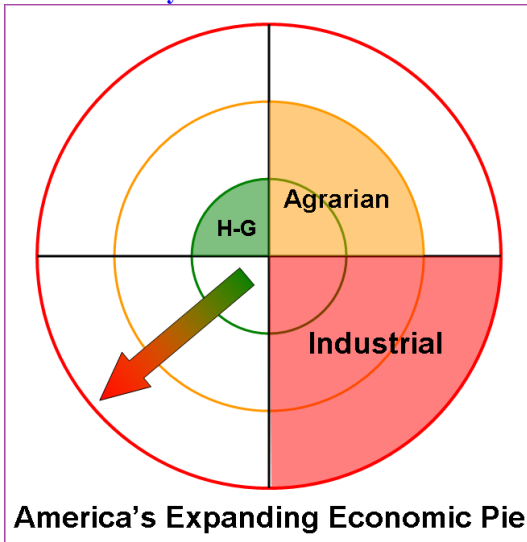
Continuously More and More

As our ancestor’s lifestyles evolved from hunter-gatherer (H-G), to agrarian, to industrial, they experienced “continuously more and more” with respect to their economic activity level and their resulting population level and material living standards. This “reality” was made possible by their natural resource utilization behavior.

As they transitioned from hunter-gatherers to farmers, our ancestors increasingly overexploited renewable natural resources—water, cropland, pastureland, forests, and wildlife—which increased their economic activity level and their population/living standard levels.

As they transitioned from an agrarian lifestyle to an industrialized lifestyle, they increasingly overexploited nonrenewable natural resources—fossil fuels, metals, and minerals—which dramatically increased their economic activity level and their population/living standard levels.

Continuously More and More

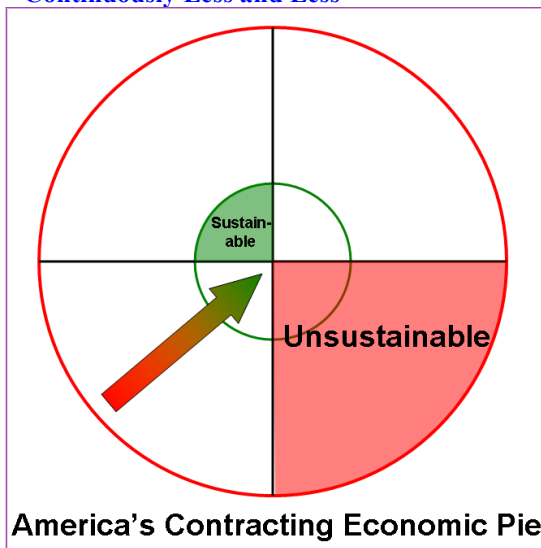


As our ancestors diversified their natural resource mix and increased their natural resource utilization levels, their "economic pie" expanded continuously, as did the average size of their individual "slices". Today, "continuously more and more" has become the American expectation and mantra.

Continuously Less and Less

Unfortunately, the finite nonrenewable natural resources upon which we currently depend² are becoming increasingly scarce and expensive, as their available supplies approach, reach, and surpass peak levels and go into terminal decline.

Continuously Less and Less



Our "new reality" is characterized by a continuously contracting economic pie and shrinking slices, as we transition from our existing unsustainable lifestyle paradigm to a sustainable lifestyle paradigm. This Nature-imposed phenomenon is occurring now and is responsible for America's societal unraveling, which will lead to our inevitable societal collapse.

America's Societal Unraveling

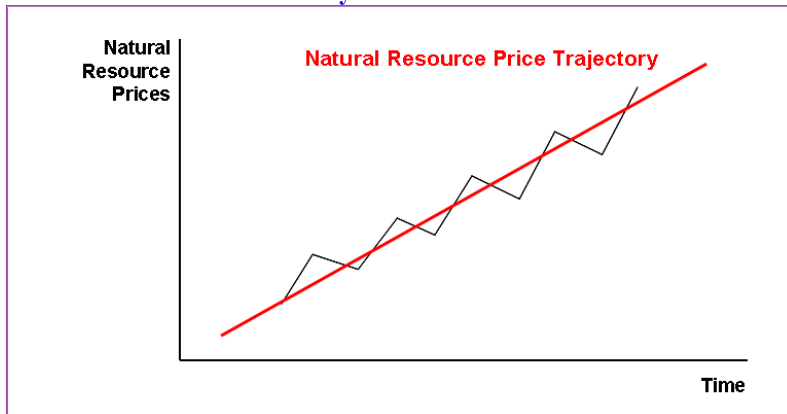
America's societal unraveling is a cyclical process that is currently unfolding as follows:

- Increasingly scarce and expensive natural resources, which serve as the inputs to our American economy, cause corresponding price increases in the goods and services derived from those natural resources, which causes an economic contraction—a recession or depression—and a reduction in our demand for goods and services.
- Our demand for natural resource inputs decreases as a result of the reduction in our demand for goods and services, causing prices for natural resource inputs to decrease as well.
- Lower natural resource prices enable lower prices for goods and services, which induces an economic recovery.
- Our demand for goods and services increases during the economic recovery, which stimulates our underlying demand for natural resource inputs—which are scarcer than during the previous cycle—causing price increases for both natural resource inputs and derived goods and services—to levels higher than during the previous cycle.
- Higher prices for goods and services cause a reduction in demand—a greater reduction than during the previous cycle; which causes a subsequent economic contraction—a more severe contraction than during the previous cycle.
- And so on...

Our economic contraction/recovery cycles will continue as they have since the inception of our industrial revolution, with one critical difference: the generally declining natural resource price levels and generally increasing economic activity level that characterized our economic cycles during times of natural resource abundance, are giving way to economic cycles characterized by a persistent upward trajectory in natural resource prices and a persistent downward trajectory in our economic activity level.

As natural resources become increasingly scarce, each successive natural resource price cycle will be characterized by a higher high point and a higher low point.

US Natural Resource Price Cycles



And each successive economic cycle will be characterized by a longer, deeper contraction followed by a shorter, less robust recovery.

US Economic Activity Cycles



As mainstream America becomes aware of the dynamics associated with our “new reality” of “continuously less and less”, ever-broadening segments of our population will succumb to the strain caused by continuous reductions in our material living standards. We will seek to maintain our American way of life in the only manner possible within a continuously contracting operating environment—by taking from each other.

Societal unrest will become increasingly prevalent, which will steepen the trajectory associated with our economic decline.

As natural resource scarcity becomes increasingly acute, the available supply associated with one or more of the critical natural resources upon which we depend will become insufficient to support the economic activity level required to perpetuate our American way of life. Permanent shortages and/or disruptions in the supplies of essential goods and services will result, and our society will collapse.

Footnotes

(1) For details regarding increasing natural resource scarcity in the US see “On American Sustainability—Anatomy of a Societal Collapse”, pgs. 43-51, Chris Clugston, 2009 - <http://www.wakeupamerika.com/PDFs/On-American-Sustainability.pdf>.

(2) Nonrenewable natural resources accounted for approximately 95% of the materials flowing into the US economy during the year 2000; “Economic Drivers of Mineral Supply”, pgs. 20-24, Lori Wagner et al., USGS, 2002 - <http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2002/of02-335/of02-335.pdf>.

Author Bio (Chris Clugston): For the past three years I have conducted extensive independent research into the area of sustainability, the goals of which are to quantify from a combined ecological and economic perspective the extent to which our American society is currently overextended—living unsustainably beyond our means—and to understand the causes, implications, and possible solutions associated with our predicament.

Prior to that I spent thirty years working with information technology sector companies in marketing, sales, finance, M&A, and general management—the last twenty as a corporate chief executive and management consultant. I received an AB/Political Science, Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Penn State University, and an MBA/Finance with High Distinction from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. I can be reached at [coclugston](mailto:coclugston@comcast.net) “at” comcast “dot” net.