

Environmental Vision and Action in Municipalities: A Few Ideas
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Four Premises

Our understanding of the environment is changing. The new problems associated with toxic chemicals, the loss of biodiversity and climate change invite us to try some new experiments in our laws and policies. Here are four basic premises for visionary environmental action.

1) Government has an essential role to play. That role is to serve as the trustee of the commonwealth and the common health for this and future generations.

2) The commons -- all the things we share -- libraries, roads, bridges, parks, wildlife, air, water, museums are foundational to the economy. They are also critical for public health.

3) The best way to take care of the commons is to use the precautionary principle, which directs us to take action to prevent harm in the face of scientific uncertainty.

4) This generation has a duty to protect the rights of future generations to inherit a habitable planet. We can create new mechanisms and institutions to protect those rights. For instance, we could designate legal guardians for future generations at any level of government.

These four principles have been expressed in various laws in the United States and around the world. For instance, San Francisco has adopted the precautionary principle as the overarching law for all its environmental ordinances.

A Problem

We are now seeing that many problems are interrelated. Burning coal pollutes the air and deposits mercury in water that contaminates fish and then harms humans when they eat the fish. The absence of sidewalks

