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Shifting Baseline Syndrome

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Shifting baseline syndrome is a scientific term for a phenomenon that affects almost every branch of life, but it's particularly important for those with an interest in permaculture, or those who are wondering why exactly permaculture is so important. While it may seem a bit of a complex term, or one that you'd rather leave to those with a more "technical" job, shifting baseline syndrome is a psychological construct that every individual needs to know.

To put it in its most simplest terms, shifting baseline syndrome is basically the way in which humans, and every generation essentially, lowers its standards over the course of time. These generations are not lowering their standards on purpose, or because they have any negative goal, but simply because they don't know any better. It all occurs underneath the surface level, with most completely unaware of what's happening. New generations assume the lack of quality that they've become used to is simply normal, and so they no longer see the extreme damage (to just about anything, be it the environment or anything else that's declined over the ages) that someone from, say, five generations prior would be absolutely taken aback by. Expectations are lowered almost subconsciously, and so the damage to the environment keeps occurring on a broader and broader scale, as damage occurs so slowly that no one even sees it, unless they were to step back and look at things over the course of multiple generations.

However, if you'll take a few moments to consider brief and seemingly inconsequential moments in your life, you'll soon see the way you too have been affected by shifting baseline syndrome. For example, have your parents ever made a quick comment on the lack of green space in your neighborhood, or how the fields and forests they wandered as kids are now taken over by suburban housing or shopping centers? Have you ever looked up at the sky and wondered if there were simply more stars when you were a kid? These changes are especially prevalent for those generations living from the start of the 20th century onward, as technology and the progression of man skyrockets into a world that no human being (or animal, for that matter) from the year 1900 would recognize today. Change has never occurred at such a fast pace in the entire history of mankind, something that most take for granted. In the last century, we've seen the turn from the horse and carriage to rudimentary automobiles to highways connecting every conceivable space and jam-packed with the latest and greatest cars.

One of the first examples of shifting baseline syndrome was given by the scientist Daniel Pauly, and his work with fisheries. Since his work, the theory is still used by many to explain the declining oceans today. He pointed out that ridiculously depleted fisheries were using the fish population from just a few decades ago as the starting point of their measurements, their baselines, as it were, rather than what a fish population would be had it never been touched by mankind. If you're looking at a drop in population over a few years, it doesn't seem to be that bad of a problem, and you could easily come up with a solution to maybe make up for a little of that. However, if you look at the drop in population over a very long period of time, say a few hundred years, the problem is suddenly mammoth, and one it would be very difficult to rectify.



It's believed that shifting baseline syndrome largely affects individuals' participation in conservation efforts, from simple in-home habits to large project participation. If they don't see a large enough issue occurring, after all, why put in the effort to change it? Some conservation programs feel it's necessary to educate the public regarding shifting baseline syndrome, so as to encourage participation on either a large or small scale, both personal and public. While it's possible to do this through normal education approaches, such as media, it's also sometimes effective to bring older and younger generations together, so as to discuss changes occurring in a more personal way.

Those already aware of shifting baseline syndrome, though, are already well on their way to combatting this environmental epidemic. Education followed by appropriate action is the key to proper environmental restoration, and great lengths can be achieved by simply researching the true effects of today's technology and human practices, and the way things once were – from plant and animal populations to water quality to air quality and beyond. Then, once we've established a proper and true baseline, a baseline untouched by human actions, we can go to the correct restorative lengths. Sustainable living leading to a permaculture revolution is

what's needed in order to truly save the planet we call home, without falling prey to shifting baselines syndrome in the process.

Link: <https://www.permaculturenews.org/2016/09/09/shifting-baseline-syndrome/>