

The 21st Century Fountain of Youth*

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The ability to delude yourself may be an important survival tool.

Jane Wagner

The Fountain of Youth is a myth based on legends that anyone who drinks its water will have a restoration of youth. Juan Ponce de Leon, Governor of Puerto Rico, searched for the Fountain in 1513 in Florida. Some other cultures have similar myths.

The 21st century counterpart of the idea of the Foundation of Youth is sustainable use of the planet (i.e., use for an indefinite period). If Earth's population were reduced and everyone had smaller ecological and carbon footprints as well as a lifestyle that nurtured the biospheric life support system, sustainable use of the planet should still be possible. However, more than a sustainability tee shirt, an efficient light bulb, or a bumper sticker on a Prius is needed to achieve sustainability.

Achieving sustainability will not be easy – as many people are discovering. Seeking eternal youth is also difficult – successive face lifts and other cosmetic procedures are both expensive and time consuming. Even with these modifications, nothing makes the inner body younger. Healthful living could help, but the lifestyle requires knowledge and focus. Even this approach will not bring eternal youth, but it may help achieve a longer and healthier life.

Sustainability can be achieved, but it will require nurturing the biospheric life support system, getting and keeping the human population within Earth's carrying capacity, eliminating ecological deficits/overshoot, reducing greenhouse gas emissions to match Earth's assimilative capacity for them, using no more natural resources than Earth can regenerate, and not treating other life forms as commodities. The changes constitute a tremendous challenge, but it is one that humankind can meet.

Sustainability is basically a gift (leaving a habitable planet) from older people to younger people now alive and to future generations. Older people should make a major shift to begin the effort to achieve sustainable use of the planet as an example to their children and grandchildren because of their love for them and as a final gift to them. Lifestyle would have to change in developed nations, who must also assist developing nations during the transition period, which will take the entire 21st century or more. Everyone must change, but an initial step by the older generation would energize the effort. Material goods, possessions, and energy per capita will decrease in developed countries, but, if the effort comes from the heart, social capital will increase. The possibility of a habitable planet for future generations will result in great joy.