

Social Innovation: How Would Nature Do It?

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As we walked in a fog-moistened forest on the side of Mount Tam, Janine Benyus, author of Biomimicry - Innovation Inspired by Nature, was excitedly showing me the elegant connectedness of the whole system – an interwoven living network of organisms that she calls “the wood-wide web.”

We were talking about using biomimicry for social innovation. Janine is both seer and sage of a growing movement that looks into nature’s 3.8 billion years of evolutionary intelligence as guidance for solving our own sustainability challenges. She said, with the humble confidence that comes from a deep relationship with the natural world, “We are looking for a coherent vision of a world that works, and a practical pathway to get there. It’s all around us...”

Indeed, the forests, grasslands, oceans that surround us, and even our home gardens – all offer us mentors that embody time-tested strategies for making life on earth work. These systems are successfully adapting, communicating, cooperating, self-organizing, building effective networks, and teaching us about what it really means to be resilient.

Consider the generous system of a redwood forest. Everybody has a home. Resources are shared. Everyone gets what they need and together they keep the system healthy. There is a constant collaboration among the species, mutual reliance, invisible yet vital support. Redwood trees, living in a place that is rainless for more than half of the year, extend 300 feet in the air to catch the rolling fog and draw it down as moisture to be used by the tree itself as well as by all the other thirsty plants that live nearby. Researcher Todd Dawson discovered that 66% of summer moisture for the redwood forest’s understory plants came from the fog that had been sequestered by the giant trees. These smaller plants, in turn, transfer microbes and algae through the soils to support the tree’s nourishment. Even after a 600-year old tree dies, it can provide resources for the whole community for two to three thousand more years.

It’s not just the other redwood trees that benefit. Science is showing now that even species we thought were competitors, in ruthless battles for access to sunlight, water, and nutrients, are actually all in it together.

They have co-evolved to become models of playing well with others. Biological research has revealed a vast underground fungal network intertwining everyone in a web of mutual reliance, exchanging both nutrients and information so that all thrive together.

My vision is that we learn to become students of these forests. That we recognize the wise mentors all around us, organisms and systems who've spent millions or billions of years finding ways to live together and thrive in all kinds of conditions. These mentors can teach us the language of adaptation, mutuality, and survival to help us build our societies to be generous and durable, in the way that a forest is.

Biomimicry for Social Innovation was started with this re-evolution as its purpose. Biomimicry, the conscious emulation of nature's genius, has been gaining traction as a solution-oriented design discipline to build smarter, more sustainable products and buildings, and to manufacture in cleaner ways. But can we apply nature's intelligence to human society, to change the way we grow businesses and lead organizations, to transforming our culture?

We think so.

There is a growing BSI network, leaders in the areas of business, education, public policy, and social change, who are recognizing that, like a forest dropping its deadwood in the stiff winds of our changing times, there are things that we need to shed as a society. There are new branches to grow and develop. It's time for us to collaborate, co-evolve, and find ways to use fewer resources while generating more mutual benefit. It's time for us to get smarter about our survival strategies, practical in our pathways to regeneration, and elegantly skilled in resilience when faced with disturbance and change. These leaders understand this, and are turning to Life for inspiration, asking "How would Nature do it?" and listening with humility.

I am seeing organizational leaders flattening hierarchy in their systems. Instead, they cultivate new feedback loops for learning, decision-making, and a capacity for adaptive self-organization in their team. I am seeing a business owner putting his company into winter hibernation for reflection and systems redesign, yielding a 20% sales increase the following year. I'm seeing community organizers studying nature's range of reproductive methods and then building their advocacy strategies to elegantly grow an evolving campaign.

There is so much to learn from the genius of the organisms and ecosystems that surround us and of which we are a part. By aligning with Life's principles, we can lead in ways that are inherently more sustainable, more regenerative, more life-affirming.

Please join us.