

Making Ripples

Money from Harm or Help: the Eco Entrepreneur's Dilemma

by Amanda Bancroft

Between every bite and within every second of our lives comes the question of how to sustain ourselves and our families. The web of complexities which is employment is often tied tighter by social pressure, privilege, ignorance and oppression. In this vast sphere recently expanded by the internet, it's easier than ever to generate at least a side stream of income online, yet more complicated than ever before to ensure access to safe employment and life-sustaining resources for a populous planet. Many people across the globe are increasingly able to consider earning income in ways that keep them healthy and don't hurt anybody else or our environment. The question is, will the majority who have the choice make it? Will they even be aware of their choice?

Some people are so aware of this opportunity for social or environmental entrepreneurship that, even in situations where they don't really have a choice, they work for years to create that choice by gaining access to solar panels to run computers and use the internet for their business crafting jewelry from junk materials that otherwise would pollute a beach. Others are laden with opportunity to the point where there are too many options.

The nuances are not insignificant. Plenty of work is semi-benign. Having a choice of work does not confer instant success. Even having success doesn't mean one can keep it forever. And in certain ways that obfuscate the problem, it seems like anything a person does will be slightly harmful to someone or something, someday. Maybe not today, but perhaps when the life of their product comes to its end. However, a lifetime of doing jobs that hurt the worker's health or harm the environment is worse than one lifetime of that work minus a decade of limited success as an eco entrepreneur. Even helping one person is better than helping nobody.

NPR recently reported interviews with voters who didn't like the dangerous discourse of their candidate, but looked at their neighborhood in coal mining country and figured the only way they could feed their families was with jobs that hurt their lungs, offered little long-term employment, and occasionally murdered their babies from the pollution that resource extraction causes. In the age of free internet at public libraries, these families saw hope only through economic opportunity that literally left them weaker than before. Meanwhile, people without internet still go into business by literally creating computer labs!

The most difficult step for many is awareness. Within our limitations, is it possible for all of us to work at a job (employed or self-employed) that doesn't harm us, anyone else, or the environment? Multiplying positive answers to that question is the key that will truly make America great again (all of America, from Chile to Canada). Let us at least make the attempt to answer it affirmatively.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.