

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

You are listening to The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens. That's me. On this show, we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment in our society. Together with scientists, experts, and leaders, this show is about understanding the bird's eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals.

(00:00:33):

In addition to climate change and biodiversity loss, more and more people are understanding that plastic is one of the most important threats to our natural ecosystems and to human health. Today's guest, Sian Sutherland, is a leading industry activist in charge of A Plastic Planet where they're using a pro-business, pro-solutions approach with an ultimate goal of helping the world turn off the plastic tap. A Plastic Planet uses a three-pronged framework of reduce, refill, and replace as a call to action for business, media, and global policymakers to pull the plug on plastic production. Sian and I take a deeper dive on what's going on with the growing awareness and response to our plastics crisis. I'm pleased to introduce Sian Sutherland.

(00:01:40):

Sian Sutherland, welcome to the program.

Sian Sutherland (00:01:44):

Thank you so much. It's a real pleasure to be here. Thank you, Nate.

Nate Hagens (00:01:48):

We have mutual friends working in the plastics endocrine disrupting space, but this is the first time we've ever spoken. I am told you have a long and diverse list of careers in your life before your current invocation, can you just introduce yourself by giving a bit of background of who you are and what you've done?

Sian Sutherland (00:02:15):

Yes. Thank you. I'll try and keep it brief because I'm pretty old, so It's actually quite a long history now. So Sian Sutherland, co-founder of A Plastic Planet and PlasticFree. What you would probably call a serial entrepreneur. So my very first career was in advertising, but I left advertising quite young. 25, set up my first business. For some crazy reason, I decided I was going to open a restaurant in Soho, in London. Zero

The Great Simplification

experience, never lifted a plate before in my life, but was very fortunate and that's a pattern really that happens through my careers of pulling together a very good team that did know what they were doing and then leading them.

(00:02:57):

And we won a Michelin star in our first year which is amazing and terrible in the same breath because then as soon as you get one star, you have to keep it or get a second star and everything you've ever seen about kitchen nightmares is absolutely true. I lived that. But it was also a wonderful experience that I learned a huge amount about business. And then I'm married my restaurant manager, left that business when I was 30, went back to my marketing roots, set up a design agency, which slightly bizarrely now I look back and think specializing in packaging. And now, if you know what I do now, you can see the irony of that. And we focused myself, my creative co-founder, focus in the two areas that we loved because we wanted to work in a small boutique way on stuff that interested us and it wasn't really cat food. It was things in the beauty world and things in the alcohol, drink world. So we did a lot of work in those two areas.

(00:03:51):

We also went through our baby making years. And through those years, we realized that there was this massive niche in a very, very saturated market called skincare where you fall pregnant and there is nothing there for you. In fact, it's the opposite of that. Everybody is fearful of the fact that you're pregnant. So we develop products for ourselves in the most truly selfish way. And then years later, recognized this niche was still there big enough to drive a bus through even though it's a relatively small market, everyone's got a mother and what does she use when she's putting that 30 inch stretch on her tummy in 40 weeks and hopefully losing it again. So we launched our own brand and we launched that in the US. So that was our biggest market and I ran that brand for the next 11 years.

(00:04:39):

So I mentioned that Nate, because you can imagine no plastic saints sitting here. How many millions of plastic bottles, jars am I personally responsible running that company for pumping out into the environment? Shocking to say this now was not on my list to think about what happened to them next, but of course, 10 years is a long time and in the life of plastic awareness. And then it was at the end of running that skincare brand that I had my personal epiphany because I was asked to advise the Hong Kong

The Great Simplification

board of the documentary filmmakers who were working on a feature documentary about plastic in the ocean. So that was a very, very fast learning curve for me working with the marine biologists and the health scientists. And it was at a time when nobody was interested in the topic of plastic in the ocean. Nobody knew. It was pre the infamous Blue Planet 2 screening where the world really woke up and it was at a screening that we were hosting of A Plastic Ocean that was the name of the documentary.

(00:05:39):

Luckily, we had David Attenborough coming, so a few people were coming just because he's such a legend. And it was then that we realized, we're about to show a documentary that's going to make people feel scared, angry, and guilty. And yet tomorrow, they're going to push their trolleys through the supermarket and they're going to fill them up with plastic because we have zero choice. And that was the moment that myself, my co-founder, Frederikke Magnussen, crazy Danish woman, decided that we could perhaps create a different kind of business model, not a charity, not an NGO, but an organization that could go forward working with governments and industry with this very, very simple goal to ignite and inspire the world to turn off the plastic tap.

Nate Hagens (00:06:22):

You said it was uncommon given that you were a plastic sinner with your beauty products and some of the other things, but maybe it takes someone that's so deep in an industry to recognize and have that epiphany because I worked on Wall Street in finance and so I saw the belly of the beast per se. So maybe it's almost a necessity for people to really be swinging for the fences on the issues of our day to have those people come from the deep experience of the industry that they're now trying to shift.

Sian Sutherland (00:07:02):

I think it does give you a different kind of credibility when you're dealing with business. When we work with other beauty brands or consumer goods companies like Unilever. And I can say to them, I co-founded and ran a skincare brand in their market. I know how hard it is to change. I also now know the imperative to change. But I do recognize it's difficult. And so I think you're right. There's very different kinds of activism. And in some ways, I think of us as you need the Greenpeace kind of activists. You need the

The Great Simplification

people who are going to board the boat and hold people to accounts in a very aggressive way. You need those kind of extremists. And in some ways, they are a huge benefit to us because we are the safe option. So people will sit at the table with us because we understand and we welcome the fact that business is the tool of change.

Nate Hagens (00:07:56):

So you're the externality diplomat?

Sian Sutherland (00:08:01):

In some ways. Yeah. That's a great way of putting it. Or as somebody from Unilever said to me, "In some ways, you are a critical friend." And they didn't mean that I was essential, but I understood what they meant that. I understand how difficult it is for them, but I'm really going to hold their toes to the fire now.

Nate Hagens (00:08:21):

This has been on my mind a lot lately because more and more people are paying attention to the meta crisis and how everything fits together. But they're very tribal and single issue. And if we have a huge amount of humans that deeply care about the environment and plastics and biodiversity and climate change, but then a huge amount of business leaders that are trying to develop and sell products demanded by humans around the world, they're often not really talking to each other. They're very firm in their objectives and their plans and their values, but there isn't a whole lot of overlap, which is a problem.

Sian Sutherland (00:09:08):

A serious problem. And it's extraordinary to me just in the world of plastic it's now five and a half years since Blue Planet was screened, the world woke up to the problem of plastic in the ocean. Every consumer goods company came out with some kind of plastic commitment and pledge. Most of them had a 2025 deadline for that. Not a single one of them is succeeding. And there is so little real collaboration between industry. And every industry will say to me, "We can't fix this alone." And I'll say, "Great, but are you actually talking to your competition." You're right. Because we have to change the entire system, not just the material here. Plastic is an extraordinary gateway to systems change and yet people are still not ready to shift away from their competitive mindset. And that's what's really got to change.

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:10:02):

So we're going to get into that in this conversation. But first, I have had several guests on Martin Scheringer, Shanna Swan, and others who have talked specifically about the impacts from plastic pollution on humans and on wild creatures and ecosystems. Can you give a whirlwind, brief recap for those might not be familiar with the serious damage that plastic and the plastic ecosystem can cause on our economy and our planet?

Sian Sutherland (00:10:40):

It's very easy for us to think of plastic as something that is a material in itself like aluminum or copper or cobalt. Plastic is not on the periodic table. Plastic is a mixture of chemicals. Many of them are toxic, known toxic. And yet when we talk about plastic, we always treat it like it's a material in itself rather than what does it actually comprise of? And you look at the amount of chemicals that are used within plastic. 13,000 chemicals are used to make plastic to give it its extraordinary qualities of being rigid and shiny or being stretchy like Saran wrap, cling film. So in order to use it in your yoga pants, so to give plastic all these extraordinary qualities, we add a huge amount of chemicals to them. Half of those 13,000 chemicals have never been tested on the impact for human health.

(00:11:38):

So this is where the problem lies. And we are in total denial of the impact on human health. And I know many of the scientists that you've just referred to and people like Professor Pete Myers and obviously Professor Terry Collins from Carnegie Mellon who are part of our Plastic Health Council, where we are trying to give them a more global stage, more mic share to really get this message out because their message is very clear. It is five past midnight. We cannot ring the bell any louder than we are. All you will ever hear is, "We need more research." Yeah, I wonder if plastic, I wonder if this credit card size worth of plastic that we are consuming every week, I wonder if it has an impact on us. I wonder if the fact that there is plastic in placenta now. I wonder if the fact that there is micro plastics twice as much in a baby poop as there is in an adult poop, there's plastic in blood.

(00:12:32):

We know that plastic is a mixture of chemicals. So all of the merchants of doubt that you will hear, largely the fossil fuel industry who will continue to purport this rumor

The Great Simplification

that we need more research. We will always need more research, but we have so much research already. We're just not listening to it. So these scientists, these health scientists who have been doing this very deep research for many, many years and who are very concerned about the impact on cognitive disorders, autoimmune disease, things like autism, Asperger's, all of those conditions that we've seen a massive rise. The huge impact on fertility, on heart disease, cancer, all of these things are caused through some of the chemicals that we use within plastic. And a lot of those chemicals already are called endocrine disrupting chemicals. Our endocrine system is vital to how our entire body operates. And when we disrupt it, we disrupt many, many health systems.

(00:13:36):

And we are doing this now knowingly. And this is the problem. When we look at A Plastic Planet and we look what are the levers of change? What are those tipping points where we can actually persuade industry that this is not a nice to because of the bit of pollution or a turtle with a straw up its nose? But this is an imperative of a have to that we can take to our shareholders, our stakeholders, that we have to move away from plastic. One of those tipping points for us is the impact on human health and this mounting body of science. And we need to give it a lot more airtime.

Nate Hagens (00:14:10):

So the person that introduced us, a mutual friend has told me over a beer that he could make a strong argument why plastics, endocrine disrupting chemicals are a greater threat to our future than climate change which was quite a strong statement.

Sian Sutherland (00:14:33):

We've got multiple threats right now. We talk about this, the multiple crises that we all face and we talk about artificial intelligence and what that might mean. Obviously, the climate crisis, the endocrine disrupting chemicals, the amount of chemicals that we're using in everything, the destruction to our soil, the fundament that we grow our food in. We know the damage that we're causing the ocean, the biodiversity of the ocean and chemicals are really need to take a fair share of the blame here. I was talking to a scientist the other day and he said, "What's amazing is." He used to work at Dow Chemical and he's now a professor of green chemistry. And he said, "It just suddenly dawned on me one day that we work in these labs and we are incredibly

The Great Simplification

good at hazmat gear and we can protect ourselves and we work on all these really powerful chemicals and then we release them onto the market, we release them into the environment."

(00:15:30):

What are we thinking that we should do this when nature, as we know, when you give something back to nature, there is no waste in nature. Nature is, of course, the perfect circle. Everything is the nutrient for the next stage of growth, but nature is binary. And what we give back to nature is either a food, a nutrient or is a toxin, a poison. And we think there's this gray area where it's maybe a little less bad, maybe bioplastics a little less bad, but actually nature's very simple it's either a toxin or it's a nutrient, and a lot of the chemicals that we are pumping out daily. I think I read somewhere, we make a new chemical every 10 minutes. So We're pumping out all of these chemicals with no regard for the impact on nature as if nature can just handle it. And clearly she can't.

Nate Hagens (00:16:24):

So I have lots of questions for you Sian, but let me just ask, how do you even frame this problem in your mind? Is it that we need to reduce the scale of human consumption or we need to reduce the scale of things containing plastics or we need to find alternatives that are not toxins but either inert or nutrients to the system? How do we even create a framework to think about what we face with respect to plastics and the human economy?

Sian Sutherland (00:17:01):

The reason that I'm so obsessed by plastic is I think it's the perfect gateway to the climate crisis, to the biodiversity crisis, to many of the things that we are facing right now. And it is that because the invention of plastic broke the system and it's such a recent problem, it's our generation, it's my generation that has caused this mess. This is not something that has evolved over hundreds of years. And if you think of the way that we used to consume and the amount of waste that we used to individually, it's not just about a growing population. I remember I grew up in a family of six. We had one metal bin, we dragged it out into the street every week. It was rarely full. My boys have left home. Now, I live in an apartment with my husband. We fill a bin every two days with packaging materials, with all of this stuff that we just use momentarily and then throw away.

The Great Simplification

(00:18:00):

So for me, the invention of plastic broke that system of repair, refill, renew, rent, share, all of those things that used to be just standard practice for us. And it broke the system so simply that we could actually it's amazingly cheap for us to make these things now that we can use them once and we can chuck them in a bin for some mythical, magical recycling fairy to supposedly recycle. And in the world of plastic that is simply not happening. So I think when you look at the climate crisis and you look at what has allowed us to get to these giddy levels of hyper consumption, obviously, in the rich West and what that has caused with the climate crisis. Why are those coal-fired factories in China? Why over the recent decades have they been pumping out more and more stuff to export to us for us to use ones to throw into a bin?

(00:18:57):

Plastic is the material that we can lay a huge amount of blame at because it broke the system. And on the same note, by divesting from plastic, by weaning ourselves from plastic, which we are so addicted to now, the new systems that we are going to have to invent not just systems but the new materials that we would adopt, I think give us a very exciting glimpse into a different future. So that's why I think of it as a gateway and it's also... There are no plastic deniers out there. It's not like carbon. I don't know. I can't see it. I can't feel it. I can't touch it. How can I impact the carbon crisis?

(00:19:36):

Plastic. I feel bad about it every single day. I'm complicit in the problem every time I buy something and I don't want it anymore. But what we need is to push governments to create laws that then create this level playing field for industry to be able to wean themselves off fossil fuel plastic and change the system. We use more material, more natural resource in the last six years than we did in the entire 20th century. And part of this is because we've got this culture of single use and that's what plastic gave us.

Nate Hagens (00:20:13):

And the amount of plastic that exists today is greater than the weight of all the animals on the earth.

Sian Sutherland (00:20:22):

Bonkers eh?

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:20:23):

It's a lot.

Sian Sutherland (00:20:23):

Yeah. And It's never going away. Every piece of plastic ever made and less burnt, which is simply burning a fossil fuel. And we know where that's got us today. Every piece of plastic still exists on the planet.

Nate Hagens (00:20:37):

And I read a plastic milk jug will degrade only after 800 years. But when it degrades, it'll degrade into microplastics. Is that correct?

Sian Sutherland (00:20:48):

Correct. So it doesn't actually degrade down to nothing. Plastic simply breaks up into smaller and smaller pieces and microplastics as you say, but then also nanoplastics. So because plastic is so omnipresent in our lives and it isn't just about packaging, it isn't about the plastic products, it's paint on the wall. It's all of our furniture. So we're inhaling it as well.

Nate Hagens (00:21:13):

So I'm going to have to amend one of my taglines that our modern economic system is turning billions of barrels of ancient sunlight into microliters of dopamine plus CO₂ and microplastics.

Sian Sutherland (00:21:28):

Yes.

Nate Hagens (00:21:29):

Yeah.

Sian Sutherland (00:21:30):

Yeah.

Nate Hagens (00:21:32):

Go ahead.

The Great Simplification

Sian Sutherland (00:21:33):

No, I was going to say I love the dopamine expression because for me it is our hyper consumption. Nate, did you ever watch that film Minimalism?

Nate Hagens (00:21:45):

No.

Sian Sutherland (00:21:45):

It was a documentary on Netflix maybe 10 years ago now. And I remember watching it with one of my sons and it showed this whole rise in hyper consumption and how it really kicked off in the late 70s, early 80s. And for him it was shocking thinking, "Wow, I thought it had always been this way." I've only ever lived in the world where we buy like we do now. But It's a fantastic documentary about these two maybe people that you even knew, Wall Street guys who decided having all this stuff was really weighing them down. So they divested, they got rid of all this stuff, and they traveled around America with very, very few things and they interviewed many people and they wrote this book called Minimalism.

(00:22:24):

And there was a quote in there that I'll never forget, which was that whole thing about the dopamine hit of the buy now, buy now. I just need more stuff because this makes me feel safe and successful and secure and it'll make me happy. And this line was, "We will never have enough of something we don't actually need." And that is so true, isn't it? And again, it comes back to fast fashion, for example, the amount of clothes that we wear, we have enough clothing on the planet to clothe six future generations already. And yet, still, the stores are full of the latest best things that we should be buying for that dopamine hit.

Nate Hagens (00:23:06):

So fashion and clothes is a microcosm of our overconsumption because there's dopamine and unexpected reward there. I like this shirt, it's one of my favorite shirts, but I've been wearing it for five years now. Maybe I need something different, even though this one is fully functional, that is a driver of many of our consumption decisions. Yes?

The Great Simplification

Sian Sutherland (00:23:28):

Totally. It makes me very sad. I love clothes, I love fashion. And yet fashion has gone from something which was about beauty and craft and enhancement. And I don't know, maybe self-esteem, it's gone from that to being one of the most depleted, pollutive, exploitative industries on the planet. And that's happened in a very short space of time. Fast fashion couldn't exist without fossil fuels.

Nate Hagens (00:23:55):

So is there a lot of plastics or chemicals involved in clothes and fashion? I'm not aware.

Sian Sutherland (00:24:02):

Yup. And most people don't. If you go to your wardrobe today, maybe yours is different to most, but anybody's wardrobe, 70% of that wardrobe is plastic bags just hanging there because 70% of all our textiles globally are now made out of fossil fuel plastic. Polyester. Anything beginning with a poly is definitely going to be plastic. Every bit of thread, even if you're wearing, if your shirt is made out of cotton there, I guarantee it's held together with polyester. So that entire fashion industry it's very, very difficult now to make things that are entirely plastic free.

(00:24:37):

And the other interesting thing that's happened in the world of clothing is that we think performance technical garments, The North Faces, the Patagonias of the world, the Lululemons of the world. We think that we can only get performance by using synthetics. And actually if you look at how do you get true breathability, true flexibility, true comfort, nothing feels as good as a natural fiber. So we've gone this slightly strange direction thinking technical equals plastic, that's the only way. And one of the brands that we work with is very interesting because they are trying to fight that system in a very David and Goliath way of saying, "We're going to be the very first brand to uncompromisingly bring out a range of outdoor wear of sportswear that is going to be entirely plastic free." And having worked with them, I recognize, "Wow, it is so hard to do it." It isn't just the threads, it's the coatings, it's the dyes, it's everything, is based on plastic.

Nate Hagens (00:25:40):

The Great Simplification

So is it the same way as fossil fuels have subsidized and built a metabolic global just in time delivery system for products because it's now cheaper to do that than have your local hardware store be an expert on things. You have Amazon and Walmart because of the fossil transportation subsidy. Is clothing the same way if you were to make natural fiber clothing, it might be better for the breathability and the other things you mentioned, but would it be significantly more expensive?

Sian Sutherland (00:26:18):

It depends what you're buying because the same really with anything that's made out of synthetics. I mean how much is a Patagonia jacket? It's not cheap and a lot of it is going to be made out of plastic. So it really depends what you're buying. But fundamentally, what we've got a question is how much do we need? So would you rather buy things that fall apart in a year's time or would you rather buy things that you genuinely love that you repair and you have for generations? And It's funny how somebody like King Charles is now known for the fact that he still wears the same shoes he's been wearing for 30 years. They've just been incredibly well looked after and the same suits and all of those things. And he's gone from being somebody that we all thought was a little bit of a fuddy-duddy tree hugger to somebody who is actually the epitome of living a sustainable life.

Nate Hagens (00:27:14):

I think to answer your question, I would prefer to buy something that would last a long, long time, even if it was more costly and it was available. But that's the thing. I don't think people have the options. Our stores are filled with the planned obsolescence gadgets and things that are cheap and easy. So I think a lot of people would answer your question in the affirmative, they would want things that would last a lot longer, but they're not available.

Sian Sutherland (00:27:49):

They're not available in abundance and that's what we need. And it's not the norm anymore. What is considered normal now is to pop into a Primark or a Target and pick something up that's cheap and actually look at that. If I buy one, I get another one half price. So we are bred to consume and that is the problem now is everything is about more and we have to recognize that actually how much lighter we would feel. That's why the Marie Kondo whole thing of tidiness and holding things and do they

The Great Simplification

spark you with joy that's why it had such a massive impact I think on many people because they recognize they're just weighed down by all of this stuff. And how was better to have a few things that you really, really love that create the core of your wardrobe or your home furnishings and all of those things that you can then just accentuate every now and then.

Nate Hagens (00:28:50):

You know what the key is to getting to that place. I don't know that people have the fortitude or the mental shortcuts to do that by themselves. But if you surround yourself with three or four or five people who are more minimalist and they care about simple things and valuing these five things, that cultural evolution can happen really fast. I want to live like they do.

Sian Sutherland (00:29:20):

Yeah, I agree. We were talking today actually about that saying that you are the sum part of the five people that you spend most time with. So choose those people wisely. Don't make them the hyper consumptive people who are just on Instagram the whole time. Buy, buy, buy, getting that little dopamine hit. That's not good for you.

Nate Hagens (00:29:39):

It's why I'm one fifth duck and one fifth dog.

Sian Sutherland (00:29:43):

I would not switch fifth.

Nate Hagens (00:29:50):

You mentioned earlier, Sian, that recycling has culturally gotten a name for being a popular option to reuse plastic and therefore keep it from polluting. Yet, you and your colleagues, from what I understand at Plastic Planet argue that it's not a solution at all and that actually it may exacerbate the problem. Can you unpack this and explain why you think that?

Sian Sutherland (00:30:19):

I think recycling is the fig leaf of consumerism. It appeases our guilt. It makes us feel that perhaps it's going in to have a useful second life and with many materials that is

The Great Simplification

true. With metals, particularly aluminum. 71% of every can you pick up is recycled daily aluminum. It is infinitely recyclable, it doesn't downgrade every time you do it. Glass very good. We're not very good at recycling it, but it is recyclable in the right way. Paper pulp, all of those things, those are the materials that fit into a recycling stream. Plastic does not. And the reason for that is you only ever downcycle plastic. It was never invented to be a material that would ever be recycled. So you downgrade it every single time. You can never recycle it more than once, maybe twice if you're lucky, but it's a little placebo pill that we have been swallowing for decades because when the plastics industry say, "We don't have a plastic pollution problem, we've got a recycling problem, we need to really invest in recycling."

(00:31:25):

And when you get the likes of, forgive me for mentioning a name, but when we get the likes of Coca-Cola saying, "If only we could persuade this lazy consumer to put the bottle in the right bin." Then suddenly it's our problem. And we feel like we're the reason the recycling system isn't quite working we're not using the bins right. Everybody's suddenly obsessed about being a good recycler and the reality is most of that plastic that you put in the recycling bin, 91% of it has never and will never get recycled globally because only 9% of any plastics been recycled, the US particularly, less than 5% last year was recycled in the US and in the UK-

Nate Hagens (00:32:08):

What happens to the other 95%?

Sian Sutherland (00:32:11):

It is landfill or it's exported. So the US are the biggest per capita producers of plastic waste. The UK are number two in that sorry league and we are both massive exporters of our plastic waste to other countries offshoring our dirt. That's why I talk about waste imperialism of thinking other people can deal with our trash. So we have to stop pretending that recycling is the answer because all it's allowed the plastics industry, the fossil fuel industry to do is continue to pump it out at the tap and have our eye on the wrong end of the pipe thinking we need to recycle more. It's a complete myth.

Nate Hagens (00:32:51):

The Great Simplification

So I heard on one of your prior talks in researching this you mentioned waste imperialism. So I'm obviously familiar with resource imperialism where the global North finds energy and rare Earth materials in countries in the global South and takes advantage, et cetera about... What is waste imperialism. Could you unpack that a bit?

Sian Sutherland (00:33:17):

The sheer fact that we do not deal with our own dirt in our own country. And one of the things that we really push governments for is that we need to ban the export of plastic waste. And until very recently, export of plastic and if you've seen some of the containers and what they're filled with used nappies, coat hangers, we're not talking about clean PET bottles here that are shipped to countries like historically to Malaysia, to Myanmar, to Mozambique, to countries that have no infrastructure for handling their waste. That's why it's an imperialist attitude.

Nate Hagens (00:33:57):

I've seen some pictures of Malaysia and Indonesia of the lakes and the rivers and the oceans are just, it looks like there's more plastic and dirty nappies or whatever than water in some cases. And maybe those are unique photos that were placed that way. But when I see those photos, I think they use a lot of plastic in Malaysia. But you're suggesting that some of that is imported from the UK and the US.

Sian Sutherland (00:34:29):

Definitely we export, I think I was just looking at a report earlier today, 31% of our exports from the UK go to Turkey. So that's us in a very developed rich country like the UK sending it to Turkey where many reports have proven it is being burnt on the roadsides of Turkish villages. So that's the plastic waste. That's the rubbish that we put in our bin, the other side of waste imperialism. Sorry, do you want to say something?

Nate Hagens (00:35:00):

No, I just wanted to grimace, keep going.

Sian Sutherland (00:35:04):

The other side of it is when we talk about textiles and clothing. And I don't know, Nate, if you have seen some of those images of the pristine, beautiful Atacama

The Great Simplification

Desert and that Atacama desert now that it is like a graveyard of fast fashion and you can see as far as the eye can see mountains and mountains of discarded clothing. There are-

Nate Hagens (00:35:28):

Wait. What country is this?

Sian Sutherland (00:35:28):

In Chile.

Nate Hagens (00:35:30):

In Chile.

Sian Sutherland (00:35:33):

Yeah. And if you look at there is one town in Ghana, in North Africa, that receives 15 million items of discarded clothing every single week. 40% of them are considered was immediately and burnt. You can imagine how much plastic that is. So all of these loopholes of us thinking that we're giving stuff away or we're popping things into a recycling stream that exists, we have to wake up. We are creating billions of tons of waste. So this is where we have to go back to can plastic and the problem of plastic be that catalyst for us to rethink how we use resources in every way?

Nate Hagens (00:36:17):

I thought I knew what you were going to talk about, but this is that deja vu feeling that when I have a guest that I've never spoken to before, that I have this little pit in my stomach that I'm learning something new, that's horrible about the world that I didn't know an hour ago. But moving on to your work, that's addressing the problem. Okay. So how do you think about as your organization, A Plastic Planet, how do you begin to think about a response to this issue that incorporates multiple aspects of society? Because it's not only the individuals and it's not only the governments and it's not only the corporations. I mean how do you even begin to structure the problem before you and your organization and aligned organizations tackle it?

Sian Sutherland (00:37:10):

The Great Simplification

As you can imagine, as an entrepreneur, I believe in the power of business and business is the tool of change. And much as we should have much stronger leadership from our governments, it's not happening and we can't wait for it to happen and ultimately governments do what industry wants. So we need to look at industry as being that tool of change. And I almost think of it as like a burger when we talk about where's, the burden of responsibility here, I flip it into a burger and at the bottom of the burger, you've got the consumer, you've got you and me the shopper. This is not our problem. And I think for too long the onus of guilt has been put upon us to feel bad about the plastic crisis. All of these problems. Ultimately we buy what we are sold It's Industry's job to sell us something different and It's Government's job to mandate the industry do that faster.

(00:38:04):

So the top of that CD bun is of course governments who need to create stronger legislation, better fiscal policy, create a framework that give business certainty because the juicy burger maybe It's vegan, whatever in the middle, that juicy bit is industry. And this is where we get really excited because this is where we can make change happen. But we need governments to give industry certainty so that they know which path should they tread. Because right now globally it's very difficult for industry to know, I don't know, is there going to be a more onerous plastic tax? Will extra producer responsibility mean that plastic is no longer the cheaper option? Is this UN global plastic treaty actually going to force me to change and governments aren't helping industry in any way. So understandably, if you run an organization like Mondelez or Unilever or P&G, a lot of people are treading water kind of doggy paddle in the shallows waiting to either have certainty or for something to happen that means that they have to not it's a nice to.

(00:39:12):

And a lot of the work that we do is how can we create the threat of legislation, the liability of the impact on human health. So all of these things will motivate business to change faster and that's say 30% of our work and then the 70% is, and then how do we help them with solutions? Because I don't think It's good enough as an entrepreneur to call for a ban as we have in Europe on the little packets sachets a trillion of those pumped out every single year they go something like 11 times to the moon and back. Every single one still exists on the planet. It is the way that big brands penetrate developing markets because It's an affordability issue. Anyone who's been to

The Great Simplification

Indonesia or Thailand will see the amount of those little sachets that are sold by western brands.

(00:40:00):

So to call for a ban on those because that's a pernicious use of plastic and we have to stop. We will also in this twin track approach worked with some of the biggest users of sachets and that is Unilever and Kraft Heinz, the little ketchup sachets. How can we work with them and help them solve the problem quicker?

Nate Hagens (00:40:21):

So here's a hypothetical situation that I often think about that would work except socially it wouldn't, but mechanically it would work that if we told industry and consumers but specifically business that oil would be \$500 a barrel in 2033. So eight to 10 times more expensive for energy for non-renewable energy. You have 10 years to prepare for that. But when that happens, oil is going to be 10 times more expensive than it is today that that would create innovation and people would use non-renewable inputs to come up with products and I think business would adapt to that if they really believed it would happen. I wonder if the same sort of thing could happen. Of course, we understand the social and political hurdles to what I just said, but in the plastics industry, if there would be some massive tax or penalty by using plastics 10 years from now, could industry design ways around that, even if it ended up costing the consumer more, there would be more options and there would be more non-fossil chemical inputs into products. Any comments on that?

Sian Sutherland (00:41:49):

I'm going to vote for you and try and get you into power so that you can make that happen. I have to obviously become a US citizen.

Nate Hagens (00:41:57):

If I was in power, what would happen is nine years from now I would no longer be in power and whoever replaced me would repeal my idea, but go on.

Sian Sutherland (00:42:08):

Yeah, you're, right? That's a sorry state of the political system that we have globally. I think you're absolutely right. Imagine, I mean if you think man invented a material

The Great Simplification

that lasts forever, how extraordinary is that? Who knew that we could do that? Did we put it on a pedestal? Do we price it like gold? Do we use it for things that we need to last forever? Do we respect it? No, we treat it like rubbish, literally throw it in the bin, throw it in the street, use it for things that we'd need for moments even though we know it lasts forever. So that's the madness of how we use plastic. Imagine if we did.

(00:42:47):

Yeah, it's so bonkers, isn't it? When you step back and that we will look back, generations will look back and they'll think many things. One of them will be why did we have a market which is about selling water in plastic bottles in countries that have a tap and could filter their water very easily? We will just think that was mad. Plastic itself, the misuse of plastic. We will definitely rue the day. Future generations will not thank us for what we've done with plastic. But imagine if we did price it like gold exactly as you said, because what's happened. It's because it's so cheap, so incredible. It is a miracle material, albeit toxic and indestructible. We haven't bothered to invent any other materials. So for the last 50 years, imagine if technology had not even bothered, "Hey. We've got a telephone it's connected to the wall, it's amazing." Why would we even need anything that's better than that?

(00:43:43):

And so, in many ways I look at technology has served us incredibly, but also It's failed us because It's just given me a massive amount of power that makes me buy more and more stuff and 147 characters in that little handheld device. But what technology hasn't done is take us to a better future. It hasn't taken us to a world of materials that can fit into nature's true circularity of growth and nutrients, growth and nutrients and that's where we need the investment now is in that new world of materials. The new world of let's reuse things more. And one of the projects we're working on here that I'm so excited about is creating the first standardized packaging that will be used by competitive brands and businesses that go into a circular system.

(00:44:34):

So if you are buying a three ounce bottle of shampoo, then that three ounce bottle of shampoo is the same bottle that will be called Dove one day and be called, I don't know, Treseme the next day. Trying to think of US brands the next day because it's the same bottle. And you and I are not buying the bottle. We're buying the stuff inside the bottle. And as soon as we can change that thinking and create this true circular

The Great Simplification

system where packaging is a service, not the thing that you buy and then throw in the bin making us complicit in the problem, then that's a true system change that I think if we could make that happen fast and normalize it, that's the nirvana. Less natural resource, less energy needed, no waste.

Nate Hagens (00:45:17):

So in that scenario I use the three ounce shampoo bottle and I'm done with the shampoo, which is what I wanted. What do I do with the bottle if this all pans out?

Sian Sutherland (00:45:30):

So that bottle, because what we'll never wean ourselves off is convenience because we've got very addicted to convenience.

Nate Hagens (00:45:38):

Time is money.

Sian Sutherland (00:45:40):

Time is money. And I don't want to take loads of bottles back to the supermarket and refill them and take time at a machine to refill them and God bless the lovely little refill stores. But there is not a viable, a financially successful scalable refill model on the planet. When big brands do them they're all marketing. What we have to have instead is systems that are massive scale with thousands of drop-off points where your three ounce bottle of shampoo... Sorry three ounces is probably a bit little for the US but Let's call it the three ounce bottle of shampoo, you then can drop back at a Starbucks and you are rewarded for dropping it because it's all about a reward system. So you can take it back to Starbucks or in time in your kitchen you will have a reusable bin because why is your bin simply about waste? It's the same people coming to collect your domestic waste or a commercial waste that could just collect the reusables, put them into a centralized system of washing and redistribution, Bob's your uncle.

Nate Hagens (00:46:51):

You're right. I don't have anything that's three ounce, probably 10 ounce. But those little bottles then they're not melted and reformed. They're actually hygienically

The Great Simplification

washed and then maybe even a new label on it might be a different company or something.

Sian Sutherland (00:47:09):

Totally. Exactly. Right.

Nate Hagens (00:47:11):

Yeah. See that makes total sense. So are you finding success? Is this something exciting that's happening or?

Sian Sutherland (00:47:20):

The good news is that a lot of the big brands that I've mentioned already, all of them have signed up to say we know that this has to be the future. We don't know quite how to get there. We know that somebody has to build the system. So we are working with the organization that's building the system, which is the cooperative that is responsible for that logistics of collection, washing, redistribution. And then the brands simply lease their packaging. They don't even need to own it anymore. They lease the packaging from the centralized system.

(00:47:49):

And then as a shopper, all I get is reward. I get an enhanced elevated experience. I've now got a beautiful aluminum or a stainless steel bottle that I know I'm not having to put into a waste bin and be part of the problem anymore. So I've got something that feels better, more substantial. And I've got the products that I love. So nothing, no compromise for me it was pre-filled. I didn't have to go and fill it anywhere. All I need to do is drop it off at a number of many, many places and for doing that I get rewarded. So we have to make it a win-win.

Nate Hagens (00:48:23):

And I could see how global education and environmental consciousness of what is happening with the natural world and plastic pollution would help but it's not essential for this model to work because even people that don't necessarily hold the environment prominent in their values would get the reward and get some economic benefit from a new cultural model of using containers for the things that they use.

Sian Sutherland (00:48:56):

The Great Simplification

Yup. And we have to do it at scale and it has to be with the mass brands, not just the niche expensive brands because we have to make it the new normal. So that has to happen super fast. In France, for example, they are mandating that 20% of supermarkets over a certain size, 20% of those supermarket floor space has to be given over to refill because they know that if they don't make that happen, it won't become normal. It'll be niche and that won't work.

Nate Hagens (00:49:23):

So I understand the consumer's role here and the role of industry. What does government have to do with plans such as this? Why are they essential as well?

Sian Sutherland (00:49:36):

Because they need to create the framework of fiscal policy and legislation that mandate that these things happen and we vote governments in to protect us, to run our countries, to keep us safe. I think that they are failing in this. They're failing in this because generally the climate pledges I'm not saying any governments hitting the climate pledges, we all know that that one and a half degree threshold we're already at 1.4 degrees. Now we don't talk about stopping this, we now talk about resilience. The language has changed. So I think governments are absolutely failing us. They haven't created the framework, the industry to have to change and that's what our governments need to do now. And again, I come back to plastic because it's popular, there is no one out there that doesn't feel a little bit bad about what we've done with plastic. And so if you want a gateway in order to start to drive systemic change that is going to be better, less energy, all the rest of it, then plastic's a really great place to start.

Nate Hagens (00:50:45):

I'm down with that. I can't wait to bring my bottles to Starbucks and get rewarded because I do feel bad and I see the things but I don't have an alternative. So what else is going on at A Plastic Planet? Do you have any other signs of progress on this massive issue that a lot of people don't know details, but they're clearly aware that we do have a plastic problem.

Sian Sutherland (00:51:09):

The Great Simplification

One of the things that we've been working on for the last couple of years been a very big project for us. We recognize in all this work with industry and we work a lot with creative agencies that there is this massive gap, a knowledge gap between the creative industry. And if you think about it, Nate, everything is designed, everything in our life, our street, what we're wearing the cup, I'm drinking out of now the computer that we're talking to. Everything, everything is designed even if it's a bad design and there is 106, there are 160 million creatives globally and there's this knowledge gap because they have not been trained for the job of the future, understandably so. The plastic free materials makers, the system changes, the proof points, the case studies, what questions should they even be asking? How can they push back against that brief that says just use a recycled plastic?

(00:52:03):

How can we inspire, empower, educate, ignite that community of 160 million global creatives so that we can redesign a different future? Because I feel very passionately about the role of the creative here. Go back in history. Tell me one moment where a banker or an economist changed the course of history. It's always been the Mavericks, those engineers, the architects, the radicals of the world who can envisage something completely different to how we live today. And we need the creative industry more than ever to do that right now. So what we've been working on for the last couple of years is we've developed a platform which is hosted on PlasticFree.com, which is that solutions platform, which is an education platform for the 160 million global creatives to help them feel ignited, inspired, and educated and all of those things so that they can push back, change the brief and redesign everything. Because if we change it at the beginning, we will have no waste at the end.

Nate Hagens (00:53:07):

I hadn't heard of this creatives demographic. 160 million. Are these marketing advertising people or is it beyond that? What do you mean by 160 million creatives?

Sian Sutherland (00:53:20):

So for me, I would actually envisage it's much, much more than 160 million because I think entrepreneurs are the most creative people on the planet and they're probably not even included in that number. But if you create a business out of nothing, you know how creative you have to be for that. But it's everything, it's the architects, it's the

The Great Simplification

designers, it's the people that work in clothing, in packaging, in product, there's a lot of people out there who have the ability to envisage a different way to make stuff of how we're going to live.

Nate Hagens (00:53:54):

Even podcast hosts, perhaps.

Sian Sutherland (00:53:56):

Even podcasts, I mean media massively influential and highly creative.

Nate Hagens (00:54:02):

Yeah. So this is such a huge, huge topic and there's so many aspects of our life. I mean I just look around my office, I have so many things made from plastic. So what areas of life do you think where we currently use plastic exclusively, do you anticipate are going to be the most difficult to change? Are there some areas that we will always need plastic?

Sian Sutherland (00:54:34):

We need to start with the innovation first. So a lot of people will say to me, "Yeah. But Sian, if you were ill and you went to hospital, you'd be so glad that the plasma bag is made out of plastic and the amount of plastic that is used in healthcare is phenomenal." We've got many professors in the NHS here and in the American health system who are saying we need to take plastic out of healthcare. It is not good for us and it is everywhere. So I'm not sure that even healthcare is where we will end up still having plastic, but what we need is the innovation. And if we start with the easy bits. So what is the most ridiculous use of plastic as we've discussed already packaging, 40% of all plastic is used for packaging alone, used for minutes chucked in a bin, we don't even want it, we didn't buy it wasn't part of the product.

(00:55:28):

So that would be a very great place to start because if we can crack packaging and then obviously we should move on to textiles because I think the removal of plastic out of textile, 35% of all ocean microfibers are from us simply washing our clothes. So that's an imperative, we have to take it out of clothing and the shift in that as well because of course fast fashion cannot exist without plastic. So therefore we will have

The Great Simplification

to rethink the entire fashion industry in a much healthier, fairer, less depleted, less pollutive way. And then the final one for us will be the built environment. Because we live in plastic tinderboxes. Every time we paint a building we plasticized a building.

Nate Hagens (00:56:13):

All right. I have a bunch of questions. So what did you say about microplastics? The microplastics in the ocean come from us doing our laundry?

Sian Sutherland (00:56:22):

Yup. Every time you wash your clothes, then your polyester clothing, your Gap fleece-

Nate Hagens (00:56:29):

Because they're not natural fiber. There's a lot of poly something in my clothing,

Sian Sutherland (00:56:35):

Yes. Everything sheds, even natural fibers will shed but they are not harmful in the same way. And those of course, just go straight into the drain. We do not have filters on washing machines. Kind of bonkers. Why is that not mandated to start with? They flood into the water system. Flood out into the rivers, no filter will ever capture them. They are invisible to the human eye and then they flood out into the ocean. So it's the equivalent of a family of four every single week going to the beach and throwing in a plastic bag. That's the amount of microfiber pollution that we're talking about with washing your clothes.

Nate Hagens (00:57:15):

The oceans are really the bottom of the barrel of our waste dump of this economic system, aren't they? In so many ways, they're invisible and just the solution to pollution is dilution, but the oceans are not unlimited in size and health and clarity. I mean they're really a lot of stuff going into the oceans.

Sian Sutherland (00:57:35):

Yeah, really terrible. And again, we come back to chemicals. The amount of chemicals that we pour into the oceans that we think the oceans can handle. It's really shocking.

Nate Hagens (00:57:47):

The Great Simplification

So let me get back to the other question I had from what you said. So if we change the packaging, there's two aspects to that. One reason we need so much packaging is because things get shipped all over the world and there needs to be a packaged thing. So part of it is maybe localizing and shortening supply chain. So not as a high percentage of the things that we use come from around the world and need to be packaged like maybe more local things. And they wouldn't need all that packaging. And then the second component is what is that packaging made from? And we would like it to be less chemical in origin. Is that correct?

Sian Sutherland (00:58:29):

Totally correct. So that's, when I say if we fix the plastic crisis, we would directly and indirectly fix so much else because you're right, why are we shipping stuff around the world in the way that we are? We know how carbon intensive the shipping industry is. So is this really necessary? I know there's a big push at the moment in the US for invented here, manufactured here, we need more of that.

Nate Hagens (00:58:55):

So there are many activists and I know quite a few of them, especially in the environmental movement who are fundamentally anti-corporations, especially large corporations. With respect to the chemical pollution and plastics situation, what are your thoughts on that stance?

Sian Sutherland (00:59:17):

We are never going to get away from big business and small brands, little indie brands, well-meaning as they are and many of them are doing the right thing from the get-go, they will not move the dial. We need the big brands to create a different normal for all of us. But I'm realistic that there are going to be casualties. And I think things are starting to accelerate and the pace of change from industry is not keeping up. And there are many that will step over that line of change and they will reimagine and reinvent themselves in a positive way and they will become less commoditized, less wasteful, less resource intensive. They will think of themselves as service industries rather than consumer goods industries. All of those things are really positive. And then there'll be some that don't and everybody's got a Kodak story. And I think we're going to see a lot of casualties going forward and it's going to happen much, much faster than we ever thought.

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (01:00:17):

I mean you had a successful career, multiple careers and now you're an advocate for an important part of our environmental and human health. So in many ways, you are an industry person turned activist. What do you think makes for good activism?

Meaning activism and behavior that actually leads to real and lasting change? And do you think the majority of what we consider activism today is aligned with this?

Sian Sutherland (01:00:47):

There's a saying that if you're not an activist today, you're part of the problem. And I think that is increasingly true. And I really love to see this next generation rise up and the anger that they have, the understandable anger of the cluster that we are leaving them after how we have raped the planet and done everything that we've done and given it back a whole load of nothing but rubbish, and very toxic chemicals. So activism I think can take a number of different forms. For me personally as an entrepreneur, you have to be a born optimist. And I'm very optimistic about where we are right now and the ability of mankind to innovate our way out of this and to wake up in time because otherwise you just couldn't get up in the morning. We have to focus on solutions. We have to stop talking about the problem. We have to stop carbon counting as if that's actually going to make any kind of impact. But key to it all for me is we've got to stop with guilt and blame because those not, they do not help us move forward.

(01:01:57):

And if you are working in a big industry right now, you are still a human being and you may not feel great about turning up every day and then going home and saying to your kids, guess what? I pumped out another billion bottles today that are going to exist forever. I'm sure people are stuck in these roles because we're all in that hamster wheel of consumerism and believing we have to earn a certain amount in order to buy a certain amount. We're all in that terrible wheel of having to earn enough right now. And so people are worried about jobs and so they do a lot of things I think they don't feel good about.

(01:02:34):

So a lot of what we want to do is how do we tap into the human within industry? And by doing that we have to help them, not blame them, not vilify them in any way. There is no such thing as industry it's, a construct that it's like money. We just invented it. It's

The Great Simplification

a body of human beings. So we need to treat people like human beings and we need to really help them to get onto a better path. Hold them to account, yes, but champion them when they do the right thing.

Nate Hagens (01:03:04):

So what thoughts do you have for the viewers and listeners of this program who care about plastics, chemical pollution, the environment? From your perspective, what can people do in their own lives on this particular issue?

Sian Sutherland (01:03:19):

I don't think your power really is for you as a consumer. We don't have time to wait for this ethical consumer to rise up in sufficient volumes that industry will take note. Your power as an individual is what you do every day at work. And this is why I love talking to people within the world of business because often they'll say, "Yeah, what can I do? I've got a usually reusable coffee cup." Say, well that's really great and definitely take a bag to the store, don't take a plastic bag. All of those things are important and we have a certain level of personal responsibility and you have to vote with your wallet and support those who are doing the right thing. But ultimately my message to them is, if you care, be a squeaky wheel at work. Go into work because there is not an industry on the planet that is not dependent on fossil fuels and plastic.

(01:04:12):

So go in and see how can you become involved as a pro-activist within your organization that is not about guilt and blame, but is saying let's get some good people in and let's see what we can achieve because I don't understand how we have allowed this model to grow where industry at the behest of everything in the name of profit to the destruction of the environment, inequality, all the things that we know in the name of profit can do whatever they need to do. And then we have this other thing called charity where industry out of the goodness of their hearts have a little bit of profit off to give the charity something to undo the harm that they've done. Why does it exist? I don't agree with it. Industry, business has to be the tool of good charity in my sorry, controversial statement. Why does charity exist? Because business has to do the good.

Nate Hagens (01:05:10):

The Great Simplification

I think the reason that it came about was because fossil energy and its byproducts which you're working on were so unbelievably cheap and the world was still not ecologically full that it was just the path of least resistance to create this stuff for monetary profits. And the externalities are not big enough to matter. And now 2023-ish, holy crap, the externalities are mattering in a big way and the stuff's not becoming as cheap and we need to change the model and fast. But I think the origins are in this unbelievable cheap subsidy and bounty from the past that we treat it as interest. But it's really principle with a big old pollution asterisk, get tied to it.

Sian Sutherland (01:06:02):

Totally agree. We are taking the resources from our children's future. We use two planets worth every single year. We sell them today and we call it GDP. How can this be right?

Nate Hagens (01:06:15):

So obviously you have thought about these issues quite deeply as a mother, as a human being, as a runner of an NGO, not on plastic and pollution per se, but what broader personal advice can you give to listeners of this program at this time of upheaval, anxiety, shame, guilt, worry about the future?

Sian Sutherland (01:06:43):

We have to have hope, we have to have optimism, but we have to remember that hope is a verb. Focus is an action word. It's not a theory. And we have to move to action now. So whatever you're doing, stop talking about it and start doing something about it. That's the whole thing of being that squeaky wheel, but have faith as well that we live on the most incredible planet in the universe. And I think it's only now when we can see, I don't know if you've seen any of the James Webb Telescope images where you see the pillars of Hercules and the origins of stars. And it blows my mind when I see some of those images. But then equally, you look back and you see this little blue and green marble suspended in space and it makes me value what we have even more. That's what we've got to look after.

Nate Hagens (01:07:36):

It does amaze me that the wonder and the majesty of everything is being recognized at the same time of the tragedy and the horror of what we're doing and it's this

The Great Simplification

juxtaposition of both of them at the same time. That can be a big motivator to change and that's what I'm trying to do here with this portal to get more people to see that and change how they think and how they act. So would you change what you just said? What additional recommendations would you have for a young human 16 to 25 listening to this show being in the first quarter of their life? What recommendations would you give to a young person?

Sian Sutherland (01:08:24):

Do not fall into the trap of consumption. Well, it'll be pretty simple. If I'm really honest, think it off the top of my head. Come off social media because we all know that social media is bad for us. Protect your mental health above all else. Get out into nature whenever you can. We live in these concrete boxes and it's how much more science proof do we need that when we're out in nature, then we feel better. Our mental health is restored. So you've got to get out into nature and just enjoy the world for whatever time we have, let's just relish it and embrace it and appreciate it like we never have before.

Nate Hagens (01:09:09):

I have a large diversity of guests and their professional background and what they're working on, but everything you just said is a very common answer. So that gives me a positive feeling that it's robust like that must be true, those things. Get off of social media, get out in nature, stop being a mindless consumer. I mean, I think those things hold water. What do you care most about in the world, Sian?

Sian Sutherland (01:09:40):

Well, it's got to be my family. I'm absolutely blessed with three wonderful brothers, a husband. We just celebrated 32 years of marriage. And my two sons who I pinch myself every day that I can't believe what wonderful human beings they are and how gorgeous they are to us. So my family is really, really important to me. My friends, super important to me. And then if I'm really honest, I am a massive advocate of the mini break. I think when we all work as hard as we do, and you Americans are not good at this, you need to take more time out. Even if you're still connected for me, that whole thing of getting out into nature. I've just come back from working from Greece and that's my fourth August now where I thought post-COVID, I can work anywhere.

The Great Simplification

(01:10:38):

And so I base myself on a Little Greek island with good wifi, as you know. With pretty good wifi, I could do everything I needed to do. But for me, the joy of being able to just jump into a sparkling warm sea every morning it's those simple pleasures, I think. That's all we need. I don't need fancy jewelry. I don't need any of that stuff. I don't need more things in my life. I need less things, but I definitely need more wonderful experiences with friends and family that's what fuels me.

Nate Hagens (01:11:10):

If you could wave a magic wand and there was no personal recourse to your decisions, what is one thing you would do to improve human and planetary futures?

Sian Sutherland (01:11:20):

I would probably do exactly what you said, which is make fossil fuels completely unattainable, unaffordable. Because I think the catalyst that would happen from that would be really extraordinary because fossil fuels really are a road to destruction. We have lost our way.

Nate Hagens (01:11:43):

But you would have to give a deferral on that because if you did it overnight, it would absolutely crash the global system. So there would have to be a build in a phase in phase, right?

Sian Sutherland (01:11:57):

Yeah, totally, totally. But that's the whole thing, if you give industry certainty, they will move because they have to move and the stakeholders will allow them to move. And at the moment, nobody has certainty. So this is where we just need to say, "This is how it's going to happen and here's the date It's going to happen exactly as you said." And then we have to come true on that. And then I think it will be unbelievable the world that we can create. I think we have no idea that the future, if we wanted it, the future that we could reimagine for ourselves into a true reality could be better, brighter, more exciting, more optimistic, happier, better mental health. All of those things living in harmony with nature. We just need to want to get there. And right now, the majority don't seem to want it.

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (01:12:48):

I would agree with that. This has been great. It's been eye-opening. Again, I've learned some things. Do you have any closing thoughts on the topic of plastics, chemical pollution, and your organization, A Plastic Planet?

Sian Sutherland (01:13:06):

I encourage anybody Who's interested to learn more to join plasticfree.com. Pretty easy to find. I think talking about the impact of chemicals, you know what's amazing to me, Nate, is you go to any dinner table with friends gathering tonight, they'll talk about schools, they'll talk about the price of property. Very, very few people will talk about what's actually happening to the world. Very few people would dare talk about the climate crisis, the plastic crisis. It's a bit of a downer. They don't want to be seen to be an eco-activist. So I really encourage people let's start to have the conversations that matter. Those honest conversations, don't feel like you're some eco weirdo. We've got to start talking about things and we're really not. We're a little bit in la-la land.

Nate Hagens (01:13:55):

Maybe we need a sequel to the movie *The Graduate*, which was out in the '70s and Dustin Hoffman had some advice from his girlfriend's dad say, "Hey, I got one word for you. Plastics." And now, in the sequel it's the impact from plastics and we need to change it. An odd comment to end the interview on, but I think the conversation-

Sian Sutherland (01:14:19):

Yeah, but I love it. I know. How many people went into plastics because of that? I'm sure they will rue the day. Dustin Hoffman listening to that thinking, "I never should have got into plastics."

Nate Hagens (01:14:32):

So thank you so much for your time and for your work on this important issue. I have these things every month called reality round tables where I have former guests, three or four of them convene together to discuss a topic. I would love to have you and Shanna Swan and maybe Pete Myers and Martin Scheringer or others to convene and have a deeper interdisciplinary conversation on this if you'd be willing?

Sian Sutherland (01:15:01):

The Great Simplification

I would love that, Nate. And thank you so much for just giving this some airtime because this is the dinner table, isn't it? These are the conversations that we should all be having. So giving it the air time, we really appreciate because it's much, much needed. We've got to take it out of the closet and talk about the problem and then we can fix it.

Nate Hagens (01:15:22):

Thank you, Sian. To be continued.

Sian Sutherland (01:15:25):

Thank you, Nate.

Nate Hagens (01:15:26):

If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please subscribe to us on your favorite podcast platform and visit thegreatsimplification.com for more information on future releases.