

Sustainability: It Just Isn't Easy to Grasp

Sometimes when you open a can of worms, you realize the can is much deeper than you thought. And while you contemplate the depths of the seemingly bottomless container, a lot of the worms wriggle away, and you see you can't possibly fit them back into the original can.

That's what happens when you try to define *sustainability*; you unleash an interpretive pandemonium of squirming, unruly, slippery concepts and ideas all of which defy a proper grasp.

Imagine, then, trying to achieve it.

And then imagine what happens if we don't try to define and achieve some measure of sustainability. Even with our poor understanding of what sustainability really means, there's a reason it's become a buzz word in the last few decades. 1) Because we care, on some level, about what happens to our planet in the future. 2) Because we're scared, on some level, that we've done irreparable damage to the planet, specifically to our environment, our economy, our bodies and our culture.

Let's start with what we know—where the word came from. We start with the Latin verb, *sustinere*, which means “to uphold.” This is the basis for our English verb “sustain,” which means, according to the “American Heritage Dictionary,”

1. To keep in existence; maintain.
2. To supply with necessities or nourishment; provide for.
3. To support from below; keep from falling or sinking; prop.
4. To support the spirits, vitality, or resolution of; encourage.
5. To bear up under; withstand: can't sustain the blistering heat.

One thing I notice about these definitions is that they are all active. They all involve an energy input.

That's why it's interesting to note that when Spanish-speaking scientists try to translate the noun sustainability, they need to choose between *sostenibilidad* (from *sostener*) and *sustentabilidad* (from *sustentar*). The first is more passive, “being upheld,” while the second suggests actively upholding.

As a concept, the noun has its origins in forestry, fisheries and range management. Long before men in red silk ties were sitting in air conditioned boardrooms talking about economic sustainability or sustainable development, the miner von Carlowitz was writing about *Nachhaltigkeit*, a German approximation of sustainability, in reference to forestry. He was interested in the long-term productivity of timber plantations and their ability to provide construction poles for the mines. That was in the 1700s.

Over 200 years later, the term was globally popularized by the Brundtland Report. Written for the World Commission on Environment and Development, the 1987 report, titled “Our Common

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Future,” defined sustainable development as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*

That report got the world talking. And that’s good. For though the definition is noble, there’s no way to measure it, to implement it operationally or to interpret it objectively. Needs are contextual. Do you need your TV? Do you need your cell phone? Your SUV? Your organic potatoes? Your second house? I am sure we can all make good arguments for what we “need.” Just today my toddler assured me that he “needed” a new John Deere tractor toy, the kind that could pull a seeder implement.

It is easier for us to define what is unsustainable. New Zealander Alan Fricker writes, in his article “Measuring Up to Sustainability” at www.metafuture.org, “Unsustainability is commonly seen as environmental (in its broad sense) degradation, from the stresses of human population, affluence and technology on ecological and global limits. Since these stresses are all of our own construction, their control is, theoretically at least, within our capabilities.”

There is little doubt, he concludes, that our present path is unsustainable.

If we dig a little deeper into the etymology, we find that the Latin origin stems from the Indo-European root *ten-*, which means “to stretch” (also the basis for our words *tendon*, *intend*, and *tenable*).

And stretching is exactly what we are being asked to do. Stretch our preconceived boundaries in terms of what is possible and what is necessary. Stretch our minds in terms of new solutions. And stretch our individual practices.

I like, as a starting point, embracing the word sustainable in terms of more or less. In all your actions, in all your practices, you might ask yourself, “Is this more sustainable or less sustainable?”

Though it would be nice to have a clear cut definition of what constitutes sustainability—and you can find some folks who are trying at <http://www.flora.org/sustain/Sustain.html>—we don’t need a commission to tell us that an energy-saving compact fluorescent light bulb would be more sustainable than an incandescent one. We don’t need a report to tell us that it’s more sustainable when we ride our bike ten blocks than when we drive our Subaru there.

“But I had to drive,” you say, “I needed to be on time to my open space meeting.”

It’s a can of worms. And maybe our job isn’t to try to put them all back in the can. Maybe they’d do more good if we let them out so they could help us deal with all the compost material we’re creating. Let the wrangling with what is slippery go on ...

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