

UNST 124g fall 2011

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

1 introduction

1.1 nature

It should be clear from our work thus far that terms like *the environment* and *nature* can mean different things to different people. Such differences may derive from cultural context but they might also have a basis in use. What an economist thinks when he or she uses the word sustainability may be very different from what a theologian thinks and that difference may have an important function, for the economist, the theologian, and their constituencies. Dan Flores asked us (1998), “When we speak today of ‘nature,’ ‘wilderness,’ even ‘ecosystems’ or ‘sacred places,’ are we speaking of abstract realities or of agreed upon fictions springing from particular value systems?” (p. 35)

Welsh academic Raymond Williams wrote about the meanings of words in his essay *Ideas of Nature* (1980) “What matters in them is not the proper meaning but the history and complexity of meanings: the conscious changes, or consciously different uses: and just as often those changes and differences which, masked by a nominal continuity, come to express radically different and often at first unnoticed changes in experience and history” (p. 67-68). Changes over time in the usage and meaning of a complicated word like *nature* reveal changes in culture and consciousness.

In a technical sense, the word **environment** is used to mean the material or conditions surrounding an individual or community of individuals. The *built environment* is the stuff constructed by human activity for human use. What we mean by the *natural environment* is decidedly less clear, although the most common understanding would probably exclude parking lots and skyscrapers. I might argue that point.

Nature supports a wide range of meanings: the primeval (that is, prior to the rise of human societies) or pristine (that is, unspoiled by humanity); a state of innocence (from which some would say humanity has fallen); or a state of wildness (into which, for better or worse, that fall took place)¹. Moore (2002) considered each of these meanings during his tenure writing *Swamp Thing*. Depending on our circumstances we might understand nature to be tranquil and harmonious or bloody red in tooth and claw². We might see wild places as realms to be either protected from or mastered by humanity. Williams (1980) urged caution: “There are some true wildernesses, some essentially untouched places. As a matter of fact (and of course almost by definition) few people going to ‘nature’ go to them” (p. 77). Mann (2002) would further remind us that the truly untouched places are few and far between.

Scientists avoid the cultural complications of words like *nature* or *natural environment* by using more technical terminology, for example *ecosystem* or *Earth system*. The meaning of Earth is relatively

¹Flores (1998) p. 35

²The image is that of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, completed in 1849.

clear, the planet, its atmosphere, and perhaps its neighborhood in the universe. A system is a whole composed of some number of parts and a systems approach to science would be one that attempts to identify and include all of those parts. Together, the *Earth system* then includes geophysical, chemical, biological, and social components, processes, and interactions that together determine the state of each of those components.

1.2 culture

People living in different communities have different access to ecosystem products and different impacts upon their environment, both locally and globally. Those disparities should lead us to include ethics in our sustainability framework. We will return to this theme throughout the year but begin here with some basic ideas about the concept of justice.

Justice is a word we hear used in social, political, and environmental contexts. What images or ideas does environmental justice conjure when you hear or read it? The term likely means different things to different people, depending on the individual's life experience. Ethicists distinguish between *general* and *particular* justice, the former being about what is "lawful" while the latter is about what is "fair." Following Raymond Williams' (1980) suggestion that the context of a word is more important than its dictionary definition, it may be useful to consider three broad frames in which definitions of social justice are constructed:

1. social contract

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Rawls

- The social contract is a set of implied agreements by which people form and maintain social order. Legitimate state authority must be derived from the consent of the governed.
- Individual conscience is the common starting point from which the rationale is established for voluntary subrogation of complete freedom of action in order to obtain the benefits provided by the formation of social structures.

2. libertarian

Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich von Hayek

- Every person is the absolute owner of their own life and should be free to do whatever they wish with their person or property, as long as they allow others the same liberty.

3. communitarian

Dorothy Day, Amitai Etzioni

- Communitarian thinking places emphasis on communities and societies and defines certain positive rights held by members of those communities, for example a healthy environment.
- Values and beliefs exist in public space, in which debate takes place. Becoming an individual means taking a stance on the issues that circulate in the public space.

2 modern meaning of sustainability

2.1 foundations

While our ability to measure the environmental effects of human activities has changed over time, the notion that natural resources ought to be managed in such a way as to ensure their products remain available in the future is not new (see for example, Shama, 1995). The archaeological record suggests that as in our own time, past civilizations sought to manage environmental and resource challenges as they arose, using strategies that changed over time (for example, Varien et al., 2007, Wilkinson et al., 2005). At the turn of the 20th century, Gifford Pinchot (1908) exhorted his fellow citizens to recognize the effects of unregulated natural resource consumption as a threat to both the environment and national prosperity.

The modern use of *sustainability* or *sustainable development* can be traced to a series of international conferences, beginning with the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (also called the Stockholm Conference). Two potentially conflicting concerns were raised prior to that conference, one from developed nations³ that continued unmanaged growth would have negative environmental consequences globally, and the other from developing nations that limiting their own growth would have negative economic consequences locally. The concept of sustainable development was created with the goal balancing economic development and environmental protection.

A decade after the Stockholm Conference, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland organized the independent World Commission on Environment and Development on behalf of the United Nations. The commission's primary charge was to examine global environmental and development problems and propose realistic strategies for addressing those problems. The Brundtland Commission report (1987) defined **sustainable development** as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" and further,

10. Through our deliberations and the testimony of people at the public hearings we held on five continents, all the commissioners came to focus on one central theme: many present development trends leave increasing numbers of people poor and vulnerable, while at the same time degrading the environment. How can such development serve next century's world of twice as many people relying on the same environment? This realization broadened our view of development. We came to see it not in its restricted context of economic growth in developing countries. We came to see that a new development path was required, one that sustained human progress not just in a few pieces for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future. Thus 'sustainable development' becomes a goal not just for the 'developing' nations, but for industrial ones as well.

The report concluded with a call to action

102. When the century began, neither human numbers nor technology had the power radically to alter planetary systems. As the century closes, not only do vastly increased human numbers and their activities have that power, but major, unintended changes are occurring in the atmosphere, in soils, in waters, among plants and animals, and in the relationships among all of these. The rate of change is outstripping the ability of scientific disciplines and our current capabilities to assess and advise. It is frustrating the attempts

³Nations with relatively high per capita income, economic productivity, education, and health standards are said to be *developed* and various metrics have been formulated to measure this.

of political and economic institutions, which evolved in a different, more fragmented world, to adapt and cope. It deeply worries many people who are seeking ways to place those concerns on the political agendas.

103. The onus lies with no one group of nations. Developing countries face the obvious life-threatening challenges of desertification, deforestation, and pollution, and endure most of the poverty associated with environmental degradation. The entire human family of nations would suffer from the disappearance of rain forests in the tropics, the loss of plant and animal species, and changes in rainfall patterns. Industrial nations face the life-threatening challenges of toxic chemicals, toxic wastes, and acidification. All nations may suffer from the releases by industrialized countries of carbon dioxide and of gases that react with the ozone layer, and from any future war fought with the nuclear arsenals controlled by those nations. All nations will have a role to play in changing trends, and in righting an international economic system that increases rather than decreases inequality, that increases rather than decreases numbers of poor and hungry.

The whole report is available online <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>.

2.2 stakeholders

The Bruntland Commission report illuminated a number of interlocking themes and challenges associated with the idea of sustainability. Social, economic, and environmental justice were recognized to be intertwined, as are the needs and aspirations of both the developed and developing world. Ecosystems and ecological processes were included in the global vision and the conservation was put forward as a global challenge. The principles of sustainable development apply to a very long list of **stakeholders**, whose motivations and goals may or may not have much in common.

Sustainability principles have been developed and carried forward by many organizations in many different ways. Those ideas are often expressed in a “vision statement” that expresses as succinctly as possible what an organization wants itself or its community to be, according to a set of values held in common by members of the organization (the stakeholders). Portland State University’s Vision Statement identifies “environmental sustainability”

Our vision is to be an internationally recognized urban university known for excellence in student learning, innovative research, and community engagement that contributes to the economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and quality of life in the Portland region and beyond.

The adidas group, whose North American headquarters is here in Portland, offers a corporate example in its Vision and Governance Statement

Our vision is clear: to enhance social and environmental performance in the company and the supply chain, thereby improving the lives of the people making our products.

We are striving to be the global leader in the sporting goods industry and this demands that we return strong financial results. But leadership is not only about results, it is also about how success is achieved. We are accountable for the way we do business. In particular, we accept responsibility for the way our products are manufactured by our suppliers. By our actions we can and should improve the lives of workers who make our products.

We are committed to good governance, and use our sustainability statement and our corporate

missions on Social and Environmental Affairs, Human Resources and Community Affairs to achieve our vision.

(http://www.adidas-group.com/en/sustainability/vision_and_governance/).

If you search for “environmental justice” and “sustainability” or “sustainable development” in one of the reference databases at Millar Library, you will discover a healthy dialog about the relationship between the two in the academic literature. That dialog reflects the lack of clarity in meaning and usage among various stakeholder groups. We too will spend some time wrestling with the meanings and uses of these terms.

3 assignment

This assignment has two parts, 1) materials prepared for a classroom discussion and 2) a short research paper on the same topic.

- We will spend (at least) one day of class talking about the meanings of “sustainability” and “sustainable development.” Please review the following questions in preparation for that discussion. Each mentor session is asked to prepare a set of notes and short, about 10 minutes, presentation that can be used to lead a discussion on one of the three topics. If appropriate, you may wish to prepare a handout or small number of slides for the class.
 - Write a short research paper, 8 to 10 pages in length, on your mentor session’s research topic. This work should be done in parallel with the materials you will generate for the classroom discussion. The paper should make use of at least three print references (book chapters, journal articles, organization reports, and so on) and at least two must be scholarly. As always, please follow the APA guidelines.
1. Different stakeholders might be expected to envision sustainability differently. Research sustainability mission or vision statements written by at least three different types of organizations (for example, educational, governmental, non-profit, corporate, or faith-based). Identify common themes and differences among the examples.
 2. The Brundtland Commission *Summary of Proposed Legal Principles* includes the following
 - I. General Principles, Rights, and Responsibilities
 - Fundamental Human Right
 1. All human beings have the fundamental right to an environment adequate for their health and well being.
 - Inter-Generational Equity
 2. States shall conserve and use the environment and natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations.
 - Conservation and Sustainable Use
 3. States shall maintain ecosystems and ecological processes essential for the functioning of the biosphere, shall preserve biological diversity, and shall observe the principle of optimum sustainable yield in the use of living natural resources and ecosystems.

Statements of sustainability principles are often vague with regard to the meaning of “future generations” and to the associated living conditions. Who should be included in those generations and how far into the future should we look? What, exactly, is to be sustained: ecosystems or ecosystem products? Are sustainable living conditions those associated with 21st Century North America, prehistoric hunter-gatherers, or something else? Are the answers to these questions different for different stakeholders?

3. The second general principle identified by the Brundtland Commission (above) is titled *Intergenerational Equity* yet it includes “present generations,” implying an intragenerational, or environmental justice, component. Indeed, the full commission report has much to say on this topic. Environmental justice and sustainability goals are often treated as separate issues, by economic, political, and social organizations (see for example, Agyeman, 2007; Norton, 2007). Such separation may be pragmatic but might also limit the effectiveness of any particular strategy or campaign. In what ways is *justice* a sustainability issue? Can you find examples of a *just sustainability* or *ecosystem justice* paradigm in action?

4 references

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