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# Introduction: The Soul of Sustainability

Dan Shilling

> For know, whatever was created, needs
> To be sustaind and fed.
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> –John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Few modern concepts are as talked about, debated, and misconstrued as sustainability – to the point that the word's trendy, buzzword status has earned it the label "sustainababble" from critics skeptical of the evangelistic aura that often surrounds it. That goofy made-up term is not entirely off beam. Review the literature, as well as the many programs and agencies that feature "sustainability" in their name or description – from the most uncompromising environmental group to the World Trade Organization – and you may find it hard to say what it is or isn't, who supports it and who doesn't (sometimes making for odd bedfellows), who benefits and who misses out, how or even *if* it can be realized, or why we're doing the sustainability thing in the first place.

*Something* should be sustained, but what? The planet's nonrenewable resources, South America's economy, or a privileged country's lifestyle? And for what purpose? To aid developing nations, grizzly bears in Montana, Indigenous peoples, or a Fortune 500 company? And underneath it all, who gets to answer those questions?

This volume looks back, historically, in order to approach these and other tough questions – back to the land practices of Indigenous cultures. Ironically, it has taken decades for many sustainability scholars to consider the spiritual and ecological underpinnings that helped define Native peoples' relationships to nature, even though these relationships "sustained" most tribal nations, and the land on which they lived, for

thousands of years. Perhaps sustainability advocates have been preoccupied with new technologies – cars that get more miles per gallon, solar cells that cost less and do more – and therefore Indigenous practices are deemed irrelevant. Or perhaps scholars and practitioners don't believe Native peoples are a good model, since they, too, the argument goes, ruined landscapes and annihilated species. Others contend that because Indigenous groups lacked modern machines, they couldn't possibly destroy their habitat. All three excuses are misplaced. First, sustainability is foremost a *moral*, not technological, undertaking, beginning with how our species relates to its surroundings. Second, while Native Americans did exploit and sometimes spoil parts of the land, they continued for 13,000 years or more in North America without damaging the place *too* badly, compared to what westerners have done in one-hundredth of that time. Third, Native peoples may have lacked earth movers but they *did* build huge cities and manipulated their environment in colossal ways. Also, considering their hunting skills, especially after they acquired the horse and rifle, American Indians probably *could* have wiped out the bison, but they didn't, an act of ecological restraint and spiritual reverence. Had they practiced farming or fishing more intensively on fragile lands and rivers, they *could* have destroyed their world and its resources, but most didn't. Historian Donald Hughes (1983: 98) observes: "Indian technology was certainly capable of doing more damage to the environment than was actually done." It wasn't so much the tools that were or were not available to Native peoples that determined ecological health; it was, instead, the wisdom to know what to do with the tools, a theme forester Aldo Leopold would later adopt: "We end, I think, at what might be called the standard paradox of the twentieth century: our tools are better than we are, and grow better faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides. But they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without spoiling it" (Flader and Callicott, 1991: 254).

This anthology, then, considers sustainability through historical and ethical lenses, beginning, as best we can, at the beginning, with Indigenous peoples' practices and knowledges, in order to trace the development and contemporary application of an idea.

## Sustainability Is Big Business

From the Latin *sustinere* ("to hold"), the word has been around in some form since the seventeenth century, but its modern usage, primarily

having to do with steady-state environmental and social conditions, only surfaced in the 1970s. A definition of sorts was established in the United Nations' 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, published by the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development. Commonly known as the "Brundtland Commission" (chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland), the document offered a concise if uninspired definition that remains a moving target for research, application, and ideological quarrels: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission, 1987: 8). Naysayers pounced on "sustainable development" – calling it oxymoronic – arguing that, no matter how sensitive or well intentioned, development is, by nature, *un*sustainable. John Ehrenfeld, a critic of conventional proposals and methodologies, puts it bluntly: "Sustainable development is fundamentally a tool that suggests new means but still old ends – development remains at the core of this concept" (Ehrenfeld, 2008: 6). Further, who defines "the needs of the present" or those of "future generations"? Are these needs the same from place to place? From culture to culture? Will they change over time? As if those terms and concepts aren't vague enough, is there a bundle of words more definition-challenged than "without compromising the ability of"? To be sure, each piece of the UN's definition can be picked apart, turned inside out, and rendered contradictory or so toothless that it is meaningless, leaving practice open to abuse and exploitation.

In the wake of this bickering, scholars and practitioners have offered dozens of alternative definitions, to the point that some scholars list more than a hundred. A distressing irony – given that, in practice, sustainability is premised on social and ecological bonds – is that many of the suggestions remain stovepiped in single disciplines, lacking any hint of the connective tissue biologist E. O. Wilson (1998) calls "consilience." That is, ecology is *the* study that underpins sustainability, yet our discussions and practices often lack the integration ecology implies. The American monk Thomas Berry celebrated Wilson and other enlightened scientists for "providing some of our most powerful poetic references and metaphoric expressions," through their *integration* of cultural perspectives and scientific discoveries – a tool for addressing, let alone solving, the challenges that threaten a sustainable existence (Berry, 1988: 16).

Despite the disputes, imprecision, disconnections, and, at times, seemingly *un*sustainable temper of the dialog, sustainability today stretches across countless sectors, not only the predictable environmental

landscape. The term's popularity alone, whether earned legitimately or not, is one reason to pay attention. It's here, get used to it.

Indeed, a quick online book search of "sustainability" reveals dozens of titles released within the last few years alone, covering business development, economic theory, urban planning, history, social justice, environmental ethics, biology, and other sciences. Step beyond the publishing world and broaden the search to include NGOs and other groups that operate in the sustainability arena, and literally thousands of hits appear: government programs, environmental agencies, think tanks, business councils, and a glut of consultants – from million-dollar firms with offices worldwide, to a guy in a bathrobe working out of his basement – all promising to make your town, company, procedure, or product sustainable. Even cities whose development history lies in the deepest circle of unsustainable hell – Phoenix and Las Vegas, for example – trumpet their commitment to the word through countless "green" programs. Large international organizations, among them Sustainable Cities, host conferences, publish journals, manage blogs, offer onsite workshops, and conduct research projects around the globe, all aimed at helping the public sector manage municipalities – from Chattanooga to Dakar, Bucharest to Curitiba – more sustainably.

Similarly, in higher education it's difficult to find an academic program that does not treat the topic in some form: law, literature, urban studies, geography, history, botany, ethics, political science, the arts, economics, ethnic studies, philosophy, and so on. Open almost any college guide, and you're apt to find "The Sustainability of" prefacing more than one course title, from undergraduate to doctoral level. Beyond individual classes, entire schools exist within colleges of liberal arts or departments of business, devoted to exploring their respective fields through the lens of sustainability. Across an ever-widening spectrum of disciplines, higher education is training future architects, economists, cultural leaders, educators, scientists, and corporate executives in the language of a term whose meaning and implications remain elusive. When these students graduate, chances grow more likely each year that their new employer, whether a business, nonprofit organization, or public agency, will eventually ask them to serve on a "green," "eco," "smart," or "sustainability" committee or initiative. Go to work for Xerox and you'll receive a "Sustainability Report" in the employee packet, along with the company's "Report on Global Citizenship" and a copy of "The Sustainability Handbook."

To cite one industry example, consider travel and tourism, a sector with an unusually heavy ecological footprint, dependent as it is on

petroleum and other fossil fuels to move, feed, lodge, and entertain visitors. For decades critics have insisted that tourism can damage cultural and social networks, not only the natural environment. Today, many students majoring in hospitality are required to take a class in sustainable tourism, an industry niche traceable to the 1980s. Like organic food, sustainable tourism started modestly among environmental and antiglobalism activists; today it is a common, if not mainstream, topic among industry leaders who hope to rebrand tourism's commodified, wasteful, and even destructive image. When today's hospitality graduates enter the profession, they'll likely encounter an array of consultants, workshops, associations, websites, and publications promising to help them operate sustainably, whether they work for an airline, hotel, rental car agency, chamber of commerce, or tourism attraction. Think back to your last stay at a major motel chain: chances are a sprightly green and blue notice in the bathroom urged you to use towels more than one day: "Waste less water so Holiday Inn can help save the planet!" Motels and other industry players who meet environmental benchmarks established by international accreditation organizations such as Green Globe receive a certificate of sustainability, provided they are dues-paying members. The best among them are recognized at awards dinners and featured in the Sustainable Traveler Index website or the popular Lonely Planet guides. Given that socially conscious travelers are a growing consumer segment, and therefore a lucrative target market, green labeling and industry honors are now common throughout the hospitality sector, if for no other reason than they present another handy public-relations tool, which is what critics say their main purpose *is*.

A concept celebrating interrelatedness and ratcheted up by climate disturbances, resource depletion, and the public's realization that the ecosystem *does* matter, and that its parts are both finite and threatened, sustainability now touches nearly every academic discipline, social issue, political agenda, and professional sector. Even in economics, some of the field's neoclassic standard bearers, a surly bunch generally unfriendly to the notion of finite systems and to what they often deem anecdotal rather than hard evidence, have reluctantly yielded to natural capitalism, industrial ecology, creative economics, ecoefficiency, ecological economics, and the triple bottom line – popular theories that combine seemingly irreconcilable terms to suggest the profit motive is not incompatible with, and in fact may contribute to, healthy natural and social ecosystems.

Sustainability is big business, another apparent oxymoron. But do the people, organizations, governments, schools, and corporations that have

adopted the term – skeptics might say hijacked the term – also embrace its core purpose and principles? Or have they written their mission language and strategic plans to serve a less demanding, self-serving agenda? Where does one even look for the term's "core purpose and principles," against which goals, methods, and outcomes might be measured? Where do we locate the soul of sustainability and, if it turns up, what do we do with it?

## Not a New Idea

Previous to Brundtland, scientists, conservationists, philosophers, and planners, among others, likely referred to "stability," "balance," "harmony," "permanence," or "the economy of nature" to map out the conceptual terrain bordering on sustainability. Long before the word earned a semblance of popular recognition, however, the *idea* was in the air, if not fully fleshed out. Indeed, one might say people during the Pleistocene Era lived sustainably in that they sensed their existence was linked to the environment's well-being. Granted, their ecological wisdom may have been grounded as much in stories as in a scientific understanding of their dependence on trees and bees, but that does not obscure the fact that the earliest civilizations in the New World, to use one example, endured at least twenty times longer than the current occupants, who have inflicted far more ecological damage in a *much* shorter span. That period, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century with the Industrial Revolution, represents less than one percent of *Homo sapiens'* time on the planet, yet this blip of a moment has experienced more environmental degradation than the previous ninety-nine percent combined.

Staying with the so-called New World, because the collision of cultures is so apparent, among the reasons for their longevity, the first Americans' way of life, typically mobile, did less harm to the earth and kept populations in check. Pre- and nonagricultural societies rarely enclosed and plowed large swaths of land, which tends to undercut sustainability by exhausting nutrients and sabotaging biotic diversity. Seldom did they clear and destroy entire forests to build permanent settlements or graze livestock – the most ecologically damaging of which, cows, pigs, and sheep, hadn't yet set hoof on the continent. A limited number of possessions to store and carry was a prerequisite of a nomadic culture, meaning that large prey, for example, were usually only hunted when their meat, hides, claws, and bones could be used fairly soon.

Stories, mobility, and millennia's worth of wisdom served hundreds of generations of aboriginal peoples, and much of that wisdom carried over

into the Agricultural Era, beginning about 10,000 years ago, when some Native Americans settled into communities; started harvesting corn, squash, and beans; built irrigation systems; established governments; developed trade with other villages; erected cities; and, like every other civilization, told themselves stories to explain their existence. Drawing on their pre-agricultural past, many of those narratives still honored nature's "sacred hoop," of which humans, so the creation stories told, were but one member. Tribal people "acknowledge the essential harmony of all things," writes Paula Gunn Allen in her elegant discussion of the sacred hoop, "and see all things as being of equal value in the scheme of things, denying the opposition, dualism, and isolation (separateness) that characterize non-Indian thought … Further, tribal people allow all animals, vegetables, and minerals (the entire biota, in short) the same or even greater privileges than humans" (Allen, 1996: 243).

The communal knowledge of, personal bond with, and spiritual relationship to the natural world represented by the sacred hoop is largely absent from today's inquiries about place and, by extension, from most discussions of sustainability, which more than a few observers across a broad swathe of disciplines regret. Biologist E. O. Wilson urges scientists to celebrate and engage the universe's essence, which he describes in terms that are as humanistic as they are technical. Poet Gary Snyder (1974) believes modern civilizations must rediscover and keep to Native pathways, a challenge he maps out in his verse and prose. Political scientist Murray Bookchin advises a return to a "vision of social and natural diversity" (Bookchin, 1995: 7). Social justice activist Vandana Shiva (1995) endorses a globalism that exports an Indigenous compassion for the planet's diversity, rather than a narrow industrial lust for its resources. Philosopher John Ehrenfeld (2008) warns that sustainability will remain elusive and largely unmet unless developed nations reorient their values. Scientist Janine Benyus (1998) counsels technicians to learn from Native insights, which often mimic nature's systems – in the same way architect Ian McHarg (1967) urges urban planners to "design with nature." Businessman Paul Hawken writes that economists must embrace a restorative approach where the market "creates, increases, nourishes and enhances" regional cultures (Hawken, 1993: 81). Farmer Wendell Berry asks us to remember that "the answers to the problems of economy are to be found in culture and in character" (Berry, 1990: 198).

Earlier western writers also sensed the need to rediscover our spiritual and cultural connections to nature, not only new technologies, if humans are to leave their environment unspoiled. Further, they believed

Indigenous people exhibited a proper alignment to model. Henry David Thoreau (1937) and Mary Austin (1903), for instance, celebrated "Indian wisdom"; Ralph Waldo Emerson found similar views in Eastern literature – an interrelatedness with nature that obliges humans to leave a livable world for civilizations to come (Buell, 2004: 172).

Many of these views are captured in a relatively new enterprise linking Western science with "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," or TEK. Santa Clara Pueblo scholar Gregory Cajete writes in *Native Science*, "Western society must once again become nature-centered, if it is to make the kind of life-serving, ecologically sustainable transformations required in the next decades" (Cajete, 1999: 266).

## The Fierce Green Fire and Sustainability

Similar ethical and humanistic building blocks were championed by Aldo Leopold, who is sometimes considered an early modern voice for sustainability, even though he never uses the term. Leopold's "land ethic," however, is little more than a modern interpretation of traditional peoples' concept of nature as a community, of which humans are just one member: "In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (Leopold, 1949: 204). This passage certainly breaks with what Descartes, Bacon, and other earlier philosophers believed about the human–nature relationship, what Manifest Destiny sanctioned, what Gifford Pinchot's utilitarianism endorsed, or what many of Leopold's contemporaries felt Genesis decreed. But *the core of Leopold's land ethic was not new*; he may have dressed it in twentieth-century ecological garb, and delightfully so, but the underlying moral obligation he revels in would have been familiar to earlier cultures of the Southwest, something Leopold realized later in life, when his words are tinged with regret for previously shutting down, rather than listening to, earlier cultures: "This same landscape was 'developed' once before, but with quite different results. The Pueblo Indians settled the Southwest in pre-Columbian times, but they happened *not* to be equipped with range livestock. Their civilization expired, but not because their land expired" (Leopold, 1990: 206–07). Rather than attempt to "fix" an impenetrable and unpredictable nature, Leopold senses he can and should learn *from* it, echoing Black Elk: "The buffalo is wise in many things, and thus, we should learn from him and always be a relative with him" (Brown, 1989: 72).

As a new ranger with the U.S. Forest Service in 1909, Leopold was transfixed by the ebbing embers of a "fierce green fire" in a dying wolf's eyes on an Arizona hillside (Leopold, 1949: 130). Over a forty-year career, he would build on that experience to disturb our certainty about the land community not a little – unearthing a deeper relationship with the natural world, metaphorically grounded in the green fire, where nature, culture, and science coalesce. Indeed, Leopold's long transition, from a haughty resource manager to a humbled lover of land, mirrors the conceptual transformation vital to sustainability today – from an unabashed and even violent utilitarianism to a personal, metaphysical, and, one might argue, *Indigenous* appreciation of place: "I doubt if there exists today a more complete regimentation of the human mind than that accomplished by our self-imposed doctrine of ruthless utilitarianism. The saving grace of democracy is that we fastened this yoke on our own necks, and we can cast if off when we want to, without severing the neck" (Flader and Callicott, 1991: 259).

Over time, the slow fusion within Leopold spawns a land ethic that is, in part, a western interpretation of Native ecology, made understandable and palatable to a dominant culture steeped in progress, boosterism, and scientific certainty. Given the political and social realities of his place and time (1887–1948), it is unlikely Leopold could stand before the Madison Chamber of Commerce, the Wisconsin governor, or the scientists he regularly addressed and declare, "We came from the earth … our mother," as did the Nez Perce prophet Toohoolhoolzote, let alone describe a conversation between a mountain and a dead wolf. But that is what his land ethic proposes – a "community" in the civilizing and mystical sense of the word, venerated by Indigenous cultures and framed by a new ecological understanding.

Leopold sought an "ethic" that was noticeably absent from Sinclair Lewis's Main Street, but whose roots he could trace to earlier cultures. While some may find his most enduring statement muddled, and critics point out that Leopold's science was sometimes wrong, those reproofs overlook the case advanced by philosopher J. Baird Callicott (1989) throughout *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, which is that the defining feature of the land ethic – that our relationship to nature must be based on something other than use – is not only valid but essential, perhaps even more so today. It is a quality that follows directly from Native American views, where land was seldom valued as a commodity to be surveyed, fenced, or purchased.

While it is impossible to identify *the* Native American philosophy or attitude toward nature that helped to shape the views of Thoreau, Leopold, or today's TEK advocates, just as there is no single Euro-American view, we can point to a few common threads that weave their way through the tapestry of many aboriginal beliefs about the natural world, among them:

- Reciprocity and respect define the bond between all members of the land family.
- Reverence toward nature plays a critical role in religious ceremonies, hunting rituals, arts and crafts, agricultural techniques, and other day-to-day activities.
- One's relationship to the land is shaped by something other than economic profit.
- To speak of an individual owning land is anathema, not unlike owning another person, akin to slavery.
- Each generation has a responsibility to leave a healthy world to future generations.

These are not Romantic myths, New Age manifestos, or fables of a prehistoric Noble Savage, as detractors claim; nor do they suggest an idyllic fairytale where Indians and fellow creatures harmoniously cavorted in a pristine garden before The Fall. The millions of people in the Americas before European contact used natural resources, built cities, diverted waterways, exploited animals, warred with one another, transformed ecosystems with fire, and sometimes harmed the earth. Complicating interpretation, the continent was home to hundreds of sovereign nations, most with multiple clans and villages; so to say all Native/Indigenous peoples in all places followed the same ecological blueprint is a nonstarter.

Having said that, more than 10,000 years of history testifies that the prevailing standards shaping most Indigenous relationships to the natural world were *restraint* and *reverence* – restraint because, as people close to the land, they understood and embraced their dependence on Earth's resources; reverence because all was a gift from the Creator, whose animated universe meant animals, trees, and rocks were another "people." The Walpi spoke of snake, lizard, and water people; Diné farmers called maize "corn people," singing to each plant as they might nurture a child; and Lakota hunters blessed and gave thanks to the "buffalo people," who fulfilled their role in the chain of life by offering food, clothing, tools, and ornaments.