

# Ramblings on Sustainability

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I had to write the following for a couple reasons and rather than let it get lost in my increasing number of unfinished articles, I thought it might be nice to share... because sharing is caring. Do you know what your footprint is? Check it out at [www.rprogress.org](http://www.rprogress.org) - click on the link on the left. Happy New Year everyone!

I've been thinking a lot recently about what sustainability means to me. I love the definition articulated in the Natural Step and I think that ecofootprinting models are useful tools, but questions remain for me, "how does this apply in MY life," and, "how do I help others make changes?" I have to believe that if people are educated and saavy about the issues that our society faces that they will necessarily care (hence my decision to get a degree in Environmental Education.) The alternative is too depressing for me. It is my hope that as I convey this message to students that they will be able to relate it to their own lives- that they can make a connection to other living things, if simply through our mutual drive to attain stability and quality in our lives.

That said, there are any number of motivations for "saving the environment" or not. For many, it is a largely emotional issue. My students need to understand how cultural and emotional differences can influence a person's desire to make a responsible choice (for the environment). Why do some people feel so strongly about recycling (in either direction)? Why do some people garden? Why do some want to go off-grid versus being grid-tied with renewable energies? Why would someone throw away a piece of trash 25 feet from a trash can? This process of examination is helpful in determining why people make responsible choices or not, whether messages to the public are effective, and even how to change messages. While not appropriate for some audiences, the article, "Don't Throw in the Towel- Use Social Influence Research" by Robert B. Cialdini discusses how the format of a request can alter the response to that request. This is an important lesson for me and for my students- the way the message is delivered is as important as the message itself (much to my dismay at times.)

In my vision for the future (albeit idealistic), everyone would seek out new information on sustainable practices and would be informed about their own footprints. We will at all times know what is next on the list to be improved in our footprints and would be striving for those small improvements.

That said, I have articulated my core principles in sustainability leadership. I hope to use these to bring my vision forth in the new year!

## Constant assessment of sustainability practices and measurements

There are a number of methods developing on measurement of sustainability. The most common ones, that are used to judge and rank the sustainability of campuses, are the ecological and carbon footprinting methods. They are simple to use and turn this very subjective concept into a number. While it is a good beginning, it has flaws. For example, it doesn't generally consider the energy required to recycle a product or the degradation of soils or bodies of water. Another method is the Natural Step, created by Karl Henrik Robert. This method puts a definition of sustainability in place with 4 criteria. This method is also somewhat flawed in that it isn't objective and often the connections to the 4 criteria are convoluted and far-reaching. The sustainability field is rapidly developing as we reach our planet's maximum carrying capacity and natural resources are strained. Assessment of policies and procedures is necessarily a regular and recurring process to keep up with this changing field.

## A Sense of Community and Locality

Everyone can identify with the feeling you get after a workout or a success&ndash;accomplishment, pride, and the desire for more the next day. That same feeling can happen in communities as well. The successes of the one become the successes of the community. Call it what you will: a "sense of community", a "sense of place", a "sense of responsibility", a "connection"&ndash;these all represent the same concept.

## Be the change you wish to see in others

In the summer of 2006, Dan and I held a windmill raising party like the barn-raisers of yore- complete with hand-printed T-shirts. We had large quantities of food, help from good friends, family and neighbors, and lots of sweat. In retrospect, the real win was not getting the wind turbine aloft, but giving people the opportunity to ask questions about their own lives and power usage. A year and a half later, we still have people driving down our driveway to check out the final height. People ask how much power we get. They want us to come and do presentations on our off-grid system for those who weren't around for the raising.

## No one person's path will be the same as another's

At times, it can be disheartening, as an environmentalist bleeding heart, to recognize and quantify just how far you have to go to attain a "sustainable" lifestyle. I console myself by believing that no one person's path to sustainability will be exactly like another's. There are people out there- like Jim Merkel, who already successfully lead sustainable lives. I am on my own path and have not yet arrived. What is important is that I am always examining my own life to make changes so that my ecological footprint gets smaller and smaller. To put it more simply, no efforts in the direction of sustainability

should be minimized.

When you have friends and family and co-workers, who coin you the "Super Eco-Geek" and "hippies" and other such labels, it is difficult to (I can't believe I'm going to quote him, but ) "stay the course" and stick to your convictions. It is my tendency to sink into normalcy when possible. Living this way has its trials and tribulations. I have to work very hard to keep this lifestyle. There are times when I think it might be easier to call the power company and have them wire-me-up or call someone to come deliver wood or install an automated central heating system. In the dark of winter, when the days are short and my mood foul, I do toy with these thoughts.

But after all this, my conviction is renewed with the calendar and I know that I am making a difference. Who knows which one of my actions will be the "small variation of the initial condition of a nonlinear dynamical system [which] may produce large variations in the long term behavior of the system." (Wikipedia- Butterfly Effect)