

Sustainability – What Is It? And Why is it Relevant to the U.S. Conservation Community?

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What is sustainability? A universally accepted definition is elusive because there are such great expectations; however, a simple definition focuses on improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting eco-systems. This broad concept initially gained traction from the Bruntland Commission's report to the U.N. in 1987 and its relationship with sustainable development. However, since then, the concept has gained considerably more ground because of the mounting evidence globally that declining fisheries, biodiversity losses, deforestation, mass species extinctions, climate change, degraded habitat and decreasing water quality and quantity concerns are not only dramatic, but threaten our very existence. And with the convergence of changing consumer expectations and the rise of global business leaders like Patagonia, Interface Global, Walmart and GE, all of which have embraced sustainability, it has emerged as a 21st century business driver. Unfortunately however; continued human population growth and individual consumptive behaviors are still putting considerable stress upon our natural resources.

So, why is sustainability, a new business driver for the private sector, relevant to the conservation community? Many of the places that we hunt, fish, hike, camp, boat, etc. continue to degrade and many face new risks every day. This is not new and neither is the North American conservation model that has provided our communities with tremendous prosperity and effective conservation funding for the past fifty years. What is new is the incredible opportunity created by the intersection of the traditional conservation model, pervasive business interests in sustainability and environmental needs that transcend the limits of both the conservation and traditional regulatory models.

The Sportfish and Wildlife Restoration Programs are an amazing testament to a unique partnership between the hunting and fishing industries, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the States and these programs will continue to be an important part of the overall fabric of U.S. conservation. Through them, we have a true collaborative model to build upon that might offer collaborative approaches to complex environmental problems that we currently face as well as contributing additional stability to conservation we have secured and will pursue. The concept of sustainability is incredibly relevant because it provides the conservation community with an inclusive platform to effectively engage the private sector and unleash the potential of our most powerful institutions, business, to do well by doing good in a recognized and effective ways.

And with the States leading the way to explore this changing landscape through formal workshops, there is no time like the present to integrate sustainability into business,

government and conservation decision making, building upon some very familiar tenets of our conservation legacy. While this might seem incremental, it has the potential to be transformational. The Wisconsin DNR is working hard to be on the leading edge of change, putting feelers out with the private sector to hear how a traditionally siloed, regulatory and resource management agency can better work collaboratively with the private sector to achieve superior environmental performance and lessen the impacts of business. The state has unique laws that provide a bi-partisan living laboratory. And the Fish and Wildlife Service is engaging in this partnership because, as the country's only national fish and wildlife agency, the Service sees sustainability as an opportunity to elevate fish and wildlife conservation and harness the power of the private sector to help address today's complex conservation issues.

Sustainability is approached as a broad, ready-made platform that is already understood by businesses and Wisconsin is looking to create additional synergy with a potential meeting of sustainability leaders. They seem to be asking a straight forward question – how to create the ideal state for growing a green bottom line. If this meeting occurs, it could create some tremendous opportunities for the conservation community in the very near future.