

Sustainable DEVELOPMENT

The emerging backlash surrounding the concept of “sustainable development”

Richard MacLean

Sustainable development and green marketing have become the darlings of the corporate world. But far off the radar scope of most environmental professionals, there is an emerging debate that these efforts might be nothing more than a sophisticated form of greenwash. Is this a bogus issue and nothing more than the rantings of extremists? What are the dynamics in play and what should you do?

The late 1980s through the early 1990s was a major turning point for the environmental movement. The idea of “sustainable development” was propelled forward in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission Report, *Our Common Future*. And in 1992, the concept captivated a global audience at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. Sustainable development became the mantra for environmental progress, a widely shared belief by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and even industry.

Then something happened. Exactly what occurred and whether it was even good or bad for the environment are now being hotly debated. Some claim that the original concept of sustainability has been co-opted by industry with the willing support of the United Nations in a symbiotic relationship called “blue-wash.” They say it is all about sustainable development with a small “s” and a very big capital “D.” In other words, sustainable development, as implemented by companies, is so skewed toward maintaining economic growth that the benefits gained are overshadowed in the long term by the negative effects of escalating consumption.

An even more radical view is that sustainable development has been purposefully transformed into a public relations and marketing tool. The net result, they claim, is that public attention is diverted away from manufacturing activities with potentially long-term, harmful

effects on the environment in the interest of expanding global trade and profits. Industry is touting the banner of sustainable development as a tactic to push an agenda of self-regulation and voluntary initiatives. Public-private partnerships are being promoted as the path forward instead of direct accountability through government regulation. Industry, once viewed as the cause of pollution, now is skillfully repositioning itself as the solution through technology and “green products.”

Sustainable development has mutated to become industry’s greenwash vehicle of choice. Are you surprised that there are people who think that industry could be so disingenuous and manipulative? Okay, probably not. Indeed, in some circles this debate has gone on for more than a decade. For the vast majority of EHS professionals in industry and government, however, these concerns are not even on the radar scope.

For example, after scanning agendas for the most recent conferences of environmental professional societies and trade associations in the United States, I could not find one that addresses this issue in any significant way. Yet, the outcome of this emerging debate may profoundly affect us all. So, does its absence in our normal information circles prove that this must all be pure nonsense?

Environmental Forces in Play

Paul Hawken, entrepreneur and noted U.S. author of the book *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*, states, “There is still a yawning gulf between the kind of ‘Green’ environmentalism that business wants to promote — one that justifies growth and expansionary use of resources — and the kind that actually deals with the core issues of carrying capacity, draw down, biotic impoverishment and extinction of species.”¹ Might concerns regarding sustainable development amount to nothing more

than just a difference of opinion over how to move forward and not some nefarious industry plot?

I have never been partial to fiendish global plots. And trying to definitively resolve differences of opinion over complex, emotional issues is usually impossible — everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, as the saying goes. Instead, let’s examine the indicators that may give some insight into what might be prompting the debate in the first place.

The underlying message by companies over the past decade has been, “We are part of the solution; we will act responsibly.” Indeed they are, and the vast majority act that way. But there is growing evidence that the rate of global environmental degradation is increasing, not diminishing. In other words, the outstanding and commendable actions that companies have taken to implement sustainable development are nowhere near enough to stem environmental degradation.

For example, in late November as I sat down to write this article, two gloomy reports were released. First, an article appeared in *Science* stating that the world will “run out of seafood by 2048 if steep declines in marine species continue at current rates.” Second, the *Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change* (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/8A8/C1/summary_of_conclusions.pdf) was released stating that climate change “is the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen” consuming 5 percent to 20 percent of economic output “forever.”

It seems that hardly a week goes by without another depressing report on global environmental degradation making the headlines. The gravest report of all may have been the 2005 UN *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Synthesis Report*, which stated that 15 out of 24 ecosystems are being degraded or used unsustainably.

But reports of global degradation, such as the preceding, inevitably evoke controversy. For example, during the same period that the *Stern Review* was released, Bjørn Lomborg, author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, organized a meeting of 24 countries at the United Nations which placed climate change lower than many other global priorities. The November 2 *Wall Street Journal* editorial page highlighted this low ranking and included Lomborg's analysis, which argues that the *Stern Review* is fundamentally flawed.

The public, politicians, and business executives have a difficult time sorting through all this environmental yin and yang. Most people do not want to believe, or for that matter even listen to, tales of the apocalypse. This is especially true for business executives who tend to be a very optimistic lot. At least in developed countries, people view the environment as getting better, not worse. Stories of depleting fish populations can be counteracted by upbeat news that, for example, bald eagles might be removed from the endangered species list. It really does not take a great deal of positive news to offset the negative, especially when the dreadful stuff is highly technical and relies on future projections.

The Strategic Dimensions

What is going on today is a tension among several dynamic forces that raise fundamental questions.

- First is the state of the global environment: is it improving or is it rapidly getting much worse, literally life-threatening to future generations?
- Second is industry's responsibility for protecting the environment: is industry contributing to its improvement or accelerating further decline? For that matter, does industry even have a responsibility beyond regulatory compliance?
- Third is the public's responsibility: should we, not industry, ultimately be held responsible for creating what some call "the unsustainability of current consumptive practices?"

Obviously, it would be impossible to get definitive resolution to the preceding questions. From a strategic standpoint, however, environmental professionals within industry must develop a clear

understanding of where their companies stand, should these dynamics shift one way or the other over time. A sure bet is that there will be continuing bad news about the environment: the relentless drip of depressing news that reaches critical mass, a series of catastrophic events, shocking revelations about technology gone amok, and/or loss of beloved or critical species.

From my cynical perspective (but backed by history), the least likely dynamic to shift dramatically is the public's perceived responsibility for environmental degradation. It is a safe bet that if future Katrina-type events reach critical mass, the public, the media, and politicians will seek out and punish the guilty (a.k.a. scapegoats) with regulations, boycotts, and/or more. And the usual suspects are, of course, companies.

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The last decade has changed the precise dynamics of how a public outcry may play out against industry in general or, for that matter, even specific companies that currently are operating in regulatory compliance. In the distant past, there were few regulations. Companies legitimately claimed innocence or ignorance over the negative environmental consequences of their actions. There were exceptions, of course, but, by and large, the public understood that fixing the situation was a shared responsibility.

You can be assured that, in the future, environmental activists will aggressively claim that this time around industry acted with duplicity and deceit, using the sustainable development mantra to greenwash their real profit-driven agendas. They will claim, "Industry said, 'Trust us, we will act responsibly.' And look what happened!" Fair? No. Possible? You bet!

The danger is especially real, because there is a ready audience prepped for this type of negative message. Corporate financial scandals laid the groundwork, but far too many of the companies that have been viewed as trusted environmental leaders have lost their shine lately. BP (formerly British Petroleum) is the

most recent example with corrosion leaks in Alaska and a lethal refinery explosion in Texas.

The Way Forward

So, what should a corporate environmental professional do? First, conduct some research. You will not find information about this topic in the usual sources. For example, David Victor, director of the Program on Energy and Sustainable Development at Stanford University, writes in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, "Despite its beginnings as a powerful animations concept, over the past two decades sustainable development has become meaningless."² How many of you out there in environmental land read this journal?

Another good starting point is to read authors Bruno and Karliner's book *earthsummit.biz—The Corporate Takeover of Sustainable Development*. The five-part series, beginning in 2001 in the *Corporate Europe Observer*, provides pointed insight.³ Another good source of emerging information is the environmental news bulletin *Crosslands*.⁴ You do not have to agree with what is published, but you should at least understand the opposing views.

Second, examine where the company stands relative to its sustainable development efforts and, especially, its green marketing programs. John Ehrenfeld, executive director of the International Society for Industrial Ecology, offers the compelling argument that "sustainable development strategies can barely cope with the forces of unsustainability." What most companies are doing (for example, eco-efficiency improvements) merely treat the symptoms of unsustainability. As he states, "Reducing unsustainability is not the same as creating sustainability."⁵

What is your company doing and/or what is it planning to do? What are the real, long-term benefits? Is this effort superficial or does it offer real environmental gains relative to possible unsustainable outcomes of your products or manufacturing operations?

Third, educate business management. Business managers (and again, even environmental professionals) are unaware of these emerging dynamics. Yet, management is becoming more and more interested in sustainability concepts, in part, because of the headlines

that companies such as GE and Wal-Mart are receiving on their green marketing programs. This is potentially a very risky situation, which leads me to the last point.

Fourth, develop a strategy. On the one hand, there are enthusiastic business managers signing on to green marketing plans and sustainable development programs/partnerships to demonstrate corporate responsibility and make money in the process. On the other hand, this turf is growing more complex and nuanced than ever. It is littered with landmines. If your company wants to play in this game, it had better know what it is getting into and how the sustainable development game will be played in the future. Most do not, but a few are starting to position themselves.

For example, one of my clients is updating its organization's strategic plan, complete with a reassessment of the company's environmental vision and policy. The term "sustainable development" does not even come into the discussion. The company recognizes that the term is reaching cliché status — a metaphor characterized by its overuse. Most parrot the Brundtland Commission's definition, but few make the effort to accurately appreciate its long-term

implications.

This client uses plain language to describe exactly where the company is headed and how it will get there. Even more significantly, it does not want to bind the company's brand and reputation to a term that may, in the future, become synonymous with corporate greenwash.

Impossible you say? First, do the research and then decide. One thing is certain, a backlash against the concept of sustainable development will not happen overnight. There are far too many powerful organizations that literally have the words embedded into their organization's name, staff job titles, policies and marketing plans.

Long term? We'll see. Now is the time to act strategically. 

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References

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² David G. Victor, "Recovering Sustainable Development," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, Jan/Feb 2006, pages 91-103.

³ Available at <http://www.corporateeurope.org/backlist.html>, last visited 11/7/07.

⁴ See for example, "Cracks Open in Sustainable Development Foundations", August 1, 2005, available at <http://www.crosslandsbulletin.com/>, last visited 11/7/06.

⁵ John Ehrenfeld, "Beyond Sustainability, Why an All-Consuming Campaign to Reduce Unsustainability Fails," *ChangeThis*, Issue 25.03, August 3, 2006, available at <http://changethis.com/25.03>. *BeyondSustain*, last visited 11/7/06.