

The Sustainability Challenge

By Dr. Glenn Sutter – Published in *Museums and Sustainability*, Museums Association of Saskatchewan, Feb 1, 2011

Imagine being asked to keep a leaky water bucket filled to the brim – no more, and no less.

With an endless supply of water and a bucket leaking at a constant rate, most of us could succeed, after a little trial and error.

But what if the conditions (the leakiness of the bucket and your water supply) began changing in complex and surprising ways? Not only would the task be more difficult – it would also be more realistic.

The water and bucket would now be acting like a living system, where complex relationships affect how supplies of energy, material and information are used and distributed. More importantly, the bucket has a clear limit, and so does our ability to affect it.

Thinking about buckets and systems is a good place to start where sustainability is concerned. Examples of real-world systems include the Earth, the economy, your home town, and your museum!

Humanity's ecological footprint¹ is now 20 per cent greater than the productive surface of the Earth (our biggest bucket), so we must find ways to live within limits. We are also facing unprecedented rates of social, technological and environmental change, so we need to take time to imagine what a sustainable future might look like. And we need to take steps in that direction as individuals, communities, governments, businesses – and museums.

The scale and urgency of sustainability work is both exciting and daunting. In his award-winning book "The Upside of Down," Canadian researcher Thomas Homer-Dixon points to five "tectonic stresses" now operating at the global level:

¹ Our global ecological footprint is based on the area of land and freshwater required to provide us with the things we consume, and to absorb our wastes. It has been larger than the productive surface of the Earth since the late 1970s and is still increasing. For details see www.footprintnetwork.org.

- *Population stresses* due to differences in population growth rates between rich and poor areas, and the growth of megacities.
- *Energy stresses* due to the increasing scarcity of conventional oil.
- *Environmental stresses* due to damaged land, water, forests and fisheries.
- *Climate stresses* due to changes in the composition of the atmosphere.
- *Economic stresses* due to instabilities in the global economic system and growing income gaps between rich and poor (Homer-Dixon, 2006, pg 11).

We can't deal with these issues in isolation because they overlap and affect each other in unpredictable ways. We need to recognize how they touch our regions, communities, households, and each one of us as individuals. And we need to respond by applying new and existing bodies of wisdom, including traditional ecological knowledge.

What can Museums do?

Museums can play an important role in sustainability work, once a few principles are in place.

First, sustainability is ultimately a cultural matter. Culture is sometimes called the "fourth pillar" of sustainability (alongside society, economy and the environment), but this model is misleading. Instead of carrying equal weight, these dimensions are actually arranged in a hierarchy, with the economy operating within society, which is within the environment (see Fig. 1).

The pillar model also tends to define culture as the arts, literature and entertainment we consume, but this is a very narrow perspective. It is more helpful to see culture as an evolving set of patterns and processes that reflect who we are, what we think and how we act as individuals and groups. This puts culture at the core of sustainability work, as the foundation for both the economy and society (Fig. 1).

Second, sustainability is about recognizing connections that link local impacts to larger issues but this not always easy to do. Reports about climate change often focus on impacts happening elsewhere, to other people, or to charismatic animals like polar bears. In Saskatchewan, local impacts are more likely to involve changing drought patterns or the loss of glacial runoff. By focusing on these sorts of connections, museums can help their communities identify local signs of stress, and develop creative solutions.

Third, sustainability needs to be embedded at the institutional level by integrating it into museum mandates, mission statements, budgets, and performance measures. To that end, this report refers to an assessment tool developed by the Canadian Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities. The tool – called the Critical Assessment Framework – provides a stratified set of criteria that museums can use to develop public engagement activities and meaningful indicators.

In the end, sustainability work is about helping people lead fulfilling lives in a limited world and responding to situations where systems are approaching – or have been pushed beyond – their limits. Museums can make important contributions through interpretive exhibits and programming, and by providing common spaces for reflection, discussion, and strategic planning. Museums can also reach beyond their walls, working with their communities to address contemporary issues and providing leadership that fosters relevant and constructive actions.

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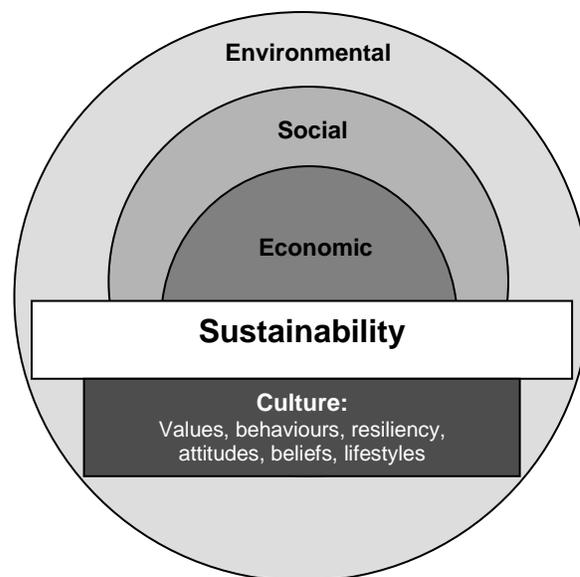


Fig. 1. A sustainability model that shows how the economy and society are nested within the environment, all resting on a foundation of culture. Developed by Douglas Worts.