

# Launching the Modern Concept of Sustainability

By Richard W. Franke  
October 24, 2011  
This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at [www.sustainabletompkins.org](http://www.sustainabletompkins.org). This part one of a series of articles on "Steps to Sustainability."

The modern concept of sustainability is barely a generation old. A search of the Harvard University online card catalog, possibly the second largest in the U.S. after the catalog at the Library of Congress,

turns up 18,690 entries (mostly books), of which 93 percent date from 1990 or later. The widely-used JSTOR search engine of more than 1,000 scientific and academic journals finds 12,349 entries under "sustainability," of which 95 percent are from 1990 to the present.

This relative newness of published writings is no accident. The word sustainability, and its initial definition, hit the scientific and intellectual world in 1987 with the publication of "Our Common Future" by the World Commission

on Environment and Development (and Oxford University Press). This document is also known as the "Brundtland Report," after the commission's chair, Gro Harlem Brundtland, a Norwegian doctor and former Labor Party prime minister (1986-89 and 1990-96).

Educated in Norway and at the Harvard Public Health School, Brundtland was Norway's Minister for Environmental Affairs from 1974-79. She served as Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) of the United

Nations from 1998 to 2003. At WHO she is credited with taking rapid and effective measures to prevent the SARS outbreak from becoming a worldwide epidemic.

In the 1980s Brundtland was asked by the Swiss-based World Commission on Environment and Development to help draft a report on environmental problems and the potential for overcoming them. This was a follow-up to the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, *Please turn to page 7*

## Sustainability

*Continued from page 6*

Sweden, perhaps the first international meeting to highlight environmental problems in a significant way.

The conference was in part a consequence of the first Earth Day, held on April 22, 1970, in which 20 million people celebrated the Earth and expressed concern about the state of the planet. In the U.S. in 1970 President Richard Nixon responded to the environmental movements by creating the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The Brundtland Commission began its work in 1983, with 23 official members and panels of experts on energy, industry and food security. Public hearings were held in Indonesia, Canada, Brazil, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Tokyo and several other locations. Academics were commissioned to prepare more than 75 studies. The report contains 21 pages of acknowledgements of governments, institutes and individuals who made contributions to its content.

Because of its international focus, the Brundtland Commission faced the issue of sustainability within the context of worldwide development, and thus took "sustainable development" as its term of reference, concluding that the concept means, "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The commission noted that this definition implies limits. They also noted that "A World in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes." It also pointed out that there are no separate crises: environmental crisis, development crisis, energy crisis—"They are all one." And they are not only about immediate concerns: "We came to see that a new development path was required, one that sustained human progress not just in a few places for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future."

The main text of "Our Common Future" runs for 347 pages and includes a remarkable amount of detail about the nature of sustainability, the threats to it and the kinds of policies and programs needed to make it viable. Although United Nations reports have earned a reputation for dullness and superficiality, owing to the need for approval by member nations, "Our Common Future" remains a relevant document today, 24 years after its appearance.

What are the ancient roots of the sustainability concept? What happened to the concept of sustainability after the Brundtland Commission report? And how can the concept be made more specific, more operationalized? Look for an update in a future "Signs of Sustainability" posting.

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