

Sustainability.

What is it? Why Should We Care?

To a guitar player, sustainability might be the capacity of a particular instrument to hold a note. An engineer might use the word to describe a structure's ability to carry a particular load.

I want to talk about sustainability in the social or cultural context.

I think of it as a responsibility to future generations to use no more than our share of non-renewable resources. The World Commission on Environment and Development agrees. They defined sustainability as “[meeting] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Exactly what, then, is ‘our share’?

There is no simple answer. There are too many unknowable variables. What is the extent of the world's oil, for example? What new technology lies just around the corner that will render internal combustion engines obsolete?

I'd suggest that the answer is a philosophy of living, rather than some identifiable quantity of oil, water, or land.

Native Americans believe that we don't inherit the world we live in from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children. We owe it to them to live more simply than

our capacity to exploit available resources allows. In other words, we need to leave a little - or a lot - in the bank.

In the last half of the 20th century, the world's population roughly doubled. During that same period, our consumption of oil, just to name one resource, increased seven-fold. As alarming as that comparison is, it doesn't tell the whole story, since most of the growth in consumption happened in the US and Europe, where the population grew more slowly than in other parts of the world.

Clearly, we can't continue on that trajectory forever. That's not realistic by anyone's definition. We can argue about when it's going to happen, but sooner or later, we'll run out of oil and other non-renewable resources.

Reigning in our consumption can happen in a controlled, voluntary manner, or it will happen very inconveniently when the supply dries up.

Living by a code of sustainability doesn't have to mean living a life of self-denial, just an end to the orgy of consumption. It's a call for moderation.

Our free-market society pushes us to consume. We're bombarded with slick ads for the biggest, the latest, the fanciest - in phones, in cars, even in our own body parts. Without them, we'll somehow be less complete, our lives less fulfilled.

It's up to each of us, as individuals, to resist the self-serving urges of corporate marketing. We need to think for ourselves - to make smarter, more responsible choices in our purchasing.

Each of us *can* make a difference, especially on a local level, in our community. Although it's easy to fall prey to the false idea that one individual person's actions don't

matter, a greater truth is that it is only with the cooperation of many single individuals that a critical mass can be developed.

One good first step towards a sustainable lifestyle is to buy locally-grown produce. Doing so supports the local economy. It also shortens the trip from source to market, saving money and fuel. Less fuel means less exhaust in the air.

All this contributes to greater sustainability and a brighter future for our children.

Yes, it might mean giving up fresh strawberries in February, but just think how much more you'll appreciate them when they come into season next June.

What fruit and vegetables grow here in the winter, you ask? Well... none. That's why our forebears relied on canning, and root vegetables, and other produce that stored well, to get them through the winter months.

We can do the same. Potatoes, beets, turnips, parsnips, and apples are all locally-grown products that store well. Canning can be hard for busy people to find time for, but we have something our ancestors didn't: freezers.

Even at this time of year, there are some fresh, local farm products in the Pioneer Valley. As the cover article of this issue reminds us, it's maple sugaring season. A couple of centuries ago, cane sugar was an extravagance and local people relied on maple sugar. We take sugar for granted, but we can still satisfy our craving for sweets with this local product – one that people in other parts of the country look on with envy.

So, what does sustainability mean?

It means making smart choices. It means thinking for ourselves about the consequences of our decisions. Recognizing that the choices we make today have an impact on the choices we and our children will have in ten or twenty years.

It's all about balance.

*Endnote:

In future columns, I'll explore different facets of sustainability: buying locally, community-supported agriculture, alternative energy, smart growth, etc. I'll try to objectively discuss valid viewpoints, both those that support aspects of a concept, and those that find fault with some. Hopefully, through the arguments presented, you'll find the tools to make informed choices for yourself.

I subscribe to a 'big tent' philosophy of discussing issues – that it's better to have thoughtful ideas presented from a range of perspectives than to exclude opinions because of narrowly defined labels. In that spirit, I invite you to share your thoughts. Send your comments to the address listed on the masthead.