

# REBALANCING THE RHECTORIC OF SUSTAINABILITY

BY KYLE BOGGS



"Sustain' is a pretty ancient word in the English vocabulary. As far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century, we see verbal forms of that word. They are analogous to the way we today use the abstract noun 'sustainability,'" explained environmental historian, **Dr. William Cronon**. He was giving his keynote lecture entitled *The Riddle of Sustainability: A Surprisingly Short History of the Future*, to a packed auditorium at the annual conference for the **American Society for Environmental History**, which was held in Phoenix earlier this year. To sustain is, "to cause to continue in a certain state, to keep up without intermission, to keep up a community without failing, or giving away."

**D**uring his talk he provided not only an etymology of the word, but also a cultural narrative surrounding its relatively recent emergence as part of our modern usage and its solidification as an ideal upon which the human future is imagined.

If you look up the word 'sustainability' in the dictionary, you won't find it. The adjective, 'sustainable,' however, is defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary* as "capable of being continued with minimal long term effect on the environment," and in *Merriam Webster's College Dictionary*: "of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged."

However, when the word 'sustainable' entered the English language, it had nothing to do with the environment, let alone social justice. Until the middle of the 1960s, it had to do with the legal usage of arguments that are sustainable. It was not until 1965 that the adjective 'sustainable' was coupled with words describing social systems: sustainable growth, or sustainable economic growth.

The first appearance of the word 'sustainability' was in the doctoral dissertation of neo-conservative economist **Thomas Sowell**. "Notice that 1972, in the context of a discussion about the history of economics, is where that word first appeared," Dr. Cronon stated. "Nobody in the 1970s used that word at all."

While we can recognize that early conservationists were focused on questions related to the way we think of sustainability today, usage of the word did not gain ground until recently.

"The efficient use of natural resources by eliminating waste is something that **Gifford Pinchot** introduced in that famous quotation, borrowed and modified from **Jeremy Bentham**, 'the greatest good for the greatest number, for the longest time.'"

For a clear illustration of how quickly the word 'sustainability' entered the English lexicon, Dr. Cronon compared the 2004 reprint of the international best seller *The Limits of Growth* to the original edition published in 1972. In the 1972 edition, the word 'sustainable' occurs only a few times, while 'sustainability' and 'unsustainability' do not appear at all. On the other hand, in the 2004 edition, "you will find the word 'sustainability' occurring dozens of times and the words 'sustainable' and 'unsustainable' occurring hundreds of times ... which is a measure of how much the linguistic universe we're talking about changed in the interval between 1972 and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

The most widely reproduced definition of sustainability comes from the United Nations Brundtland Commission: "To meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability for future generations to meet their own needs."

In the 1980s, as environmental justice movements exposed the disproportionate suffering of poor communities as a result of environmental degradation and pollution, "one of the features, interestingly, of sustainability, will be its assertion from the beginning that concerns about the environment can never be tackled by themselves ... In all definitions of sustainability, the argument will be that you cannot solve

environmental problems without also worrying about sustainable economic growth ... and worrying about social equity. Social justice. It all must be done simultaneously." Dr. Cronon's words provide historical insight into the creation of the now ubiquitous, 'three-legged stool' of sustainability. The concept of the three-legged stool is articulated in various ways: Economy, Society, Ecology; Economy, Equity, Environment; or the triple-bottom line of People, Planet, Profit.

The incarnation of this triple concern arose "to move away from an environmentalism that seems to be focused too much on nature and not enough on people."

Dr. Cronon's 'Riddle of Sustainability,' lies in negotiating the tension between the idea of a balanced stool and our current reality, which prioritizes the economic system over environmental or social justice. "Is sustainability sustainable?" asked Dr. Cronon. "Can it be sustained? What are its virtues? What are its unresolved tensions? What are the paradoxes built into it?"

I spoke to **Winona LaDuke** before she addressed a sold-out Northern Arizona University audience in early February. "You have to rethink the paradigm," she said. "What is good quality of life? Generally the discussions around sustainability have to do with maintaining this level, and trying to figure out how to keep this economy going, in a way that does not entirely compromise or cause eco-systems to collapse. And that's an unrealistic approach."

Dr. Cronon highlights this as one of sustainability's "greatest attractions." "Its seeming implication is that we can effectively have our cake and eat it too. We can reinvent our entire culture, our entire political economy, and our mired relationships to nature and natural resources without the devastating reductions in the standard of living that past environmentalist prophecies almost universally asserted were necessary."

**Ms. LaDuke emphasized that our current reality is one in which social justice and the needs of the natural world take a backseat to the needs of the economy.** And that this shift will, indeed, require a change in lifestyle expectations. "We need to create a sustainability that

is restored in its relationship to the natural world and to all our relatives, whether they have wings, or fins, or hands."

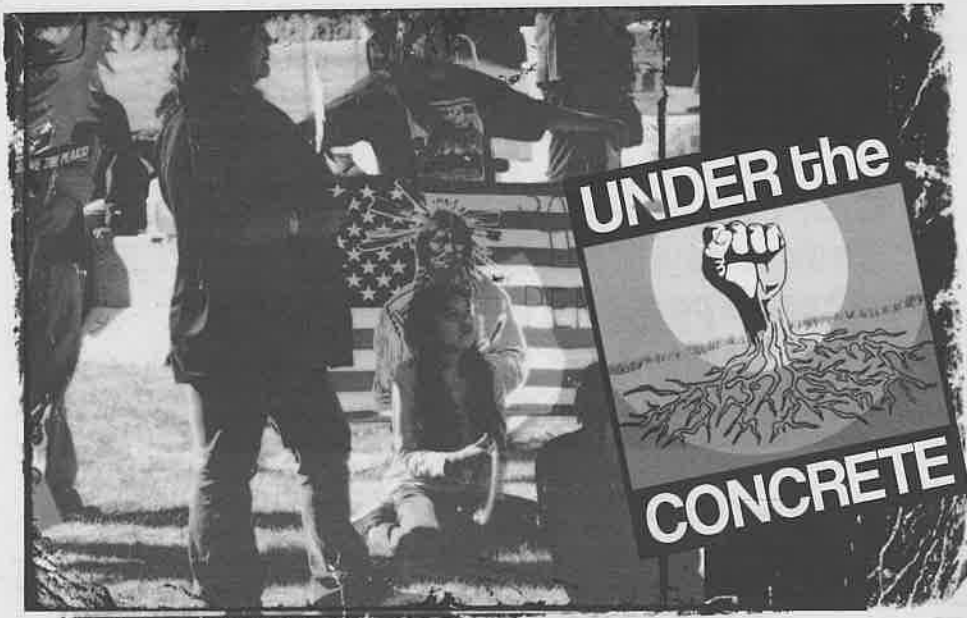
Instead of orienting social justice and environmental concerns around the economy, the economy should be transformed to work around the needs of people and the natural world. Said Ms. LaDuke: "You cannot have a sustainable economy if you rob other countries of their wealth or their people or their intellectual capital, whatever that is. You cannot have a sustainable economy if you contaminate the water or mine everything that is there."

Mining, especially mining on indigenous lands, where communities rely directly on the land to live, is a particularly illuminating example. On March 26<sup>th</sup>, at the **Orpheum Theater**, elders from the **Havasupai Tribe** came together with local environmental and social justice organizations and native musicians from all over the Colorado Plateau to voice their opposition to uranium mining near Grand Canyon.

Havasupai elder, **Rex Tilousi** has traveled internationally for decades trying to raise awareness of the effects of uranium mining on his community. "We feel very honored to be here to share what we as indigenous people have been going through in the past 500 years," Mr. Tilousi began. "They [mining companies] tell us it is clean, it is cheap, but what they don't tell us [is] where is it coming from? The waste, the tailings they all left behind - what is happening to that? This is happening on indigenous lands."

**Taylor McKinnon** from Flagstaff's **Center for Biological Diversity** connected the environmental impact of uranium mining on the health of local communities. "The government cannot guarantee that mining will not damage our aquifers or damage our springs. If that happens, if our aquifers become contaminated or depleted from uranium mining, it is impossible to clean up. **We've seen far too many examples in the Four Corners area of aquifers that have become ruined by uranium mining** and people who have suffered as a result of that. We cannot let that

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happen."

The constant threat of development on the **San Francisco Peaks** is another local example that highlights perceived economic gains over healthy communities and the integrity of the natural world. Traditional Diné medicine practitioner, **Jones Benally**, made this connection at the benefit to stop uranium mining. "That's our sacred place, that's a holy mountain. We learn ceremonies from the bottom to the top. There are also a lot of different kinds of medicines on that mountain and a lot of different animals. You know what will happen, if we let them? They are going to destroy it. And we don't want to let that happen. We belong to the earth; we don't own it."

The appeal of using treated effluent to make artificial snow on the San Francisco Peaks is a "mitigation strategy," according to University of Arizona economist **Rosalind Bark**. When I spoke to Dr. Bark about her conclusions, she asserted that, in light of climate change, cities like Flagstaff will not have reliable winters. Making snow artificially is not a solution to this, but a strategy whereby Flagstaff is essentially buying time as it rethinks its winter economy.

There are consistent and well-documented connections between maintaining the integrity of the San Francisco Peaks and the cultural and spiritual survival of over 13 native tribes. There is also a lack of meaningful data to show that snow made from 100% reclaimed water (the only resort in the world to attempt this) would not have an adverse long term effect on humans

or the natural integrity of the mountain itself. By approving the use of treated effluent, the City of Flagstaff ignores the impact on local communities and the natural world, in an effort to lessen the effects of climate change on the local economy.

Although widely regarded as a way to mitigate the effects of climate change by producing "clean nuclear" energy, uranium mining has shown over and over again that it does not take into account its impact on local communities, or the integrity of the local environment. And because our usage of nuclear power is not actually replacing dirtier energy sources like coal, but is simply an addition to them, we can infer that, again, the needs of an inherently unsustainable economy is trumping the needs of people and the natural world. Asked Ms. LaDuke, "**If that [uranium mining] is the answer, what was the question?**"


Indeed, transforming the economy into one that orients itself around the needs of people and the natural world is a huge challenge. "We are told that renewable energy cannot meet the demands of the US energy economy," says Ms. LaDuke. "Well, who would want to? The reality is that between point-of-origin and point-of-consumption, according to the Lawrence Livermore Lab, **57% of the energy we produce is wasted. So why would anybody want to sustain that?** What we produce the most of in this country is trash! Fifty trillion tons a year. And if we aren't putting it all in landfills, we ship it off to Somalia ... is that a balance we're trying to maintain? Probably not."

Perhaps we can have our cake and eat it too, as long as the cake consists of empowered communities and a healthy environment rather than disposable electronics and kiwi that travels 14,000 miles so we can eat it in January. "Don't get in that false debate about how you're going

to meet our current demand, because the reality is that you shouldn't be shipping food from California across the country and you shouldn't be shipping power at the rate we are," says Ms. LaDuke. Food and energy systems must be scaled appropriately so they can be under community control. That is what sustainable communities are all about.

"There is a problem of scale," asserts Dr. Cronon. "The claims of sustainability are strongest at the global level, the planetary level. Though all of us know that it is not in fact where most human beings experience their strongest affective obligation, their strongest sense of commitment ... the most effective expressions of sustainability have been at the local scale."

The widely attended Stop Uranium Mining benefit was a good example of this, as was the Save the Peaks protest during the City of Flagstaff's Earth Day events. On Saturday, April 16, over 150 Flagstaff citizens marched from City Hall through the downtown area protesting the city's ongoing compliance with development on the San Francisco Peaks. Protestors blocked traffic and effectively shut down the city's Earth Day events earlier than scheduled out of what must have been a perceived fear of what the united citizenry might do.

"People working in small communities, face-to-face relationships, can actually genuinely work together for the good of that community," concludes Dr. Cronon. "The farther outward you go on the scale, the harder it is to see the shared good, and the harder it is to recognize 'the other' on the other side of the planet as someone who shares your humanity." 

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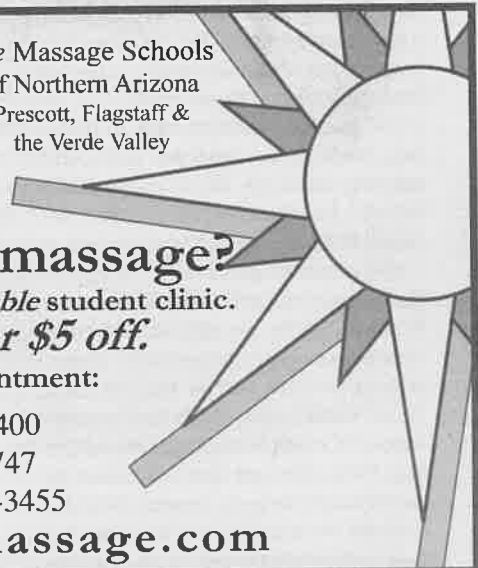
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