
Conserving Concepts: in Praise of Sustainability

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We were on a small boat bound from the Peruvian city of Pucallpa to Dos de Mayo, an Amazonian lowland village. This trip takes several days, which granted us time to think about this debate on the proper goal of conservation. We mention this unusual place and situation because it colored our thoughts and affected the comments we make here. Confined to a small bench in this large canoe that rarely touches shore (with no access to references), we took our inspiration from being on one of the major tributaries of the world's biggest river, that cuts through the world's largest forest, that is within the world's most iconic conservation regions.

Newton and Freyfogle argue that the term *sustainability* is not equal to its task of being the “guiding light” of environmental conservation. Its shortcomings, they insist, are many. A fundamental problem, cited by others as well, is the term's vagueness and utter malleability. Sustainability, they insist, “lacks solid meaning,” and its very popularity signals its inadequacy. They go on to enumerate other deficiencies of the term: it is not informed by the latest science; it is uninspiring; it is without a moral component; and it is not linked to the land. That today's central theme of conservation is so roundly defective is, according to Newton and Freyfogle, both a sign of just how “on the rocks” conservation is today and, presumably, a cause of “our find[ing] ourselves. . . in such an intellectual morass.” As a remedy to this alarming situation, they suggest that sustainability be replaced by another term: *land health*. Although we agree with some of these criticisms of the utility of sustainability as a central tenet for conservation, we fundamentally disagree with others and reject, although somewhat reluctantly, the suggested solution to their terminological dilemma.

In addressing the authors' primary complaint, we do not argue that as a term sustainability is malleable. This common complaint is aptly dismissed by Sarewitz (2001),

who stated that “Sustainability has been criticized as a woolly, ambiguous concept that is resistant to precise definition, fraught with internal inconsistencies, and difficult to apply in practice. It shares these difficulties with other core societal values, such as freedom, equality, and justice.” Indeed, we suggest that in its malleability, flexibility, and adaptability is the term's strength as a universal goal for conservation efforts made across sectors, countries, and environments.

Different people invoke sustainability to set different paths of action on their way to unlike goals. It may be that some of these means and goals are actually contrary, as Newton and Freyfogle warn, to the maintenance of ecological processes and biological diversity. The folks in Dos de Mayo, the village of 300 farmers and fishers that we visited, live by the communal goal of sustaining the populations of fish in their lake so they will not go hungry. They maintain an ecological balance in Mahuizococha, their lake, as a community—controlling access, regulating fishing tools, restricting fishing for profit, limiting fish harvests—precisely to sustain the resource for themselves and future consumers. Quite on the other end of the spectrum, it may be true that sustainability has been invoked, as Newton and Freyfogle suggest, to argue in favor of environmental scourges such as increasingly industrialized agriculture in which the application of tons of fertilizer maintains the productivity of the land. This is hardly sustainable in the eyes of most conservationists. But we doubt that the term's tractability is the grave problem the authors make it out to be. On the contrary, we believe sustainability is a flexible term and that this is as it should be.

Newton and Freyfogle certainly offer wonderful historical contexts for their arguments, but their context seems to be exclusively U.S.-based. And lest the authors suggest that their arguments are meant to address only North American conservationists, and deliberately speak entirely of local priorities, we offer that U.S. conservation rhetoric, as well as action, echoes throughout

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the world and has impacts, for example, up and down the Amazon. Poor rural people around the planet have repeatedly received and rejected already too-simplified versions of urban and developed-country conservation priorities. (Among too many Ucayali villagers, for example, the “simple message” that has been received is that American conservationists are interested only in forbidding them from cutting another tree, thus denying millions of farmers a way to make a living.) The flexibility of a term such as sustainability offers some hope of accord, however imperfect, and movement in a common direction, even if on widely ranging and divergent paths. What is better than a concept that many disparate communities and individuals can make their own? What is more compelling to most people around the world than a term that speaks of the future, of achieving and maintaining a livable world—conceived in more than one way—for their grandchildren?

We dispute the authors’ suggestion that what conservation needs most is “well-crafted rhetoric—simple ideas” or a “single conservation goal” to inspire the public. Simplicity of rhetoric seems to be a virtue, but we question whether a more simplified message will at once inspire the suburban Wisconsinite and goad the Ucayali River villager to conservationist actions. We assume the authors recognize that contemporary conservation agendas and needs are many, varied, changing, and complex. Conservation requires an examination of the complexities of the “real environment” to which these authors refer and to the many alarming realities all around the world. Scientists certainly have a role in conservation, one that could use better definition as Newton and Freyfogle rightly suggest, but so do peace workers, arbitrators, fair business practitioners, and honest politicians.

Their concern that “conservation runs the risk of being drawn into and overwhelmed by the many social and economic considerations that sustainability broadly conceived so often includes” is, although perhaps well-founded, to a certain extent narrow-minded. These “social and economic considerations,” we argue, provide the basis for the “moral component” of conservation that Newton and Freyfogle suggest is lacking from the goal of sustainability. Environmental sustainability—just one of the three pillars of sustainable development—is fundamentally about the interaction between humans and the environment. What could be more morally correct than working to make certain that the means of production (of, for example, energy, timber, and shoes), technologies of waste management, and uses of natural resources do not result in depletion of the natural resources, degradation of the ecosystems, and contamination of the environment upon which human life—our biological, social, and economic well-being—depends. The implementation of conservation measures—such as setting aside critical areas of a watershed or habitat, regulating trade in certain species, or following sustainable harvest criteria—is just

one strategy among many necessary to achieve environmental sustainability.

We recognize the attraction of coming up with a fresh (or resurrected “retro”) rallying cry, and we admit that sustainability has become somewhat too familiar and tired. But again we suggest that the fact that it is widely used is no cause for jettisoning the term. Its popularity is a drawback primarily among academics, and those selling new projects, not among those who are toiling in the fields trying to stem further deterioration. Scientists and conservationists around the world have worked with this term for several decades now, as Newton and Freyfogle point out, and it is used in just about every international environmental treaty, convention, plan of action, and national resource management plan from the Kansas prairie, to the Himalayan highlands, to the savannas of Kenya. Now that the term is familiar to resource managers, policy makers, biologists, entrepreneurs, and the public, it is time to give it new vigor and meaning, not time to give it up.

Much of what Newton and Freyfogle find problematic—and we have suggested is positive—about sustainability (i.e., its adaptability to multiple situations, environments, and populations) can easily be applied to the suggested alternative land health. We concede that the use of a term such as this, with its obvious connections to human well-being and strong personal resonance, may have more potential for giving conservation a personal, individual face, but we dispute the contention that land health as a term has a compelling collective significance.

Although people may have a similar sense of what personal health feels like, we imagine that interpretations of what environmental or land health is vary widely. The vision of Aldo Leopold of a “vibrant, fertile, self-perpetuating community of life” has great appeal and should be welcomed everywhere. It even, ironically, probably has more application to the agricultural villages of the Ucayali today than to the communities of urbanites and suburbanites that Newton and Freyfogle are actually addressing. But Leopold’s visions of what constituted specific signs of land sickness (erosion, floods, weeds, and declines in yields) are a world away from the realities of the Amazon floodplain, and the term points poorly, if at all, to the factors that are threatening that region and many others. We note that the “other life forms, soils, rocks, and waters” in much of Amazonia are doing quite well. They continue to be “healthier” than the life forms, soils, rocks, and waters in much of the developed world. The people of rural Amazonia do not, however, largely share in this state of health and lag well behind their North American and European equals in most health measures. Although villagers along the Ucayali River, like their counterparts in Illinois, would doubtless like something “better than survival,” the “stagnant, repetitive life” so disparaged by Newton and Freyfogle probably does not seem such a poor deal to a great number of them.

Equally troublesome, sustainability and its converse, unsustainability, are difficult concepts to operationalize along the astoundingly dynamic Amazon, where the river swings dramatically, with or without human intervention, across a broad and ever-changing floodplain. Substituting land health as a goal would probably not hurt but would hardly stop the clandestine logger or the poisonous mining operation from hurting plants, animals, and people alike. Nor will it help stem wanton urban sprawl creeping onto the Wisconsin grasslands. For changes to occur at this level, we must appeal to the miners', politicians', and developers' sense of the equally "woolly" concepts of justice and equality.

Land health may well be useful as a "distinct, ecologically grounded goal and measuring metric," and it most certainly is linked to the land, as Newton and Freyfogle complain sustainability is not. But land health is just that: a snapshot measure that refers to but one of the multitude of ecological zones that concern conservationists anywhere in the world. Where are the aquatic or atmospheric issues, where is the genetic pollution of important populations? Are the threats of global climate change really adequately summed up in the rallying cry for land health? We cannot help but admire, even love, the term—such a powerful merging of the body and the soil—but we

suggest it belongs *within* sustainability, a more unifying conservation goal.

Perhaps Newton and Freyfogle are confusing their terms. *Sustainability*, as it refers to how humans are interacting with the natural environment, is, in fact, the goal, whereas *conservation* is but one of the means to achieve that goal. What conservation needs, rather than a revision of the rhetoric, is for each one of us to know the problems that affect the health and well-being of our own and other communities and of the environments in which we live. We need to know what our roles are in creating those problems and be engaged collectively in solving them. What we need least is a new terminology that might narrow the path to our goal and possibly exclude those unlike us. We need to join together with the families of Dos de Mayo to understand how to sustain the future and to focus on finding new and ever more effective and inclusive ways to do it.

Literature Cited

- Sarewitz, D. 2001. Commentary on "sustainability." Page 74 in N. Mirovitskaya and W. Ascher, editors. Guide to sustainable development and environmental policy. Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina.

