

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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What IS and What IS NOT "Sustainability"?

During the past one to two years, the word "sustainability" has become very prevalent in the business world. It is being used so much, that many, or even most, of the people don't really know what it means in this new context. For many years, the word "sustainable" usually referred to a company that had steady growth and would survive for a long time. Today, the word "sustainability" is short for "sustainable development" which was defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition was the result of a major concern that the developed countries were consuming the earth's natural resources in such a rate that there would be little remaining for the poor developing countries. Something needed to be done to be sure that there are adequate natural resources for all people on earth.

One example of a natural resource that will eventually run out is fossil fuels. Since the supply of fossil fuels is finite, within a century or two they will all be consumed and none will remain. This is the reason that there are many efforts to increase the efficiency of the energy consuming devices in order to give us time to develop new renewable, as opposed to non-renewable, energy sources. A renewable energy source is one that will never run out. Some people feel that making your operation more energy efficient is being sustainable. There is no question that improved energy efficiency is the right thing to do, but it is not sustainable. I call it being "less bad". Being sustainable would require your energy operation to utilize energy from solar panels, wind turbines, geothermal, hydro-electric or other renewable sources.

Another example that requires implementation of sustainability is the fishing industry. Because of the increase in the world's population and with most of the people living near water, fish has long become a common food item for everyone. However, we are harvesting fish faster than the rate of re-population. It is critical that new practices be implemented so that we are removing fish from the oceans at slower rate than the increase in the fish population until they reach an optimum concentration so that harvesting of the fish equals the reproductive rate. In this situation, there will always be an adequate quantity of fish to feed the world. This is what is meant by sustainability.

Manufacturing automobiles that have more efficient engines so they get, say, 40 miles per gallon rather than 25 mpg is going in the right direction. We must build more efficient automobiles in order to reduce the oil consumption and reduce the carbon emissions. But, again, this is not being sustainable. It is just extending the life of our oil reserves. To operate an automobile in a sustainable manner, it must be electric and the

batteries must be recharged with renewable energy (wind, solar, etc.) and not by coal fired power generation.

Interface, Inc. is the largest U.S. producer of commercial carpeting. Some years ago, it decided not to sell carpeting to its customers, but rather sell beautiful interior spaces, comfort underfoot, noise control, durability, cleanliness, and functionality. In other words, it would sell the function of carpeting rather than carpeting itself. In effect, Interface leased the carpeting to its customer and from time to time it would examine the floor and replace the carpet tiles that were worn or stained, and leave the others in place. The removed carpet tiles were taken to its plant, separated into their original components and recycled to produce new carpeting. In effect, the company was using minimal natural resources and producing little or no waste. Interface was contributing to a sustainable world.

There are many examples of sustainability and we must all learn how to make this world a sustainable, living earth. I have been preaching sustainability for many years and have been trying to practice it in my every day life. It is this commitment that led me to write this column with its title: "A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift".