



Nickel tailings, Sudbury 1996 / Image copyright Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto

The overall legacy we leave to our grandchildren is a combination of the side effects and leftovers of countless individual decisions – on purchases, policies and projects. How wisely those decisions are made determines whether that legacy contributes to sustainability or to further degradation.

– *Robert Gibson*

Testing for Tomorrow

Robert Gibson

Explicit sustainability tests are emerging to help ensure that new initiatives preserve ecosystems, maintain viable livelihoods and deliver quality-of-life gains.

A SERIOUS TEST is one you can fail. A useful test is one you can hope to pass – eventually, if you put some effort into it – and passing makes life better. Sustainability is both of these.

At the global scale, we are failing the sustainability test. We are extracting, disturbing and discharging at a rate that is beyond what the planet can sustain.

Give us an F, maybe an F-.

Nonetheless, some lessons are being learned and some efforts made to turn things around. Growing numbers of decision makers are being pushed to reconsider their old ways and to seek alternatives that promise a more positive long-term legacy on both ecological and human grounds. This is leading to the elaboration and adoption of explicit sustainability tests.

Consider parks. Historically, they were set aside as islands of green, playgrounds for the rich, and justifications for exploitation elsewhere. Now, serious parks officials are engaged in stewardship that extends well beyond the park's boundaries. Park managers today are expected to recognize global uncertainties and build bridges to neighbouring communities in order to enhance ecological integrity.

Consider cities. After 50 years of sprawl, urban authorities are turning to smart growth, having found that the costs – for everything from infrastructure repair and social services, to replacement of ecological goods and the policing of irate commuters – are unmanageable. Conceding that old-style growth is foolhardy, they are rethinking what makes urban life more vibrant and viable ecologically, socially and economically.

Consider food. The dominant model has been a global, high-input, industrial food system, controlled by a shrinking number of major corporations, heavily dependent on fossil fuels and minimally sensitive to the peculiarities of place. Now that oil prices have risen and the perils of dependence on a money-driven global system have become more evident, we see growing attention to local food and regional cuisine as the means to protect farm livelihoods and foodlands; to promote

greater equity in global food trade; and to enhance the construction of an alternative, more sustainable agricultural model.

What has happened, and is happening, with parks, cities and food is illustrative of a broader phenomenon. In these and many other cases, the dominant model has failed the sustainability test. It wasn't preserving ecosystems, or maintaining viable livelihoods, or delivering quality-of-life gains, or proving sufficiently adaptable in the face of new conditions.

In search of better options, some people are beginning to specify what they want from new undertakings. The result, in many jurisdictions, organizations and subject areas, is the emergence of explicit sustainability tests for proposed new initiatives.

There are now countless examples of official decision-making requirements that are quite comprehensively sustainability-based and influential. Authorities currently applying such tests include the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the Swiss Federal Office for Spatial Development, the City of Melbourne, the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, the Forest Stewardship Council, the Joint Review Panel for the Mackenzie Gas Project and more.

Each of these approaches to sustainability is open to criticism. Some of the tests are still too easy to pass, or to avoid altogether. But every year there are more tests and higher standards. Evidently, we are gradually learning to look ahead and to build a future that bridges the dangerous old divides between ecology and equity, stewardship and livelihoods, precaution and innovation, solidarity and diversity.

Eventually, as better decisions add up, we may be able to pass the big test of living lightly and equitably enough on our only available planet. 🌱

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