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Mitchell Park in the Village of Greenport, Suffolk County was once a polluted brownfield site. Today, the waterfront park includes an amphitheater, a harbor walk and this historic carousel. This showplace has helped Greenport to become one of Long Island's premier tourist destinations and a prime example of New York's commitment to sustainability.

(Photo by Bob McInnis)

sus·tain'a·bil'i·ty

LEAVING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE

By Shannon Brescher Shea and Beth Meer

Many expressions are part of our everyday vocabulary even though they mean different things to different people. Unlike physical objects, words like “nature” call to mind a variety of images. Likewise, the press, government, environmentalists and companies use the word “sustainability” to imply a range of meanings.

The word sustainability first appeared in a 1987 United Nations report. The report defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The Department of Environmental Conservation’s (DEC) own mission embodied this ideal far earlier. The mission, first written in 1972, is “to conserve, improve, and protect New York’s natural resources and environment, and to prevent, abate and control water, air, and land pollution, in order to enhance the health, safety and welfare of the people of the state and their overall economic and social well being.”

Rather than presenting us with either/or choices, sustainability looks for actions that can simultaneously benefit society, the economy and the environment.

Sustainability distinguishes itself from other environmental philosophies by its positive, holistic and future-oriented approach. Sustainability addresses both the “natural” world (including the need to maintain natural ecosystems and biodiversity), and the everyday human world. It takes account of economic concerns and promotes healthy investment. It includes social aspects, requiring that all people have equal access to and responsibility for natural resources, and that no one unfairly bears environmental burdens. Rather than presenting us with either/or choices, sustainability looks for actions that can simultaneously benefit society, the economy and the environment. Perhaps

most importantly, it is a proactive, optimistic approach. Although a sustainable society may discourage or prohibit some activities, its true focus is on providing a framework for positive action.

Leaving the world a better place for our children and grandchildren is a universal human goal. If our global society continues on its current path, future generations will not be able to meet their needs. People now consume roughly 25 percent more resources than the planet can continually supply, according to the Global Footprint Network. Each person is responsible for a portion of that impact, called an environmental “footprint.” According to the Network, Americans have the second highest per capita footprint in the world. To transition to a sustainable society, we must all find a way to shrink our individual and collective footprint.

The pursuit of sustainability is a journey as much as a destination, and will require the efforts of people and

organizations far beyond DEC. Still, DEC’s powerful mission and the broad scope of our activities have an important role to play in helping New Yorkers achieve a sustainable world.

DEC fosters healthy communities by cleaning up contaminated brownfields, revitalizing urban centers and protecting open space. We encourage and provide financial support for pollution prevention, waste reduction and recycling programs that conserve resources and reduce toxic chemical use and pollution. Our environmental justice initiatives help to ensure that all communities benefit from environmental projects and do not suffer unfair burdens. Safeguarding New

York's natural resources supports a healthy economy by sustainably managing forests and other natural resources, protecting air and water quality, and preserving wetlands and key wildlife habitat. Our campgrounds, education centers, wilderness areas and hunting and fishing programs help New Yorkers stay

Sustainability embodies the notion that sound natural resource management and environmental protection are core elements of economic prosperity.

healthy and develop a deep appreciation for the natural world. We are fighting climate change by developing programs to limit greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to changes that do occur.

In addition to promoting a better future through its core mission and programs, DEC is also working to improve the sustainability of its own operations. We have already made considerable progress in a variety of areas. DEC purchases one-fifth of its electricity from renewable green sources and has installed solar panels, fuel cells and wind turbines at a number of sites. It has eight certified green building projects in progress or completed, including its main office in Albany. Through these and other efficiency efforts, DEC has reduced its buildings'

electricity usage by 30 percent. DEC's four environmental education centers, Five Rivers, Stony Kill Farm, Rogers, and Reinstein Woods compost their organic waste. The centers have also integrated sustainability into their core educational mission, with displays on recycling, waterwise landscaping,

and green buildings. This year, two nationally recognized organizations certified all state forest lands managed by DEC as sustainable.

Currently, DEC is working to build on these efforts by increasing the fuel efficiency of our automobile fleet, greening office meetings and events, and ensuring that recycling is universally and consistently practiced at all facilities. We are also developing programs to reduce resource and energy use through green purchasing, technology like teleconferencing, and the use of public and alternative transit, such as carpooling, walking, or bicycling.

As well as improving DEC's own environmental footprint, these efforts will help individuals across the state to act in a more sustainable way. As DEC's

environmental professionals see changes made within the agency, they will become more knowledgeable about steps individuals and institutions can take. They will also better understand what impediments stand in the way of citizens "greening up" their lifestyles. By encountering problems and solving them, the agency can learn and pass those lessons on to others.

Many of DEC's projects can serve as teaching tools themselves. For example, the green buildings at Stony Kill Farm and Reinstein Woods will have "cut-away" sections that make the inner workings of sustainable building systems visible to the public. These dynamic, hands-on demonstration projects significantly increase the value and impact of DEC's sustainability efforts.

DEC also has an important role to play in developing and strengthening green standards. Many of DEC's efforts are focused on such standards, such as the Green Building Tax Credit Program and the construction of buildings that meet the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standard for sustainable buildings. As these standards become more widespread, it will be important to ensure their credibility. For example, DEC was an active participant in the creation of guidelines for green cleaning products developed by the state's Office of General Services for use by schools and state agencies. It also submitted comments on green cleaning product standards proposed by Green Seal, an internationally recognized independent non-profit organization that certifies environmentally responsible products and services. Sound standards are key to building consumer confidence in the green product market, and as



Connecting children to nature is essential to building a sustainable future. DEC's education centers offer programs that help mold the environmental stewards of tomorrow.



DEC has eight certified green buildings in progress or completed. The Stony Kill Farm Environmental Education building has interpretive signs explaining sustainable features and will have “cut-away” sections that make the inner workings of sustainable building systems visible to the public.

certifications become more common they will carry more weight.

New York State alone spends more than \$8 billion a year on products and services. Through this spending, state government can strongly influence the market for green products. As more people and organizations require their products to meet green standards, manufacturers will increase their supply, lowering the price and expanding the product’s accessibil-

ity. For example, the state’s demand for green cleaning products has encouraged companies to develop more and better alternative green cleaners. Because developing new product lines can be expensive and risky, the state’s buying power can play a crucial role in encouraging producers to take that risk. As a result, more green cleaners will be available for everyone to buy at a cheaper price.

State government also has an important role to play in supporting the economic development of companies that offer green products. New York State’s lead economic development agency, Empire State Development, is working to offer financial assistance to companies that provide sustainable products and services. Likewise, the newly established Pollution Prevention Institute, to be housed at the Rochester Institute of Technology and a number of public and private academic institutions across the state, will assist businesses with the design of green products and cutting-edge methods of sustainable production.

DEC’s leadership on sustainability in its own operations heralds a culture shift that is required for the future of our environment, economy, and society. DEC will continue to lead the way in New York State and beyond.

Beth Meer works for DEC’s Policy Office and is the co-chair of DEC’s Sustainability Workgroup. **Shannon Brescher Shea** is a staff writer and contributing editor for *Conservationist*.

10 STEPS TO SUSTAINABILITY

Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. Recycling is easier than ever, but the other two steps are actually more important. By reducing and reusing the amount of products we buy – and the packaging they come in – we reduce the energy and resources needed to produce them.

Dispose of your hazardous wastes appropriately. Some types of garbage – including paint, fertilizers, and compact fluorescent light bulbs – can damage waterways and soil if they are thrown out in the household trash. Find out where to recycle these goods safely at: www.Earth911.org.

Eliminate the energy drains in your house. Unplugging appliances when they aren’t being used can save energy and lower your electric bill.

Switch your lighting to compact fluorescent light bulbs. These energy-savers use about 75 percent less energy than incandescent bulbs.

Buy energy-saving appliances that are ENERGY STAR® rated.

Leave the car in the garage, and walk or bike when possible. The more people in your town show an interest in being outside, the more likely the town will provide resources like sidewalks and bicycle trails.

Keep your car in tip-top shape.

By keeping your tires properly inflated, having regular tune-ups, and maintaining a steady speed, you can maximize your fuel efficiency when you do drive.

Clean green! Although many green cleaning supplies are on the market, even a simple vinegar and water solution is great for mopping the kitchen floor.

Wash laundry and dishes on full loads, and use cold water when possible to wash clothing. You’ll be saving time, water, and energy.

Refuse plastic shopping bags. Keeping a recyclable grocery bag in your car or tote allows you to avoid plastic bags, which can take more than 500 years to decompose.

