

Sustainability – a journey worth taking

April 28, 2005

Tony Erba

USDA Forest Service, EMC staff

People find the definition of sustainability difficult to agree on. People also inherently understand what is unsustainable. Why is this important to humans? Without human presence, are there just flows of energy and matter between components within systems?

We have focused on what the land can produce for us, hopefully in a sustainable manner. A shift to sustaining systems is now the basis for our own sustainability. This transition seems to show that sustainability is more of a journey rather than a state of being. After all, “any attempt to understand is better than not to attempt” (Kadash Chandra Owen).

Where are we headed?

The Forest Service reflects societal values. Sustainability is a human social value. As such, it cannot be an absolute. Diversity among human values prevents this.

Those human values define what “healthy systems” are. What is perceived as “good” or “bad” is through human interpretation. What we desire now and for the future is through our eyes. However, holding systems in a state that is productive to us may be contrary to how systems actually function.

As Frank Engler stated, ecosystems are more complex than we can think. However, it is our conscience that makes us think about our influence on the systems. The sustainability conversation started back when our nation desired to have public land set aside for preservation and conservation purposes.

What should we do?

It’s time to reflect on this 100+ year conversation. We are beginning to recognize and confront the undesirable outcomes of past human activities. We are also beginning to understand that these outcomes can only be rectified with significant investments of money and effort, if at all.

Should the Forest Service stand up and say “no!” to unsustainable practices? Certainly, Chief Dale Bosworth has demonstrated this with his Four Threats. But to put this in motion, we need to leave past practices behind. Mary Ellen Hale observed that the confrontational model “is based on competition for competition's sake, not for the benefit of the land or environment.”

What can we do?

Focusing on systems rather than products seems prudent. We can urge each generation to manage its resources in a sustainable manner. Creating a process for dialog can move the sustainability idea from semantics to action.

So, what is this dialog process? Collaborative planning. According to the Committee of Scientists (1999), this type of planning “begins by finding agreement in a common vision for the future conditions of the national forests and grasslands and their unique contributions to different

regions of the country." That's exactly what the Forest Service's 2005 forest planning regulations advocate.

Indeed, collaborative planning is expected to be the foundation for a national forest's vision. This vision should reflect the social choices people make about their public land. Trade-off discussion is also critical because we cannot have everything we want. Starting and continuing this dialog is all part of this journey toward sustainability.

Ultimately, it's about doing the right thing, not being right. What is "right" reflects our values. The Forest Service's collaborative planning process aims to reconcile our differences by (a) starting the conversation and (b) continuing the journey. Jack Ward Thomas offered words from Isaiah, "Come, let us reason together." In the end, that may be the only meaningful way towards a sustainable community.