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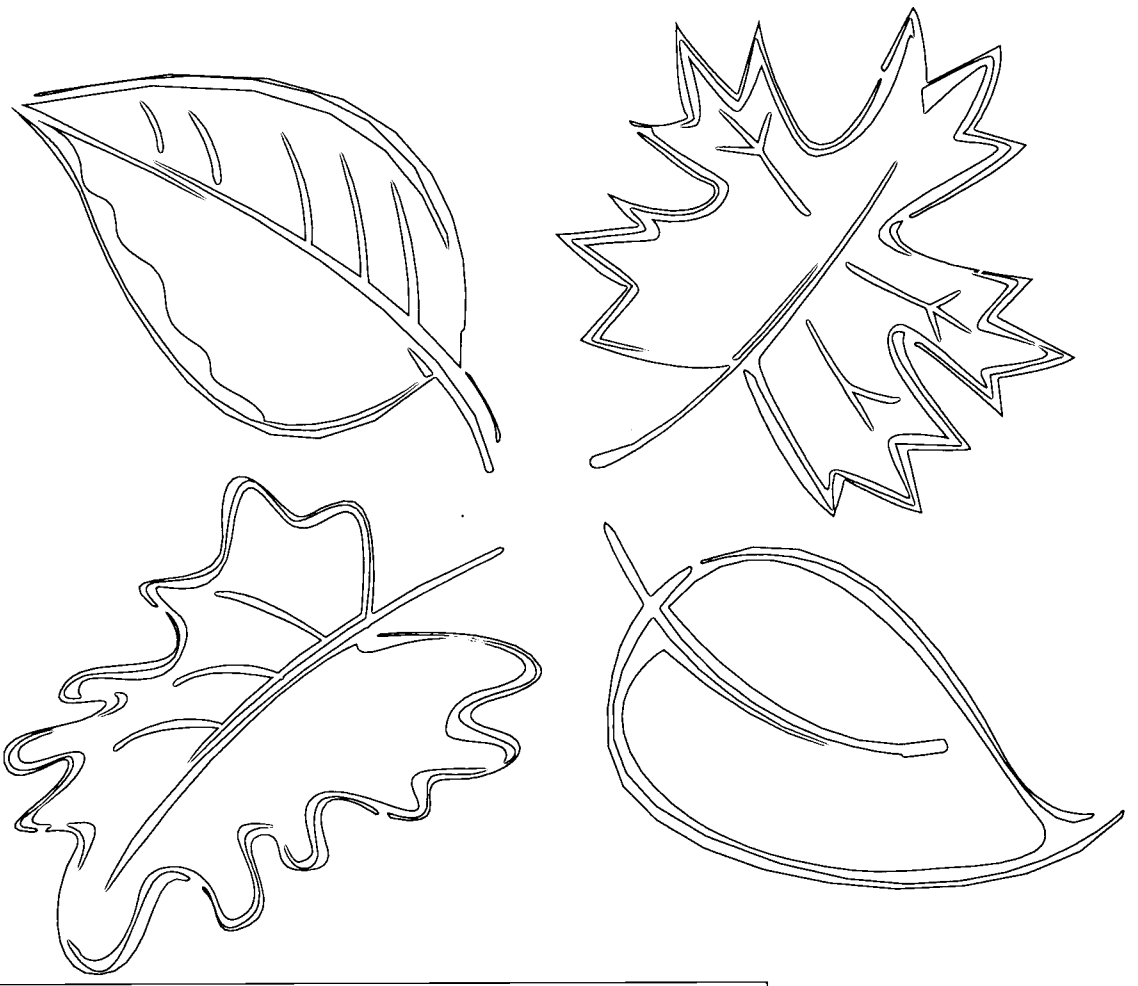
ABSTRACT

Education about sustainability is the foundation of conservation efforts. This publication was designed to inform and inspire individuals and communities that may be contemplating or already undertaking efforts to promote community sustainability. The four stories in this booklet are: (1) "Coastal Community Connections"; (2) "Cultivating Farm Communities"; (3) "Natural Communities"; and (4) "Building Urban Communities." Contains a list of other Community Sustainability case studies and Internet resources. (CCM)

Four Stories

People, Communities and Sustainability



Environments For Life
Conservation Issues Forum Series

Izaak Walton League of America
Sustainability Education Project
July 1998

Four Stories

PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Environments For Life Conservation Issues Forum Series

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Andrew Pearson

The Sustainability Education Project is a conservation initiative working to bring the impacts of human population growth, economic development and natural resource consumption into balance with the limits of nature for the benefit of current and future generations.

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For more information about the Sustainability Education Project or additional copies of this publication, write to the Izaak Walton League of America, 707 Conservation Lane, Gaithersburg, Md. 20878-2983; phone (301) 548-0150; fax to (301) 548-0149; send e-mail to sustain@iwla.org; or visit our World Wide Web site at http://www.iwla.org.

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Introduction

"Communities everywhere are starting to understand,
in a more profound way, what the qualities
and characteristics are of the places where they live,
their beauty as well as function.
And then they are finding ways
to decide together how to make new rules
that are good for people and the land."

Anne Pearson, director
Alliance for Community Education

I first met community educator Anne Pearson in 1993, when I became the director of the League's new population and resource consumption program. The Carrying Capacity Project had just completed a series of focus groups conducted to gauge members' knowledge of population issues and to identify possible grassroots action projects to address them. Anne already was talking about sustainability and working on plans to launch an inclusive citizen-driven sustainability initiative in her hometown of Annapolis, Md.

Anne's Alliance for Community Education shaped many aspects of the new Sustainability Education Project, which succeeded the Carrying Capacity Project in 1996. Her Sustainable Annapolis initiative resulted in three successful community summits and launched her efforts to inaugurate similar projects in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and in other parts of Maryland. The League followed suit, developing and sponsoring community sustainability workshops in Wyoming, Iowa, Minnesota and California.

Recently Anne and her brother, filmmaker Drew Pearson, received a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to create an educational CD-ROM about people and communities across the United States that were working toward sustainability. The result, "This Place Called Home: Tools for Sustainable Communities," is a resource library of inspiring interviews about sustainability with grassroots individuals and national leaders. In their own words, sustainability advocates relate the methods and tools they've used to balance their community's development with natural resource conservation and human health and well-being. In this issue of Environments for Life, Drew and Anne chronicle their cross-country trek and introduce readers to some of the most memorable people and communities they encountered in making "This Place Called Home."

Community sustainability happens in places where people work towards environmental stewardship, economic security, civic democracy and social justice as complementary goals. The methods they use are inclusive, citizen-led, proactive and consensus-driven. In short, they are democratic.

Education about sustainability is the foundation of our conservation efforts. League members see it not as a top-down process that gives specific solutions to complex regional and local problems, but rather as a way of continually asking better questions about the relationship between people and the environment. It's a lifelong process that requires knowledge of the complex interconnections between society and the economy and how both depend on — and interact with — ecological systems and the environment.

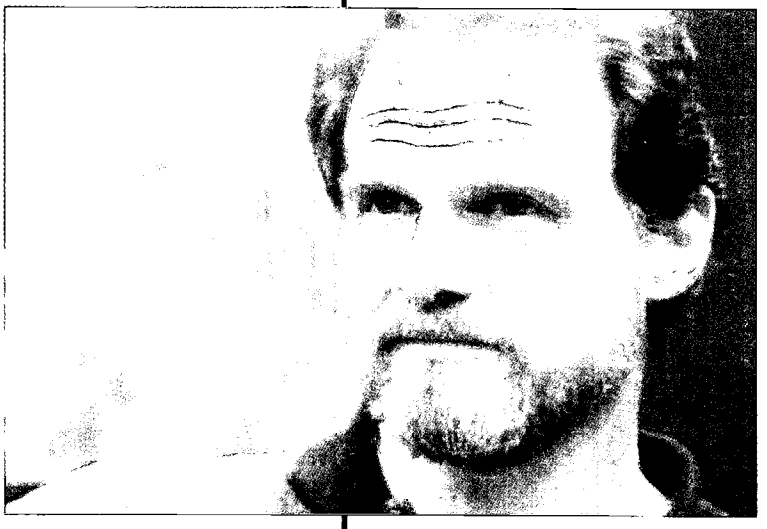
"Four Stories" is the fifth and final issue of our project's Conservation Issues Forum Series. This group of publications was designed to inform and inspire individuals and communities who may be contemplating or already undertaking efforts to promote community sustainability.

We hope our publications will help you work towards sustainability in the community, town or city where you live.

Ben Hren, project director
Sustainability Education Project

Story One:
Coastal Community Connections

"I think we will find that
living in a sustainable manner
is economically logical in the long term
and the converse is also true,
that not living in that way
is going to be a phenomenal expense."



Michael Beck
Endangered Habitats League
San Diego, Calif.

The people of San Diego are passionate about their ocean-side city and its Mediterranean climate. Millions more will join them there in the next few decades, drawn by the region's natural beauty, economic vitality and cultural assets.

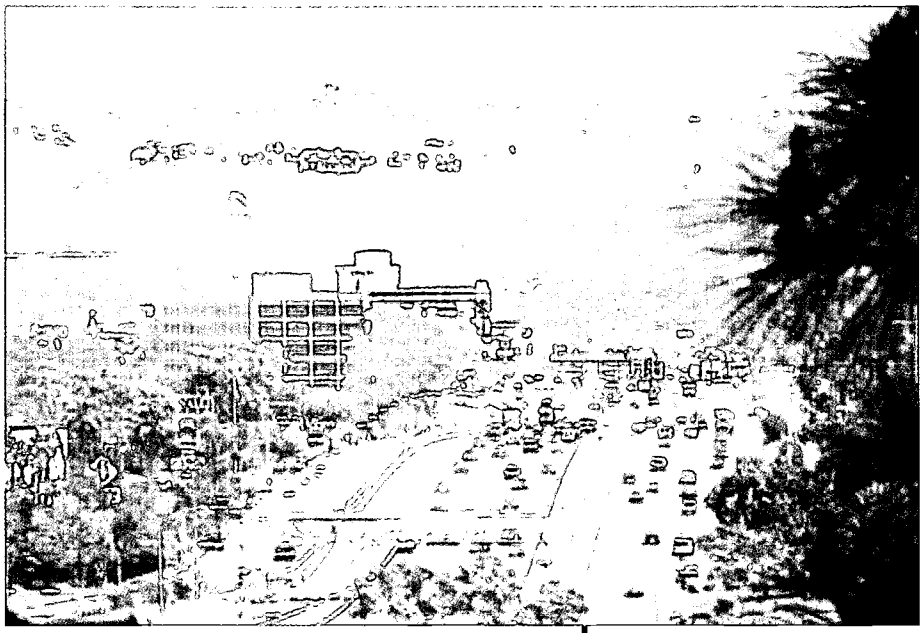
"The historical forces that have resulted in what is now southern California — economic forces, development forces, private land ownership patterns and speculative land development — are still the strongest forces at play in the state and probably in this country."
Michael Beck

If an ethic of private, uncompromising property rights had prevailed, the projected growth would have blanketed the region's wild areas, watersheds and hillsides with homes and businesses. But San Diego residents have decided to take another course. They have accomplished something spectacular for an American city: a plan to preserve the unique natural, cultural and historical resources of the place they call home.

Michael Beck, San Diego director of the Endangered Habitats League, says managing growth "is the hot topic everywhere." People in small towns and large cities across the country are recognizing there are limits to growth, he says. When they exceed those limits, they begin to diminish the very quality of life characteristics they sought to enhance.

"The historical forces that have resulted in what is now southern California — economic forces, development forces, private land ownership patterns and speculative land development — are still the strongest forces at play in the state and probably in this country," says Beck. "Many aspects of these forces create huge problems. To identify a potential strategy to address these forces — and then to implement

that strategy — is a phenomenal undertaking. Ultimately, it's going to require a kind of leadership and vision that has never been part of our system in southern California."



San Diego, Calif.

Beck is a major force behind the Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP), a comprehensive habitat conservation program for southwestern San Diego County. The plan aims to preserve a network of habitat and open space to protect native plant and animal species while enhancing the region's quality of life. The 900-square-mile study area — which includes the city of San Diego — contains more than 200 plant and animal species that face an uncertain future. Most are listed currently by the federal and state governments as endangered, threatened or rare. Many are candidates proposed for listing.

Beck has been working with people representing government, developers and environmental organizations to find answers to a difficult question: How can people organize themselves to live within southern California's ecological limits?

Beck speaks fluently and forcefully about his belief that the way Californians make everyday decisions can and must be altered. But he says people won't feel they have to try unless they believe a crisis exists.

Beck believes the crisis is real. He says people can see it in the intersecting maze of highways where traffic often is backed up or stalled at times when people care most about getting someplace. They can feel it in their lungs on days when smog from automobile exhaust is trapped at ground level under a layer of warm air. They can recognize the decreasing elbow room in the densely populated parts of the state. And if they travel to Los Angeles, just to the north, they can glimpse what could happen to them in another decade if they don't act now.

"Historically, the human race is so crisis oriented that it doesn't change directions until the last moment," says Beck. "That's certainly occurring here. I think that in order to begin to create a new vision

for our community, the first thing is reaching a critical mass of people who feel very uncomfortable about where we are and where we're going."

"In order to begin to create a new vision for our community, the first thing is reaching a critical mass of people who feel very uncomfortable about where we are and where we're going."

Michael Beck

Working within the democratic system of laws we've all agreed to abide by, says Beck, people from the entire spectrum of the community need to come to an agreement about how they want their communities to develop — not for the next 10 or 20 years, but for the next 100 years at least. Our capability to project that far is enhanced greatly by new tools available to citizens and planners alike.

"One of the things that's changed in the last 10 years in particular is our ability to visualize our world and graph the trends," says Beck. "Whether it's graphs or maps or the written word, these new data and tools help us say this is where we were, this is where we are, and this is where we're going."

"For the first time, we can bring previously segregated issues together," explains Beck. "Whether it's traffic, crime, schools or air quality, we can overlay all of these issues. That is a profoundly powerful tool. It's almost analogous to the moment we were able to look at planet Earth from outer space and realize, 'Oh, this is a finite system!' It went from the abstract to an actual, visual image. That's a very powerful way to motivate people."

Beck knows that motivating people is the key to changing southern California's land use habits. He cites a landmark 1995 report from the San Francisco-based Bank of America, calling on California to halt sprawl in order to improve the state's competitiveness and quality of life.

"We've got the quintessential financial institution writing a report that says the cost of this sprawl is absurd and irresponsible...not just for future generations but for us," says Beck. "It's an empty, exposed myth that development for the sake of development is an economic benefit. And we now have empirical examples everywhere to show that not only does it not work in the long term, even in the short term it doesn't work."

Traditionally, an area stops growing when a critical resource is in short supply. The price of the resource rises as it becomes more scarce, spurring the search for substitutes or for more sources.

But in the United States today, this is no longer the case. The expense of providing limited, scarce or regionally depleted natural resources is distributed among taxpayers and consumers. In some cases, the cost is deferred to future generations. There may be no better example of this process in action than southern California's use of water.

"In the middle of the desert they haul out huge hoses and literally hose down the streets in Palm Springs," says Beck. "This is a story written by Lewis Carroll of 'Alice in Wonderland' fame. It's beyond comprehension."

Southern California imports nearly all its water from the Colorado River, lifeblood of the American Southwest. Much of the time, the river is so heavily tapped that it retreats from its delta, never reaching its mouth in the Gulf of California.

"We have the ability to measure the patterns of rainfall, the recharge capacities of aquifers, and the quality of the water," says Beck, "and there's no argument about these data. We know how much water there is and the precipitation patterns over the last hundred and fifty years. We know we will have to change our pattern of water use. It's almost criminal, our current mindless misuse of this resource."

The region already has "crossed a threshold" of water use, Beck maintains, even as it prepares to welcome millions more people to the San Diego area. Among many southern California residents, a sense of crisis has led to a search for more effective ways of making decisions. The problem with the old ways, says Beck, is that there were too many losers in decisions resolved by simple, majority-rules votes.

In San Diego, consensus-based decision making has evolved over the last six years as the only way to make progress on complex and emotional issues. Using this process, Beck's group has developed a strategy to save fairly large amounts of San Diego County's wild areas so they will not be developed.

What drove the process, says Beck, was a "monkey on the back" of area landowners: the Endangered Species Act. San Diego County was reaching a point where many of its native species were threatened with extinction. Federal law was on the verge of dictating how land would be used in southern California. The developers were looking for a way to escape the consequences. Environmentalists saw an opportunity: creating a plan for saving open space in a way that might be more creative and relevant to local circumstances than what the Endangered Species Act would require.

San Diego, Calif.

It's not a perfect arrangement, Beck concedes. "We're dealing with the last 15 percent of what was historically here in the coastal zone," he says. "And in that sense, yes, we are dividing the pie up for the last time, because there's hardly any left. The reserve that we have established acknowledges and recognizes the dynamics of biological systems to the degree that it can."

He notes that the regulatory costs of simply listing the threatened species as endangered were almost exactly the same as establishing a network of habitat and open space. "And if you did the program," says Beck, "you would have something when you're done."

Jim Whalen

Jim Whalen represents the southern California building industry on the MSCP planning group. He admits that it "took courage" to participate in a consensus-building process that considered the wide array of community views.

"It's easier to be extreme," Whalen concludes. "It requires less thought and less accountability. It's much more difficult to try to see other people's viewpoints and see how you can integrate them into what you think is a workable model."

Whalen describes a process that involved hundreds of meetings over thousands of hours, but in the end, all the voices in the community were heard.

"I think what we've done is instructive to people who want to pursue these programs elsewhere, because we've tried all the other ways," says Whalen. "The only one that worked was to let everybody be heard and let the group dynamic move the process along."

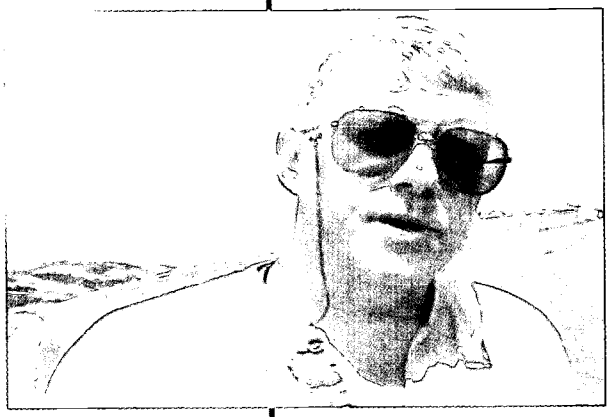
For the most part, says Whalen, government was "brought along" and did not lead the process. Another difficult element was time: to build trust, to agree on a set of goals and to see the process through.

"It took a long time for us to explain to certain members of the environmental community that we do have a reason to worry about losing our land," he notes. "On the other side, it took a long time for some of the builders to understand that the environmentalists' commitment is in many cases genuine and not just masquerading as 'no growth.' This was a very hard negotiation."

As difficult as it was, says Whalen, a process that reconciles diverse views and steers people toward a common goal is one that can work anywhere in the country.

"It's an example of a process that's making a substantive change in the way we do business," says Whalen. "It's a process that requires stakeholder participation. This whole collection of different interest groups is actually moving towards a common goal that fulfills the different needs of the participants. It is on the shoulders of the public as well. People have to act."

"The reason so many folks are interested in trying to save multiple-species conservation areas like the Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve is to preserve the tremendous biodiversity that we have," says Mike Kelley, president of the California Native Plant Society. "We could probably try to find all sorts of utilitarian reasons why we're involved in this, but ultimately I think it's a moral decision. It would be a crime if we were to fail to preserve the plants and animals that make San Diego special so future generations can know them."



"It would be a crime if we were to fail to preserve the plants and animals that make San Diego special so future generations can know them."

Mike Kelley

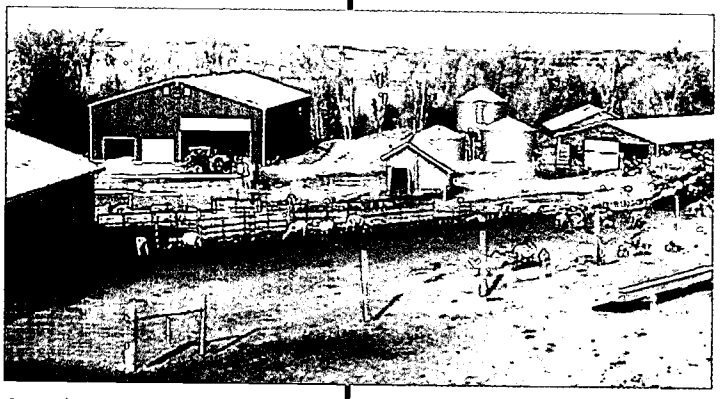
"It's a place where people can escape," Kelley says of the preserve. "People ride bikes and horses, and hike and jog there. It's a place people go to relax, to get away from the city and from all the buildings, and to see trees, hear running water, visit a waterfall and enjoy the wildflowers."

"I think an awful lot of folks have lost their connection to the Earth and to nature," he notes. "After all, it's only in the last 200 years that we've become urbanized, that we've lived in these concrete boxes and paved cities, and have lost the feeling of depending on the Earth."

"I think we've lost something that's a very important part of being a human being," he adds. "And I think an increasing number of folks are coming to understand that now. Protecting a piece of land — restoring it — is one way of regaining that connection and that sense of intimacy with nature I think we've lost."

Story Two:
Cultivating Farm Communities

"Part of the solution to the decline
of family farms and rural communities
has to be found in community-based initiatives.
We can't go to the government
to get all of the change we need.
A lot of it needs to happen
right here at home."



Anselmo, Neb.

David and Connie Hansen
Nebraska family farmers

The way to the Hansen farm in Anselmo is littered with reminders of Nebraska farm families that left the land, sold out or were forced out by debt.

Huge piles of tree stumps lie where a former windrow had been bulldozed to make two fields into one — more efficient for larger agricultural machinery. A large house rests close to the road, all the glass missing from the windows. Two farm houses sit empty across the street from each other, weeds and vines starting to fill in the spaces where people would have been.

"We have towns that are abandoned that used to have their own high school, shops, bank, post office and churches," says David Hansen. "Big equipment enables a person to operate a lot of acres. And you have to have a lot of acres to pay for the equipment. So what you end up doing is investing capital in what could have been invested in people and their work. Big equipment drives people off the land."

Later, he muses on a speech, made by Abraham Lincoln in 1859, that warned that "the ambition for broad acres leads to poor farming."

In that speech, recalls Hansen, Lincoln said, "I have more than once known a man to spend a respectable fortune upon one, fail and leave it. And then some man of more modest aims gets a small fraction of the ground and makes a good living upon it. Mammoth farms are like tools or weapons which are too heavy to be handled."

Hansen has seen this warning come true.

"When I was growing up, I remember a gentleman living not far from here, who was acquiring one piece of ground after another," he says. "He owned more land than anybody I ever knew at that time. In the 1980s when things started going bad, that whole thing came crumbling down. Worse than that, it brought down the local co-op, because they had given him so much credit. It was a classic case of the ambition for 'broad acres leads to poor farming.'"

David Hansen

David and Connie Hansen belong to the Center for Rural Affairs, a Nebraska-based organization that focuses on issues affecting people and the land. The group is working for a better national farm policy that recognizes and encourages family farms, helps young farmers get started and assists in creating local small businesses. The center also tries to get local people to participate in the political process so their voices are heard in the state legislature.

When asked about the value to sustainability of family farms, Center Program Director Chuck Hassebrook offers a compelling answer: "It simply creates healthier communities."

Connie Hansen

"There's a large body of research that shows that communities surrounded by family size farms are healthier in every respect than communities that are surrounded by a few large farms that are owned by absentee owners and operated by hired, low-paid laborers," says Hassebrook. "There's less poverty, there's more social involvement, they have more active democracy, they have more churches and social institutions, they have better schools, and they have lower crime rates."

Hassebrook believes that a farm where the owner works and manages the operation "helps bring out the best in people."

"It challenges everyone to develop to their full potential and be rewarded for it," he says. "I think it gives meaning to life for people. It gives meaning to work for people. And it gives people a stake and creates more social equity."

Hassebrook also notes that "in terms of plain efficiency," family farms can compete with corporate agriculture. He speaks from experience, having been raised on a farm in east-central Nebraska.

"We used to sit around the table when I was a kid and talk about how the family farms were being squeezed out by the large farms, why it was a negative trend and what could be done about it," he says. "I remember particularly my father talking a lot about threats to family farms, and later on, the issue became corporate involvement in the hog industry. I care a lot about issues of social justice and environment, and the center was the one place that was really addressing those issues as they affected the kind of community I grew up in: a family farm community."

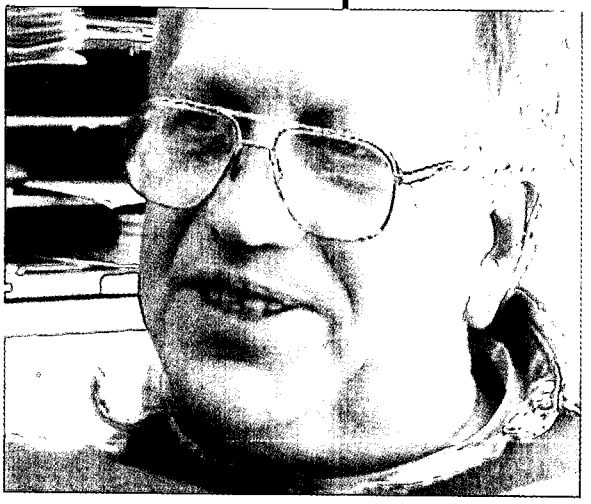
After decades of land centralization in the Great Plains, there is an understanding now that something clearly has gone wrong. Many farmers are realizing that as guardians of the land, they need to treat the soil and their farming enterprise in a sustainable fashion.

"If you have a farm of modest size, you can give some attention to the management issues and to certain parts of the operation," says David Hansen. This approach is more sustainable than that taken by corporate farmers, who he characterizes as "sweeping through the whole place, tearing out all the fences and all the tree breaks so you can get through with big equipment and forget what trees mean for the conservation of the land."

"If we didn't have the trees that we have on our north and this grove here, we wouldn't be nearly as well set up to have a livestock operation," says Connie Hansen. "Our sheep wouldn't have the protection on the north and our cows wouldn't be able to calve if we didn't have those trees. It would make it easier for us to plow from beginning to end if we took out the trees, but in the long run a tree is worth a lot more."

"Natural capital is an investment that generates interest on which people can live."

Wes Jackson



Wes Jackson runs The Land Institute in Salinas, Kan., a few hundred miles south of the Hansen farm. Jackson is a farm-raised Kansan who later became a professor and researcher.

Sitting at his desk at the institute, he mulls the fate of agricultural communities in the Plains states. It's a fate made worse by the loss of topsoil, the key to the region's farming productivity. In the world of sustainability, topsoil and other vital resources are "natural or ecological capital." It's just like economics: natural capital is an investment that generates

interest on which people can live. The investment shouldn't be tapped or the return diminishes. But that's exactly what is happening with soil in the Plains states, Jackson argues, and the effects are clear: abandoned towns, farms and homes.

The Hansen family farm, Anselmo, Neb.

"According to some estimates, we've lost half of our topsoil already from this great continent," he says. Cornell University ecologist David Pimentel "estimates the cost of soil erosion per year at 44 billion dollars. Billion. That's about equal to what our exports are." At the Land Institute, researchers are working to develop principles of agriculture based on the use of perennial grain varieties grown without artificial fertilizer and chemicals — producing grain for people and animals while conserving and building topsoil. Other projects explore livestock and annual crop production methods that require no pesticides, nitrogen fertilizers, irrigation or fossil fuels. Jackson also writes and lectures widely about the benefits of family farms to the economic, environmental and social security of America's Great Plains communities.

Like Jackson, Hassebrook believes that agriculture should move toward the sustainable, family-farm approach.

"We need to develop the knowledge by which farmers can use their skills to manage the farm in a way that works more in concert with nature," he says. "It avoids some of the pest problems and nutrient shortages for which people now spend so much money. I think the key point is that agriculture does not need to continue to go in the direction of industrialization."

To prevent farming from heading further down that road, says Hassebrook, farmers need to market their products in ways that tap the growing numbers of consumers who "are willing to pay premium prices for food that's produced in an environmentally sound way." Another part of the solution is found in community-based initiatives, he adds.

Chuck Hassebrook

"We can't go to the government to get all of the changes we need," he states. "A lot of it needs to happen right here at home. There are lots of people in rural communities that have resources they could use to help young people get started farming without making a huge economic sacrifice."

As an example, Hassebrook suggests that a retired farmer could rent his land to a beginning farmer for share-rent — an arrangement where the land owner would get a percentage of the profit as payment for renting the land. The Center for Rural Affairs also is actively involved in helping farming communities develop micro-enterprises — businesses that employ fewer than five people — through the use of revolving loan funds. Hassebrook says these small businesses are "the most successful thing farming communities have done" to stimulate stable economies in communities in the Plains states.

And, finally, he does not shy away from criticizing the role of federal farm policies in shaping the current situation.

"We've got a farm program right now that was ostensibly created to help strengthen family farms," he maintains. "But in effect what the Farm Program does is subsidize very large farmers and very large land owners to go out and bid land away from moderate size operations. We need to stop subsidizing that process."

"We have a lot of problems with our government today, but most of them could be fixed by a good dose of citizen action," he concludes. "This is a democracy and if family farmers get actively involved, they have the numbers that could change the voice of the farm lobby and turn around a lot of the farm policy in the country."

Story Three: Natural Communities

"We have a productive business environment,
an exceptional living environment
and a healthy natural environment.
As long as we protect and enhance that
our economy will improve."

Tim Hayes
economic development director
Northhampton County, Va.

Jim Harrison

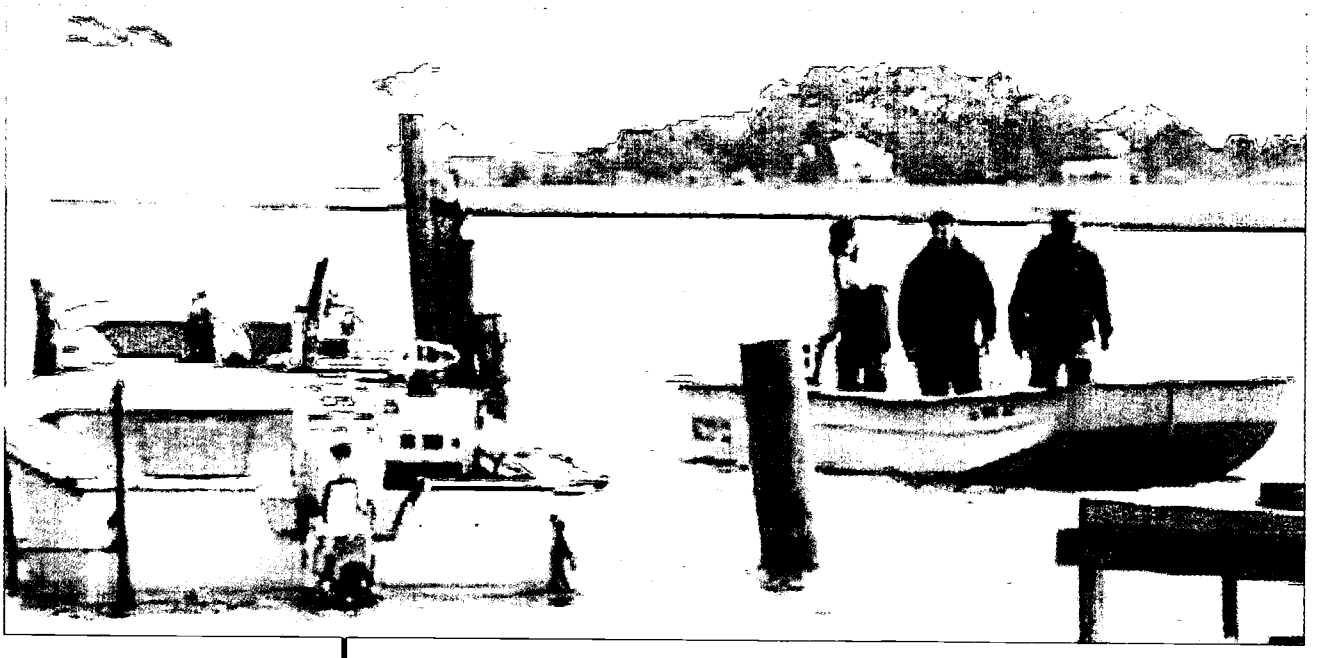
Bob Willis, Jim Harrison and their families have worked the land and the waters of the Eastern Shore of Virginia for generations. They've come this morning to check the water conditions and their boats, which are moored to a small dock in protected water.

The sky's almost completely gray except for a few narrow open patches that let the sunlight through intermittently. Beyond the protected inlet, there are white caps on the open water.

Bob Willis

They decide not to go out today. These days there is less work to do out on the water than there was for their fathers or grandfathers. Overharvesting and biological pathogens, combined with the effects of pollution from industry, towns and farms, have caused a drastic decline in the historic abundance of fish and shellfish in the Chesapeake Bay. The oyster beds are mostly gone, but Willis and Harrison still fish and put out crab pots.

The men have some ideas about how to solve the problem: "Give the fish a little more advantage" by returning to the low-tech fishing boats of years ago, says Willis. Make commercial crabbing operations pull their crab pots up by hand, says Harrison. ("They won't have a thousand crab pots, they'll have two hundred. And the crabs will be more plentiful and you'll have a better price.") And then he hits on something bigger, a core principle of sustainability: "Restricting our



"How can we combine our need and desire to protect habitat for the birds and the fish and other wildlife, with the people's need to have jobs, a decent way of life and a livable wage?"

Laura McKay

practices to not what we want but what we need — that's the big thing."

"Everybody's got to have more, more, more, you know," he notes. "You ain't got to have but one pair of shoes. Now they got walkin' shoes, going upstairs shoes, downstairs shoes, tennis shoes, runnin' shoes. Everybody's gotta have 50 pair of shoes. That doesn't make sense."

Where Willis and Harrison live, the population of the community is declining and there is extreme poverty, says Laura McKay of the state's Coastal Resources Management Program.

"Jobs are critical to people here," she says. The question facing the region is, "How can we combine our need and desire to protect habitat for the birds and the fish and other wildlife, with the people's need to have jobs, a decent way of life and a livable wage?"

The answer, she concludes, is "to listen really well to community members — to what their needs and priorities are."

"You also have to understand the science of what's going on environmentally and have some notion of how this ecosystem works," says McKay. "And you have to try to find common ground. You have to merge habitat protection with economic development."

Laura has followed her own advice. She points to the creation of Kiptopeke State Park, a section of the shore now protected from development. It's one of the areas where she is trying to preserve habitat for migrating birds in a manner that also contributes to local

employment. Kiptopeke is one of several key Mid-Atlantic peninsulas that provide essential feeding and resting areas for thousands of migratory birds. The growing popularity of nature-based tourism provides an opportunity for residents to be economically rewarded for their conservation efforts.

Sustainability raises tough issues, many with broader implications, McKay explains. For decades, populations of neotropical migratory songbirds — those birds that nest in the Northeast and then travel to Central America and the tropics for the winter — have been decreasing.

Many of the reasons for this are occurring well beyond the region's geographical boundaries. Migratory songbirds are losing intact waterside habitat all along their migratory route. These habitats are critical to the birds' ability to feed and seek protection from prey. To the north, their summer nesting grounds also are being lost to logging and development. The large, unbroken tracts of land they prefer are being fragmented, and other birds evolved to exist in these newly formed "edge" habitats are out-competing the migratory songbirds. Similar habitat changes are occurring in their wintering grounds to the south.

McKay reasons that if "bird watching can become a viable economic activity, the county will not be forced to take on some industry that might destroy a lot of habitat in order to create the economic gains the community so desperately needs."

She has received funding for a boardwalk that meanders over the sand dunes and through the edge of a maritime forest. There, people can unobtrusively watch birds feeding and resting before the next stage of their migrations. She's also helped start the Eastern Shore Birding Festival, which takes advantage of the region's unique geography.

vermillion flycatcher

In Northhampton County, nature-based tourism is just one example of the ways local communities are working toward economic development goals that promote economic security, environmental protection and social equity.

"The first time I ever heard of the idea of a zero discharge industrial facility was from one of the working watermen at a community meeting," explains Tim Hayes, economic development director for Northhampton County. "He said 'we need to convert our treatment plant into a zero emission treatment plant and recycle our fresh water.'"

Although the idea of industrial operations that produce no pollutants and recycle the materials produced as byproducts seems futuristic, the future has come to Northhampton County. The Port of Cape Charles is the home of the United States' first eco-industrial park, which will serve as a demonstration site for advanced facilities that incorporate resource efficiency and pollution prevention.


Alice Cole

The recent arrival of a small Swiss company that manufactures solar building systems has led to job skills training and new employment opportunities for local residents. Alice Cole is one of the first to benefit. She now has the first steady job of her life.

"They taught me how to do this work," says Cole. "I used to be on public assistance, but I have children, and there just wasn't work here on a regular basis. The only jobs I used to be able to get were seasonal. This is a real job."

The eco-industrial park is only the first in a series of changes Northhampton County and the Port of Cape Charles will see during the next few years. In pursuit of its goal to promote sustainability, the county also will address several other important local economic activities. Educational programs for local farmers have been designed to introduce techniques that reduce runoff pollution while sustaining high crop yields. Emerging seafood farming technologies and improved wastewater treatment strategies are being implemented. And in addition to nature-based tourism, the county is enhancing and marketing its historic and cultural sites.

It's sustainability in action, says Tim Hayes.

"People say that sustainability is a nice theory, but it will never be real, it will never work," he says. "And then I explain that actually, it does work. It's working here."

Story Four:
Building Urban Communities

"Community comes through
folks sharing tasks.
Laughing and crying,
celebrating and grieving
alongside one another.
That's how people come together.
It doesn't come through managed programs."

Marty Johnson
director
Isles, Inc.

Trenton, N.J.

Trenton's empty factories symbolize a city abandoned.

Rows and rows of windows in the red brick facades are broken. "For Lease" signs that look as though they've been there for decades are painted on the sides of some buildings. Refuse and polluted earth are piled high in some of the factory grounds. Freeways link the towers of state government in Trenton with the suburbs, allowing commuters to pass along the edge of the neglected city center at 60 miles an hour.

Trenton's middle-class population moved out to the new suburbs after World War II. Over the years, the city's factories gradually closed, moving south and then overseas. That's Trenton's story, but it's not unique. Throughout the nation, inner cities were abandoned to become places of decline and concentrated poverty.

Fortunately for Trenton, Princeton University is 20 miles to the north. There, Marty Johnson and a group of other students are studying development issues. They felt they had a responsibility to understand the conditions of inner cities in the United States and not just in less-developed countries.

Johnson lives with his family in Trenton. He runs Isles, Inc., a non-profit corporation that provides leadership and expertise for inner-city residents. The name, he says, refers to "isles of development" which eventually expand and join together.

Marty Johnson

Johnson's group got its start when a Trenton community group called the students for help. The group was trying to cope with a looming redevelopment project that would have changed the character of the community, replacing low-income, tenant-occupied housing with upper-income, market-rate housing.

"As we got to know the local players and began to spend more and more time with them, we started looking at other issues that were going on in the community, not necessarily related to housing," he says.

"For example, a vacant piece of city-owned land kept filling up with trash," he recalls. "The leadership of the local citizen group believed that success meant getting the city to come clean up the trash. We suggested they consider a more active use for the site to keep it trash free. If it was used to grow food, for example, it could be a real asset to the community instead of a liability. There was only one supermarket in the city of 90,000 people at that time. So, access to fresh produce that was affordable and high-quality was a real problem."

The residents' initial reaction, says Johnson, was deep skepticism.

"They thought we were crazy," he says, "that it wouldn't work, that folks who lived next to the garden wouldn't get involved, that dogs would destroy the plants, that children would destroy the crops, that the soil was too lousy and might even be contaminated."

The students were receptive to the concerns, says Johnson. The break came when a farmer donated topsoil and manure to the site.

"And sure enough, the next door neighbor stepped up and started growing some plants," he says. "And then their next door neighbors decided that since he was doing it, it was probably okay for them to do as well, and by the end of summer there was a flourishing garden on that site. And we started to think about the prospects of being able to replicate that in other places around the city alongside our work to promote and restore housing."

Johnson pulled out piles of color photos that document the evolution of trash-filled city lots to lush gardens. The neighborhood children crowd the fence when the horse and plow arrives to prepare the earth for planting. A farm near Trenton — where horses are kept as part of a working museum — was happy to send the team.

There are photographs of proud gardeners showing off their vegetables. Pictures of plots so full of string beans and sunflowers they make the apartment houses next door seem out of place. And grinning children holding shovels as tall as they are. Is this a farm or a city?

"Through getting involved, our young people can really learn," says Johnson. "Typical approaches to environmental education take an inner-city kid, put him on a bus and head out to pristine natural settings. They look around and they see what is considered to be the natural world. Then they are driven back into the inner city and are told that this is not the natural world."

Johnson says that for the children and residents of the area, the implications of a different approach are "tremendous."

"People need a level of control over their local environment," he notes. "So we develop environmental education programs that value what is here locally, that build upon what is here, and that give folks an ability to make a difference ultimately in the quality of life around them."

Johnson says community members talk about their community programs "in terms that relate more to their understanding of their neighbor than the types of produce that's grown." Residents are "grateful they know somebody who lives around the corner that they can call on in other situations. That's real important to them. It creates a higher level of self-satisfaction with the community, understanding that others share this common ground. The more common ground is built, the healthier our communities will be."

"People need a level of control over their local environment. So we develop environmental education programs that value what is here locally, that build upon what is here, and that give folks an ability to make a difference ultimately in the quality of life around them."

Marty Johnson

Johnson, who himself had relied at one time on public assistance, says there's a sense in Trenton's inner-city neighborhoods that "people need one another here — much more so than in a suburban setting."

Trenton neighborhood

Isles has two staff members who manage the group's community gardens program, providing "locally based groups with only enough assistance for them to succeed and no more," says Johnson. His group "had a real strong sense that the urban communities were capable of much more than they were given credit for at the time."

"This was back before folks talked about empowerment, back before folks talked about community development," he adds. "This is when people talked about the need to provide services to those 'at risk.' In that context, we appeared to be quite a bit more conservative than many of our brethren in the field of social change at the time."

As Isles expanded its community programs and worked with more and more residents, Johnson says he grew more confident "that our self-help orientation, rooted in local activities, was the right way to proceed."

"It's very difficult to understand the capacities that exist here when you're from the outside," he notes. "If you're a thinking, feeling person and you see children with bare feet on the sidewalks in the winter time, you say, my God, these people are victims and we need to help."

But he says that as he interacted and worked with folks, he learned that "the capacity of community members to help themselves was highly undervalued." Part of what Isles does in Trenton is "take young people who've been on the street corners for a couple years and get them into situations where they're ready and motivated to make changes in their lives." They train them in construction trades, "and perhaps even more importantly, spend nine months with these people in a peer-to-peer training environment where they're learning life skills."

"They're learning basic self-esteem, finding ways to support one another and learning teamwork," says Johnson. "Those are the kinds of skills that employers want."

In addition to building human skill assets, Isles is working to make Trenton communities as economically self-sufficient as possible.

"When I ask people why this community looks the way it does, they tend to say, well these folks are just too poor," he says. "When in reality, what's going on here is that we've got people paying a tremendous amount of money for apartments that are rat infested — a one bedroom home here costs almost 600 dollars a month. We have a lot of money coming into these communities. Where that money goes once it gets here is a big concern."

James and Louise Rolling also are learning how to build assets in their neighborhood. They live across the street from a now-abandoned factory building where car batteries were manufactured. When the factory was in operation, sulfuric acid emissions often forced them indoors to escape the fumes. After the plant closed — followed by years of being ignored by city government — Isles helped the Rollings and their neighbors develop a community plan for cleaning up the lead-contaminated soil, demolishing the building and creating things the community really needs: a playground, a grocery store and perhaps a neighborhood center.

James and Louise Rollings

"Isles helped us get organized, showed us how to conduct meetings and helped us develop ideas the neighbors liked," says James Rolling. "They introduced us to the mayor, which helped us get some action on the soil cleanup." The Rollings have an intense pride in what they have accomplished. At the same time, they are frustrated by the amount of time they know it's going to take to see their plans come to life. But they've made a start.

"It's asset creation that needs to happen here, achieved through promoting self-sufficiency," says Johnson. "That's what gives people real dignity. People want some justice, but they don't want to be served."

Epilogue

My sister Anne and I began our CD-ROM project in San Diego. Our goal was to document some of the most interesting examples of what people and communities are doing in the United States to resolve the disconnect between human activity and the environment. Our brother, Tom, has lived near San Diego, in Del Mar, Calif., for many years and we stayed at his house, just above the Del Mar beach.

We walked on the beach the evenings we were there, enjoying the last light in the sky. On the land side of the beach, houses had been built side by side on the sand, just above the high-tide line.

A major storm would push the ocean surf right through their living rooms. Each household had installed some form of barrier against the ocean — rocks or cement in front of their houses. But the protection would amount to little more than an insignificant obstacle for the forces of a real storm.

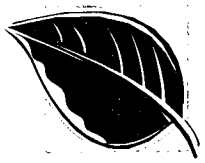
In the last 70 years, advances in engineering have allowed the American dream to take root in landscapes that don't naturally lend themselves to the kind of development being imposed on them. Equally disturbing is the rate at which many communities are transforming their most productive farmland into housing subdivisions, large-scale shopping areas and roadways.

Currently, many communities find themselves looking for new and appropriate land use. They're also searching for economic development strategies that recognize that humans also depend on the earth's complement of water, clean air and soil for their existence and well-being.

In the process of completing our project, we had the privilege and pleasure of meeting many community sustainability innovators. Although the people we met are just a few of the many across the United States currently working to build a new understand of their communities' futures, their stories are repeated in small towns and large cities across the country. I hope this brief introduction may lead you to discover or initiate similar activities in the place you call home.

Andrew Pearson

Resources



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Bank of America, "Beyond Sprawl: New Patterns of Growth to Fit the New California," Bank of America Inc., San Francisco, Calif., January 1995.

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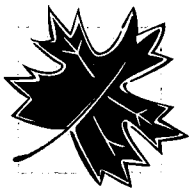
http://www.cyberg8t.com/wroberts/ehl/san_diego.html

Multiple Species Conservation Program — a comprehensive government habitat conservation planning program for southwestern San Diego County.
http://www.sannet.gov/mwwd/mscp/

San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program Working Group — a coalition of government agencies and nongovernmental organizations working to develop and implement a multiple species habitat conservation plan for San Diego county.
http://ice.ucdavis.edu/Ca.../
san_diego_multiple_species_conservation_program_working_group



Story Two: Cultivating Farm Communities

Jackson, Wes, "Becoming Native to This Place," Counterpoint, Washington, D.C., 1994.

Web Sites

The Land Institute — a nonprofit organization seeking to develop an agricultural system that will conserve soil resources while promoting prosperous and enduring communities.
http://funnelweb.utcc.utk.edu/~samuels/theland/tli.htm

Center for Rural Affairs — a nonprofit organization serving and advocating for America's farm families and rural communities.
http://www.cfra.org/

Story Three: Building Urban Community Assets

Walsh, Joan, "Stories of Renewal: Community Building and the Future of Urban America," a Rockefeller Foundation Report, Mahwah, N.J., January 1997.

Web Sites

Best Practices for Human Settlements — a searchable database with information about proven solutions to common problems facing the world's cities.
http://www.bestpractices.org/

Urban Ecology — a nonprofit research and education foundation that fosters the efficient and sustainable use of natural resources as a path to global security.
http://www.best.com/~schmitty/ueindex.shtml

Story Four: Natural Communities

Web Sites

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http://www.indigodev.com

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Reilly, Brian, "Encouraging Sustainable Communities," a Wingspread Conference Report by the Johnson Foundation, Racine, Wisc., 53401-0547, 1996.

Web Sites

Civic Practices Network — a nonpartisan project bringing together a diverse array of organizations and perspectives within the new citizenship movement.
http://www.cpn.org/

Joint Center for Sustainable Communities — a project of the National Association of Counties and the U.S. Conference of Mayors that supports local elected officials' efforts to promote sustainability.
http://www.usmayors.org/sustainable/

Nature Conservancy's Conservation Based Development Initiative — a program that helps communities build strategies to balance human development, economic development and environmental protection concerns.
http://www.explorecbd.org/stories

U.S. Department of Energy's Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development — a federal program providing information about land use planning, transportation, green buildings, municipal energy, sustainable business, disaster planning and rural issues.
http:/www.sustainable.doe.gov/ss/success.html

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Community-Based Environmental Protection Program — the home page of the EPA's Office of Sustainable Ecosystems and Communities.
http://www.epa.gov/ecocommunity/

Washington Department of Community Trade and Economic Development — a Washington state project providing success stories about communities pursuing economic prosperity and environmental protection as complementary goals.
http://www.wa.gov/cted/success2/

The Community Concept

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate.

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.

This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species. A land ethic cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.

In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such.

In human history, we learned that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves. . .

The ordinary citizen today assumes that science knows what makes the community clock tick; the scientists is equally sure he does not. He knows that the biotic mechanism is so complex that its workings may never fully be understood.

Aldo Leopold, "A Sand County Almanac," Oxford University Press, 1949.

The Izaak Walton League of America is a national conservation organization founded in 1922. Its members conserve, maintain, protect and restore the soil, forests, water and other natural resources of the United States. League members also promote means and opportunities for public education about these resources, their enjoyment and utilization.

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