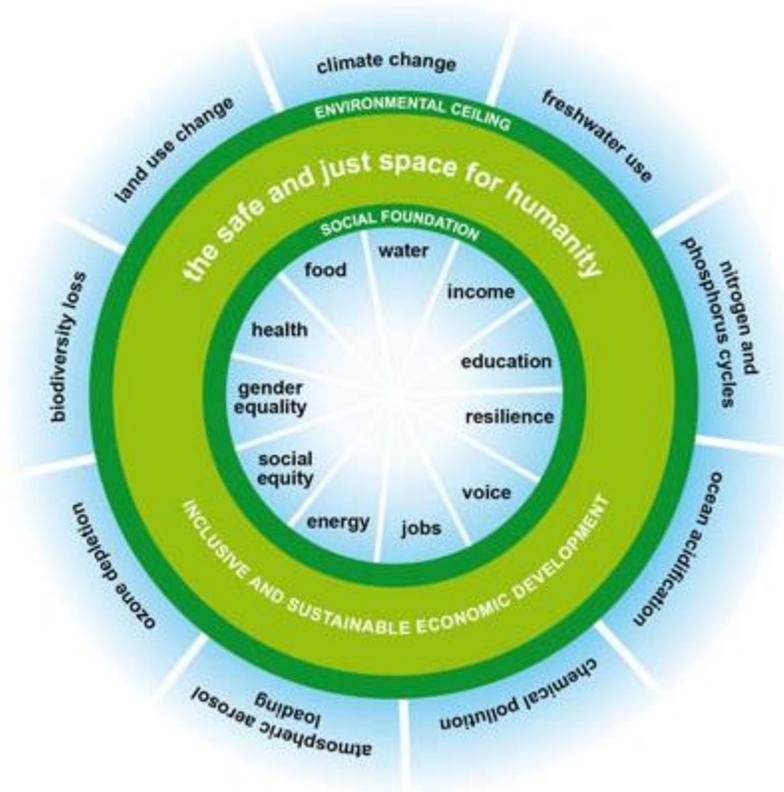




# JOHNS HOPKINS ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS

Student published from the Advanced Academic Programs, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences



## CUT THE SUSTAINABABLE: IS TRUE SUSTAINABILITY STILL POSSIBLE?

Posted by [Dan Kulpinski](#) on Thursday, April 25, 2013

The word “sustainable” has become so commonplace in recent years, it’s losing its meaning and impact in a cacophony of “sustainababble.” So argues Worldwatch Institute’s new report, “State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible?”, which aims to “expand and deepen discussion” of the term by specifying new ways to measure and implement true sustainability. The outlook is somewhat positive, but it won’t be easy to save much of the biosphere, give everyone access to the prerequisites for a decent life, and ensure that future generations will be able to meet their own needs.

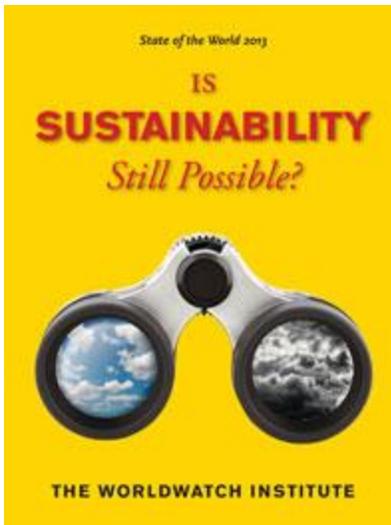


Image from Worldwatch Institute

“Sustainability means never having to say you’re sorry to the future,” Worldwatch President Robert Engelman said at the [press conference](#) for the report’s unveiling, April 16 in Washington, D.C. “The truth is we don’t approach climate change or any other environmental problem with this concern for the future.” He said society needs to “expose sustainababble” and “insist on a rigorous definition of sustainability.”

[The report](#) is certainly rigorous, with 34 chapters spanning 442 pages. The chapters are divided into three sections: Ways to measure environmental and social sustainability, actions society can take to attain true sustainability, and — in a bow to the reality of human nature — strategies to “make the best of it” if we continue to fail to make significant progress. ([View the table of contents and read the section intros here.](#))

In the second chapter, Carl Folke describes environmental sustainability as maintaining the human-friendly conditions of the last 10,000 years by staying within nine “planetary boundaries for critical biophysical processes,” including climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, nitrogen cycle, and ocean acidification. These boundaries describe “an envelope for a safe operating space for humanity.”

On the social side, in chapter three Kate Raworth sketches out an “inner boundary of resource use, a ‘social foundation’ below which lies unacceptable human deprivation.” This inner boundary consists of 11 human rights such as food, water, health care, education, energy, jobs, gender equity and more.

Using concentric circles to combine the set of environmental “outer” boundaries and social “inner” boundaries creates a doughnut shape (top of post), what Raworth calls “the safe and just space for humanity.” Worldwatch’s goal for sustainability is to create this space. (To learn more, visit Raworth’s blog on “[Doughnut Economics](#).”)

It sounds great, but moving to true sustainability will take major changes. The report’s recommendations include big ideas such as reengineering consumer cultures into cultures of sustainability, transforming corporations into planetary stewards, leaving dangerous fossil fuels in the ground, building a global moral consensus on environmental action, preparing for environmental refugees, and building resilience in people and communities.

After the press conference, I asked Tom Prugh, co-director of the report, where we should start. “Getting carbon under control is probably the single most important driver or imperative,” he said, noting that about 86 percent of the world’s energy comes from carbon sources. “That more than any other single factor is tipping the planet into this danger zone...Energy drives development and development is behind other problems like species extinction.”



Generating more energy via solar photovoltaic panels is likely to be among the first steps to true sustainability. (Creative Commons image “Solar panel 3” courtesy of [Photo Mojo Mike](#) on Flickr.)

I asked him which of the report’s recommended measures was likely to happen first. He pointed me to chapter 15, in which T.W. Murphy, Jr. assesses energy alternatives by using 10 criteria, including abundance, difficulty and efficiency – but not cost. All score lower than fossil fuels, but solar photovoltaic and solar thermal top the alternative chart. “Solar p-v is getting close to parity in some markets, like the East Coast,” noted Prugh, saying we need to get behind it and provide lots of capital to scale it up. The world faces the realities of climate change, population growth, and a growing global middle class that is demanding more natural resources and material goods. Is it too late to change our course, or is civilization on the path to a huge crash and decline?

At the press conference, science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson, who wrote the report’s final chapter, said, “The question is not is it too late, but how big are the losses going to be? How much are we going to save of the biosphere?...I think what we have to avoid is the idea that because the situation is dangerous therefore we are doomed...in evolutionary terms, the only reason we’re dominating the globe are [sic] because we’re good at cooperating and long-term planning.”

And with that there is hope that the strengths of our species will enable us to manage the mess we’ve gotten ourselves into. We have the ability to become sustainable through cooperation on a focused objective: The report notes the world has already met one Millenium Development Goal by cutting in half the number of people lacking access to safe water, as compared to 1990 levels. “[State of the World 2013](#)” is an excellent starting point to renew and reinvigorate progress toward true sustainability.

Do you think an environmentally and socially sustainable world is possible? How can we get there? Leave your comments below!

(Top image source: Oxfam 2012.)

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