



EDITORIAL

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Editorial on *Sustainability* e-Journal

As a member of the Advisory Board of *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy*, I am deeply encouraged by the launching of this new e-journal. The challenging endeavor of launching a new scholarly publication has been supported by an innovative partnership [between CSA, the National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBII), and Conservation International (CI)], who have put together a stellar board of editors to guide the journal as it develops a community of contributors and readers. The professionals, academics, and policymakers who have joined this effort are not only experts in their respective fields but are also committed to promoting productive debate on issues related to sustainability. The goal of the publication — *to establish a forum for cross-disciplinary discussion of natural and social sciences, practices, and policies related to sustainability* — is an important step toward creating achievable sustainable practices through buy-in and consensus.

Starting a journal like *Sustainability* is a critical undertaking. The very term “sustainability” is murky and difficult to define and will only evolve into a coherent discipline through well-informed debate. Disciplines feeding into the field, as well as professionals already examining its practices, come from highly diverse arenas. The beliefs and priorities from different sectors, countries, and cultures are equally divergent. For example, examining how to sustainably manage a large and complex coral reef environment will draw dramatically different views from fisheries managers, scientists, local and indigenous peoples, and political players. Action will not be possible unless all parties are willing to compromise to reach consensus. Such negotiation is a tedious process, which must be held in an open forum. *Sustainability* will be a model for this activity.

In setting its timing, content, and editorial standards, *Sustainability* will address multiple needs in the community of researchers and practitioners concerned with sustainable practices. First, by keeping its editorial focus, it will provide support for — indeed push — stakeholders to construct explicit descriptions of how they see specific problems in which current practices are clearly unsustainable. It is easier to identify a practice that is unsustainable than to identify the core sources of that unsustainability, much less which ones should be addressed

first to alter the practice. The problem often centers on defining the core conflicts in a way that is acceptable to all parties involved *and* that will lead toward a change in practices on the ground to enhance sustainability.

Sustainability will also address the need for a coherent, identifiable, and central forum for the diverse community of people working on sustainability solutions. Because studies of sustainable practice problems are, by nature, cross-disciplinary, stakeholders are forced to read and interpret language, models, and references that are outside their home domains. These differences in discourse styles and expectations can, more easily than we’d like to admit, lead to misinterpretation. Much time can be wasted talking about semantics while skirting the substantive issues at hand. The editors and reviewers of *Sustainability* are committed to helping authors articulate their perspectives and the tools they create in ways that will resonate with the broadest possible readership. The journal will be a stable and consistent setting where stakeholders can safely formulate a new, rich language of sustainability, one that exemplifies a broad range of disciplinary cultures. In so doing, the journal expects to become a truly valuable asset for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and others directly involved in studying sustainability problems and creating lasting solutions.

A third need the journal will fill is serving as a central forum for discussion through the Internet. The Internet now offers us the tools to create new virtual communities by providing multiple channels for sharing information and developing the forward boundaries of expert knowledge. In the past, many research institutions focused primarily on the conduct of science; the work of disseminating and providing access to their information was considered to some extent an “add on.” The actual “usability” of the information for those who did not create it was secondary. This historical reality very much parallels the way that early computers — and their instructional materials — were produced. However, just as interface designs and online help systems have now become the litmus tests for the viability of computer software, so have the accessibility and usability of scientific information, particularly that supported by government funds. Today, most government research agencies have grown to think of themselves as information facilitators; they are charged with helping stakeholders easily find, understand, and use

the information they produce. In launching this new journal, the partners are stepping forward as leaders, creating and disseminating the information and tools that are critical for understanding, and wisely managing, natural resources. Today, by mining the potential of the Internet, by creating new information technologies, and by supporting publications like *Sustainability*, we are broadening our role not only as an information provider, but also as a facilitator of information sharing and cross-disciplinary problem solving.

Of course, many communities of researchers have been reformed by the Internet, for instance in biomedicine, where centralized free bioinformatics resources like GenBank and PubMed have greatly added to the ability of the community to share and critique information. Without question, the connection between the National Institutes of Health and the National Library of Medicine (NLM) has been a powerful part of that growth. Through the NLM and its gateways, biomedical researchers can search in multiple systems for information from journals, drug trials, encyclopedic listings, toxicology references, book contents, data on clinical trials, abstracts from professional meetings, and dozens of other information resources. This cross searching has been built through collaborations of publishers, librarians, technology experts, and usability gurus to build user-friendly resources for researchers. Today, information providers and research institutions such as CSA, the NBII, and CI, are doing much the same with their collaborative resources. As the health of the environment becomes increasingly important in funding and political realms, the research community will increasingly turn to these powerful information resources to study the complex relationships between the health of the environment and that of human populations.

One way or the other, open access (which is not the same as free access) to scientific resources is inevitable. No doubt, it will take many years for institutions, publishers, librarians, authors, users (a.k.a., readers), and others to adjust to the new routes and costs of retrieving the information they need. Open access will certainly make all those involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of science more aware of how interdependent they are. *Sustainability* will play a central role in defining these components of community structure by presenting clearly written, robustly linked, and well-argued cross-disciplinary science in an open access forum.