The Sustainability Revolution

Where are we now? What do we have to know? What happens next?

By Viviane Simon-Brown

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

“May you live in interesting times.” This article offers a snapshot of our time, based on my interpretation of the 2012 UN Rio+20 work report The Future We Want, and the 2005 edition of Andres Edwards book, The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift. I would like to highlight five key points to know about the Sustainability Revolution; and identify internal stumbling blocks – and catalysts – for Cooperative Extension professionals involved in sustainability education.

Let me begin with the biggest picture possible, and the five key points.

KEY POINT ONE
We are in the middle of the most profound social transformation of our time – the sustainability revolution – and most of us don’t have a clue about its tremendous scope, or the roles we play within it. Think about the Scientific Revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the big names that came out of it – Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Voltaire, Rousseau, Linnaeus, and Locke. Consider the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, and its inventors – Wright Brothers, Ford, Watt, Whitney, Fulton, Edison, Nobel, Pasteur, Lister, Curie.

The Sustainability Revolution is as momentous. There are names associated with it too – McKibben, McDonough, the Dali Lama, Meadows, Robins, Dominguez, Bruntlandt, Hawken, Ray, Mother Teresa, Kumar, Durning, Schumacher, Shiva, Leopold, Macy, Fodor, Petrini – don’t recognize most of them? Don’t worry, 50 years from now, people will. Who knows? Our names could be on this list too.

KEY POINT TWO
The Sustainability Revolution is international in scope, covering all facets of society, including government, industry, the private sector, education, churches, and the arts. All socioeconomic backgrounds, nationalities, religions, and cultural affiliations are represented. You want numbers? Paul Hawken estimates there are 30,000 sustainability groups in the US, and tens of thousands worldwide. Social researcher Paul Ray estimates 50 million sustainability advocates in the US and 80-90 million in the European Union. In 1998, an internet search of the words “sustainable living” revealed three references to the term. This year, an internet search reveals 3.85 million.

Economists take note here: It has a multi-billion dollar economic impact. Ray states there’s a
$230 billion dollar market in the US and a $500 billion dollar market worldwide for sustainable products and services.

**Key Point Three**
Sustainability is often confused with only ecological concerns, but sustainability values represent the broadest context of issues – that literally have spread underground in all sectors of society throughout the world.

Expand your vision of sustainability to include conservation, globalization, socially responsible investing, corporate reform, ecolliteracy, climate change, human rights, population growth, health, biodiversity, labor rights, social and environmental justice, community-supported agriculture, local currency, invasive species, conflict resolution, women’s rights, public policy, trade, and organic farming. While not a complete list, these topics are familiar since Extensionists are involved in every one of these.

**Key Point Four**
While there is no one single ideology, there are remarkable similarities among sustainability groups in their overall intentions and objectives. These include:

1. Concern for the environment, the economy, and social equity; the triple-win, the triple bottom line, the sustainability triangle, the nested model
2. An understanding that our survival and well-being are dependent on the health of natural systems – clean air, clean water, healthy soils and forests, biodiversity
3. Knowledge of the limits of the Earth’s ecosystems and the detrimental impact of unchecked human activities – such as unchecked population, pollution, economic growth
4. Groups all over the world are taking long-term, intergenerational actions and goals

Are you reeling with the immensity of it all? Are you wondering how all of this could be going on without you, an informed Extension professional, knowing about it?

**Key Point Five**
Leadership is decentralized. Leadership within the sustainability revolution is made up of hundreds of thousands of citizens and community leaders from around the world. Paul Hawken says it best: “No one started this worldview, no one is in charge of it, no orthodoxy is restraining it. It is unrecognizable to the American media because it is not centralized, not based on power, nor led by charismatic white males.”

**What Do We Have to Know?**
We have to know where Cooperative Extension fits into this picture. What’s working against us? As an organization, our collectively-conservative ethics make it difficult for Extensionists – and our traditional audiences – to acknowledge the veracity of other groups’ worldviews. As a group, generally, Extension folks don’t consistently model sustainable practices.
Sustainability as an overarching concept is rarely an Extension priority. Our program area structure doesn’t support truly multidisciplinary endeavors. We work on one to three year cycles, not 20 to 100 years. And then, there are the dwindling budgets….

However, I submit that Extension has ingrained cultural values which can greatly benefit our sustainability outreach efforts. We promote frugality, family cohesiveness, land stewardship; these are Extension versions of sustainable practices. We have an established presence in most areas of the United States. The new outreach guidelines for large federal grants give Extension a larger platform. We have multiple technologies for distributing needed programming.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?
Our clientele – both traditional and new – are hungry for a ‘revolutionary, science-based, paradigm shift’ organization like ours to help them sort through the myriad of conflicting messages. Extension will not be the only source of trustworthy information – we don’t have an exclusive franchise on knowledge – but we can establish ourselves as one of the key players.

It’s up to individuals within Extension to make this happen. The recent Extension Sustainability Summit in Park City, Utah, is an excellent example of Extensionists seeing a need and following through. The National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE) is another catalyst for change. We can no longer wait for a system-wide mandate. We can make a positive difference if we incorporate the five key points of the Sustainability Revolution.

CONCLUSION
In 2000, an international committee, The Earth Charter Initiative (see next page for the preamble to the Charter), crafted a comprehensive, cross-cultural, multidimensional approach to presenting values for worldwide acceptance. I propose that its spirit be included in our deliberations.

**Preamble to the Earth Charter**

We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future.

As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise.

To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.

To read the complete charter, visit http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html