A Question of Size

BY GARY CHILSON
Paul Smith's College

The Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies (AJES) has, since its inception in 1994, championed sustainable development within the region. The phrase has been useful but, in trying to operationalize the concept, it has become increasingly clear that its meaning is far too ambiguous. We have learned that two new phrases are preferable: developing sustainable communities at the local/regional level or developing sustainable societies at the national level. These phrases put the emphasis on sustainability rather than on development. Regardless of the level, efforts at developing sustainability require us to recognize the importance of size.

Before abandoning sustainable development for its superior alternatives we should acknowledge its significant contributions. The phrase was introduced to the world by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development (UNCED) in their 1987 report, Our Common Future. The report concluded that economically depressed regions, particularly those experiencing rapid population growth, pose environmental and social threats to themselves as well as to the well-being of future generations around the world. Thus the report's definition of sustainable development: a strategy of human culture to meet the needs of the current generation without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

To my way of thinking, the phrase achieved two very important objectives. First, it enabled us to explicitly recognize and discuss the idea that a society's failure to address the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation would ultimately lead to the society's collapse. Second, it enabled formerly disparate groups, like advocates for the environment, economic development, social justice and world peace, to recognize their overlapping interests.

While the first objective is what sustainable development is all about, the second objective actually depended upon the ambiguity of the phrase. Environmentalists could see sustainability as congruent with their ecological concerns while peace and social justice interests could recognize their economic and equity concerns as important parts of the solution as well. Because each could see in the phrase their own interests reflected, the power of cooperation has subsequently launched thousands of sustainable development policies, programs, and projects around the world.

These efforts to put the phrase into concrete action at local and regional levels, where such efforts must be made, have frustrated everyone. At a global and theoretical level, sustainable development could be accepted as useful despite its inherent impossibility at the level where people actually live. Like jumbo shrimp, sustainable development is an oxymoron.

Development, usually measured in economic variables and meaning growth in ecologically damaging material and energy throughputs, can not be continued indefinitely while sustaining the ecological integrity of local ecosystems or the cultural integrity of local social systems. Clearly, there is both a biophysical and a socio-cultural limit to sheer scale. Thus a revision in the phrase is emerging to specify the strategy as developing sustainable communities instead of sustaining development.

Critical to understanding the development of sustainable communities are
two interrelated ideas. First, an appreciation of a community’s size in terms of the quantity of throughputs within the confines of the supporting ecological and social systems that establish the community’s environment. Second, that communities can develop in ways other than by larger and larger amounts of energy and material throughputs. To sustain our communities within the confines of our social and ecological environment, ecological economics teach us that development should be redefined as an improvement in the quality of life rather than an increase in the quantity of throughputs. Furthermore, we have found that a more equitable distribution of an existing flow of energy and material throughputs does far more to improve the quality of life for a community than simply increasing the size of the flow.

Determining the optimal size of a community is not an established scientific process. Ecologists have yet to quantify the ecological carrying capacity of our economic demands. The problems inherent in making such calculations are primarily centered around defining a community’s shifting and multiple boundaries, the constantly changing impact of market forces, and determining the environment’s accumulative and restorative capacities. Nevertheless, the people actually living within the community have a pretty good sense of how big their community should be. For example, few if any people living in Lake Placid, a regional growth center, would want their community to be five times larger or about the size of Plattsburgh. At the same time, they might think a little larger than it already is would be okay. Unfortunately, that acceptance of an incremental increase in population, coupled with our natural adaptability and complacency, leads inexorably to a growth in the size of the community. We get used to each larger size and think a little larger is still okay.

It is time to begin a serious discussion about how big we want our small towns and villages in the Northern Forest to actually become. Some communities, I suggest, are big enough and shouldn’t get bigger. The many and varied advantages of a community near its optimal size are lost with continued growth in population. The benefits of the larger community that accrue to the few simply do not overcome the added costs in terms of ecological and cultural degradation for the many.

Within the Northern Forest and the Adirondacks especially, a no-growth policy for those communities that democratically choose to limit their population size would work to their advantage as well as to the benefit of those communities that still seek an increase in their populations. Appropriate land use controls can encourage growth in the hamlets while limiting sprawl in the surrounding area. Thus if Lake Placid and North Elba Township, for example, chose to limit its ultimate population size to sustain the community’s quality of life, undersized communities nearby would enjoy the benefits of additional growth. Development in the no growth community would then take a different form than simply growing bigger. Like a child reaching their mature height, no longer developing physically in size, yet still developing mentally for the rest of their life, communities reaching their optimum size could sustain the values of their small town character while developing their quality of life sustainably in nonphysical ways.

In this issue of the AJES, Mike Wilson presents the results of a social and environmental indicators that demonstrate the similarity of Northern Forest counties across northern New York and New England and measures an important form of wealth. Jack Elliot discusses the results of his survey of rustic furniture makers in the Adirondacks. Curt Stager examines the impact of reclamation on Black Pond’s water quality. Tim Scheaffer presents some lessons to be learned in cooperative watershed management from the Catskills. Mary Rutley completes the second of her two-part discussion of black flies and the use of Bti, a biological control technique. Also, we are pleased to show the art of Mike Storey and Tim Fortune.

Finally, I invite you to read about the expansion of the AJES’ regional focus beyond just the Adirondacks to include the entire Northern Forest and, coming soon, the availability of fully searchable articles in the archives on the Web.

Comments?
Please direct your comments, suggestions or ideas for material for AJES to Gary Chilson, Editor, Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies, Paul Smith’s College, Paul Smiths NY 12970, chilsog@paulsmiths.edu.


Bald Eagle
Drawing by Mike Storey