3. Sustainability - What Is It?



Sustainability often brings to mind thoughts about recycling, green infrastructure, electric vehicles, **renewable energy**, **circular economies** and high-tech green futures. Moreover, the definition of sustainability can be variable depending on who is defining it and it can be conflated with concepts like sustainable development (which is related but different). For example, read the selection of definitions below and reflect on the key questions that follow:

1. “sustainabile development is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” - United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission 1987)
2. sustainability is staying within the ‘safe operating space’ of the 9 planetary boundaries within which humanity can survive, develop and thrive for generations to come. These include climate change, biosphere integrity, biogeochemical flows, land system change, freshwater change, ocean acidification, chemical pollution and novel entities (plastics), stratospheric ozone depletion, and atmospheric aerosol loading (Rockstrom, 2009; van Vuuren etal 2025)
3. “transformative sustainability ignites a deep sense of interpersonal connection with place, fostering an engagement, both affective and cognitive, with the material and cultural contexts and realities as well as the communities, constituting the place they are situated in” (Maison 2022)
4. “critical sustainability recognizes the material and ecological necessities that sustain all life on the planet, while also acknowledging and seeking out sociopolitical orientations

that support dignity, equity, respect, and rights for all parties." (Rose and Cachelin 2018)

To compare these definitions, try to answer the following key guiding questions and discuss with others joining you in this module:

Key Guiding Questions (condensed)

- What are the differences and similarities across these definitions?
- How are 'needs' or 'necessities' conceived across definitions?
- Reflect on who is defining each (what is their **positionality**) and why does that matter?
- What vision of the world is being sustained?
- Do any of these bring us closer towards **collective liberation** and how?

Mainstream sustainability is broadly conceived as the practice of living on planet earth in a way that minimizes depletion of 'natural' resources and minimizes pollution so that future generations are not compromised. This conception of sustainability tends to center the environmental dimension, which has led to provocative critical analyses from Indigenous studies (McGregor etal 2020), political ecology (Brito-Millan et al 2023), environmental humanities (Blanco et al 2024), economics (Biermann and Rakhyun 2010), and science and technology studies (Turnhout 2022) fields (amongst others).
Even though, sustainability is a recent term that became popularized in the last half century, 'sustainable' human practices and lifeways have existed throughout history across cultures around the world. There are a myriad of flavors of sustainability (even though, they are not called sustainability – a good question is why?) where people have cultivated strong interdependent, responsible relations with their surroundings and with **more-than-human** kin to embody a profound model of sustainability. A few examples include stewardship (Kyle Whyte), kinship (Kyle Whyte), caretaking (Tallbear), buen vivir (Kawsak Sacha), ecological swaraj, ubuntu, and architects of abundance (Lyla June).

> **circular economy** = an economic model that seeks to make consumption sustainable by emphasizing reuse, recycle, repair, sharing, leasing and minimizing disposability to shift production and consumption into a circular cycle (rather than a linear process that ends in waste and pollution). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circular_economy

> **renewable energy** = energy derived from 'natural sources' that do not run out, such as solar, wind, tides, geothermal heat; however, the technology needed to harness these are often built from finite sources (including fossil fuels) (Hoodwinked in the Hothouse zine https://climatefalsesolutions.org/welcome/)

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positionality = the social, political and cultural context that shapes a persons identity and perspective, influencing how they engage with and interpret the world around them (including research); “Positionality is about our relationships between each other, the origins and formations of our ideas and knowledge, and the actions we credit to ourselves and others. ” https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/introduction-cultural-anthropology/positionality https://www.commonground.org.au/article/what-is-positionality also see section on positionality in next section.

Caretaking relations, not American dreaming

K TallBear - Kalfou, 2019 - search.proquest.com

Indigenous environmental justice: Anti-colonial action through kinship

K Whyte - Environmental justice, 2020 - taylorfrancis.com

more-than-human = sentience, agency, purpose, emotion, intelligence and spirituality that includes and goes beyond co-dwelling of multiples species on our planet

https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/what-is.php?t=more-than-human-world-definition

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