

Opinion & Analysis

Debunking the myths surrounding sustainability



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Living in a sustainable manner is not a new idea, but there is still confusion about what that concept entails

ONE ENVIRONMENTAL buzzword that seems to be well-known and misunderstood in almost equal measure is sustainability. In the morass of eco-complexity, you would think we could all at least agree on what being sustainable means? Then again, perhaps not.

For all its new-found trendiness, sustainability is hardly a novel concept. For instance, among the six nations of the Iroquois in North America, tribal elders were required to weigh the impact of major decisions for a full seven generations ahead.

Providing for our great-great grandchildren somehow seems quaint in our age of instant gratification and conspicuous consumption. And lest you think the recession has caused us to jettison these narcissistic values, tune in to *The Apprentice* on TV3, and watch Bill Cullen lovingly stroking the bonnet of his Bentley before buzzing off in a helicopter. As the old joke goes: what did posterity ever do for me?

History, however, is littered with the fragments of civilisations that, by failing to plan ahead and use their resources prudently, overreached their natural limits and were wiped out. Easter Island and the Maya civilisation in Mexico are just two famous examples. To help step lightly through this

ethical minefield, here, with help from *Scientific American*, is a guide to the 10 most common myths about sustainability.

1. Nobody knows what sustainability really means. This is clearly not the case. In 1987, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland commission) produced an influential report that defined sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. There is, however, nothing implicitly “green” about this definition.

2. Sustainability is all about the environment. The Brundtland report was originally more focused on finding ways to allow poorer countries to catch up with richer ones in terms of living standards. However, concerns over resource exhaustion have in the last two decades become far more acute. As author and entrepreneur Paul Hawken puts it: “We have an economy where we steal the future, sell it in the present and call it GDP.”

3. Sustainable is code for green. We commonly use the term green to describe a way of life that favours the purely natural over the artificial. Last week, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Change and Energy

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Security proposed converting much of the Irish car fleet to electric by 2020. To be truly green, Simon Coveney et al should of course be on their bikes. Sustainability on the other hand recognises that for most of us, the idea of going back to nature is a pipe dream. The same applies to nuclear power: sustainable? By and large, yes. Green? Anything but.

4. It's really about recycling. Yes, recycling is a good idea. After all, in nature, the typical recycling rate is 100 per cent, which is both energy-efficient and also neatly avoids the problem of waste. However, sorting your cardboard and dropping your empty Chilean chardonnay bottles down to the recycling centre in your Range Rover should not for a

moment be confused with sustainable living. That's really just for show.

5. Being sustainable costs too much. A recent *Irish Daily Mail* newspaper headline on a report from the INTO conference, read: “teachers despair that as class sizes increase [the Minister] puts money into energy-saving initiatives”. The absurdity implicit in this statement is that, somehow, energy itself is either cheap or free, so why waste money saving it? The Du Pont Corporation cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 72 per cent over 1990 levels, netting them \$2 billion in cost savings.

6. Sustainability means we'll all be poorer. This is another shibboleth that evaporates under close scrutiny. The US Green New Deal is a massive job creation programme, for example.

7. Leave change to consumers and activists, not politicians. The scale of the challenges we face mean that while personal responsibility has a role, the really big stuff, like fuel-efficiency standards and taxing carbon can only be done at national, EU or via binding global agreements. That's why our politicians are the most important players, and activists need to target them, rather than navel-gazing about their own personal virtue.

8. Technology to the rescue! Some clever technology can help, but it's no silver bullet. Smart sensors that cut down on wasted energy are a case in point. Genuine sustainability requires permanent changes in our lifestyles, with a shift away from the cult of consumerism.

9. Sustainability all boils down to population. Without doubt, sheer pressure of human numbers makes all efforts at reducing our collective footprint on the planet much more difficult, but consider that just four million Irish people gobble up the same resources as around 120 million in sub-Saharan Africa. How sustainable, never mind equitable, is that?

10. Living sustainably is easy. Far from it. What looks like the right thing to do can often be disastrous. The EU's embrace of biofuels is a regrettable case in point. Are Irish-grown tomatoes more sustainable than importing them from Spain? Politically correct answers to these conundrums are regularly wrong.

Sustainability is clearly anything but straightforward. As the *Scientific American* article concludes: “the admirable goal of living sustainably requires plenty of thought on an ongoing basis”. (Earth 3.0, *Scientific American*, Vol 19, Number 1, 2009)