



Sustainability is a diverse, global movement in society, economics, environment, and higher education. It is a complex term, as its meaning can differ from place to place and from person to person.

At Lakehead University, sustainability is being considered in a pluralistic and inclusive way, encompassing human and ecological health, social justice and equity, Indigenous rights, secure livelihoods, workplace wellbeing, and leadership for vibrant and resilient communities.

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development published *Our Common Future*, a report that coined perhaps the most frequently cited definition of sustainability:

“sustainability is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

This report is known worldwide as the Brundtland Report.

Since then, the concept of sustainability has often included the three pillars of ecological health, economic fairness or improved standard of living, and social and cultural wellbeing. This ethos emphasizes that sustainability is more than “environmental stewardship,” although the latter is an important facet. For a society to be living sustainably, therefore, it must operate in a manner that does not exhaust ecological, economic, and social resources to the disadvantage of human and all other living beings. To be sustainable, this ethos must be practised in perpetuity.

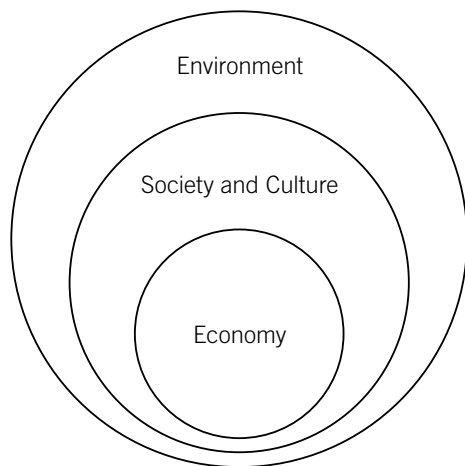
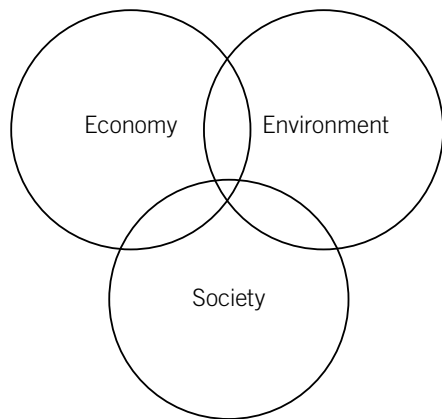


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Several diagrams¹ have been created over the past couple of decades to illustrate sustainability. The top diagram below depicts the three interconnecting pillars. The area where the circles overlap is where sustainability is achieved. The bottom diagram below depicts, again, the interdependence of the pillars. However, it further emphasizes how the economy, and society and culture, ultimately depend on the health of the environment.

These schematics have undergone various representations over time. In recent years, some representations have illustrated “culture”, or “human”, as a fourth pillar of its own.



¹ Learn more about these [diagrams](#).

Indigenous Worldviews and the Notion of Reciprocity¹

Indigenous worldviews and ways of being can have profound influences on how sustainability is understood and practiced. Further, major sustainability challenges impact Indigenous communities and Indigenous communities have been leaders on the frontlines of protecting ecological and human health. Principles akin to sustainability have been practiced in many Indigenous communities long before the term sustainability entered popular discourse.

A worldview is the collective conceptual outlook of a culture and it is the common property of the culture's members. To open our minds to other ways of knowing sustainability, talking circles were convened between members of the Ogimaawin-Aboriginal Governance Council, Indigenous students, members of the University's Elder's Council, and with Indigenous faculty and staff designated by the Office of Indigenous Initiatives. During these talking circles, participants discussed the limitations of the word “sustainability” which is often narrowly defined as finding environmentally responsible ways to continue economic development as long as possible.

It is important to note that like all worldviews, Indigenous worldviews are not static, but evolving and changing in the context of the globalized world. Like all worldviews, Indigenous worldviews throughout the world differ from one another based on their unique sense of place; nonetheless one commonality is that they are often relational in nature. For example, the Anishinaabeg recognize the interconnection and interdependence of all

¹ Borrowed from Lakehead University's 2019-2024 Sustainability Plan, page 6.



living things. Like a spider's web, when one string is tugged in an ecosystem, all others resonate. This concept is represented in the Anishinaabeg protocol "All my relations" that expresses that we are all related and must be respectful to these inter-relationships².

The notion of "reciprocity" perhaps suggests a more holistic outlook than "sustainability." Reciprocity invites each one of us to live in relationship with the land, or in the words of Pottawatomi scholar and author Robin Wall Kimmerer, to be "partners in renewal"³. Kimmerer says the concept of reciprocity is founded not on what more we can ask of the Earth and its inhabitants, but rather, what we can give back. This shift in emphasis calls upon humans to recognize the personhood of all living things as living beings, and in doing so, consider them as voices equal to ours. In Anishinaabeg worldviews, humans are not exceptional, but are of equal value to other living beings from which they can also learn⁴.

To live in a reciprocal relationship with the Earth, we must know the language of our place. In the words of Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete⁵:

2 Bell, N. (2013). Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin: Living spiritually with respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility. In A. Kulnieks, D. Longboat, & K. Young (Eds.), *Contemporary studies in environmental and Indigenous pedagogies: A curricula of stories and place* (pp. 89-109). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

3 Kimmerer, R. W. (2014). Returning the gift. *Minding Nature*, 7(2), 18-24.

4 Kimmerer, R. W. (2014). Returning the gift. *Minding Nature*, 7(2), 18-24.

5 Cajete, G. (2000). *Native science: Natural laws of interdependence*. Santa Fe, N.M: Clear Light Publishers.

[First Nations] peoples through long experience and participation with their landscapes have come to know the language of their places. In learning this language of the subtle signs, qualities, cycles and patterns of their immediate environments and communicating with their landscapes [First Nations] people also come to know intimately the "nature" of the places which they inhabit. Learning the language of place and the "dialects" of its plants, animals, and natural phenomena in the context of a "home-land" is an underlying foundation of Native science.

We recognize that Indigenous worldviews move us towards a deeper notion of sustainability, which is especially important given that popular notions of sustainability have been formulated by white settlers with Eurocentric worldviews. If we are to embrace a form of sustainability that upholds tenets of social justice and equity, then it is necessary to learn from Indigenous nations. Given the history of our country, and even the framework of our institution, doing so is not without its challenges; it will take time, willingness to listen and engage, and radical change. But change is possible, and considering the stresses on Mother Earth at present, imperative.



Unpacking the Terms

Let's revisit the definition of sustainability at Lakehead University: sustainability is considered in a pluralistic and inclusive way, encompassing human and ecological health, social justice and equity, Indigenous rights, secure livelihoods, workplace wellbeing, and leadership for vibrant and resilient communities.

A closer look at these terms will help unpack what sustainability looks like.



Human and Ecological Health

The earth's ecosystems exist in a healthy balance in which humans and other living beings are able to thrive interdependently. The gifts of the Earth (land, water, air, etc.) are consumed in a capacity that allows them to regenerate in a manner that does not disturb the balance of the ecosystems.

Social Justice and Equity

Basic needs and human rights of all people are met. Society operates with leaders who promote equity among all peoples; this is reflected in its laws and policies. People have shared privileges and do not fear discrimination based on their ethnicity, age,

gender, sexual orientation, culture, size, physical ability, mental ability, class, and so on. Cultural heritage, crafts, and traditions are protected.

Indigenous Rights

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-government, and are equal to other peoples. Treaties are upheld and honoured; Indigenous peoples have access to ancestral lands and resources, and their cultural heritage, languages, and religions are preserved.

Secure Livelihoods

The economic system operates in a manner that ensures financial stability for all peoples. All human communities have equitable access to financial resources and can exist interdependently; the standard of living is equitably distributed.

Workplace Wellbeing

Employees are given a living wage and compensated equitably. Health and safety standards are met in the workplace, and wellness programs are accessible. The workplace is amenable to employees, and employees maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Leadership for Vibrant and Resilient Communities

Individuals take action in their daily life to support and nurture a culture of sustainability.

Leadership for vibrant and resilient communities is critical to achieving a world that is sustainable. Creating a culture of sustainability involves a shift in behaviours and values, and is not without its challenges. It requires individuals and communities to be active agents, who, when working together, advocate for change with local-to-global impacts.



The Office of Sustainability

The Office of Sustainability is dedicated to nurturing a culture of sustainability at Lakehead University on both of its campuses. This is demonstrated in the 2019-2024 Sustainability Plan, developed in collaboration with the Sustainability Stewardship Council and Sustainability Executive Advisory Committee.

The Office of Sustainability integrates sustainability into the Academics, Operations, Engagement, and Planning and Administration of the University. Integrating sustainability into these sectors contributes to the goal of placing Lakehead University as a leader in sustainability, and by extension, models an ethos of sustainability to its employees, students, and broader community.

For more information, please contact the Sustainability Coordinator at coordinator.sustainability@lakeheadu.ca



The movement has three basic roots: environmental activism, social justice initiatives, and Indigenous cultures' resistance to globalization.

Collectively, it expresses the needs of the majority of people on earth to sustain the environment, wage peace, democratize from the bottom up, and improve lives—women, children, and the poor.

~ Paul Hawken

Gratitude propels the recognition of the personhood of all beings and challenges the fallacy of human exceptionalism—the idea that we are somehow better, more deserving of the wealth and services of the Earth than other species.

The evolutionary advantage for cultures of gratitude is compelling. This human emotion has adaptive value, because it engenders practical outcomes for sustainability. The practice of gratitude can, in a very real way, lead to the practice of self-restraint, of taking only what we need.

~ Robin Wall Kimmerer



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