

**Signature Question:** How do people understand and create a more sustainable world?

**Definition of sustainability:**

Sustainability is a dynamic process which enables all people to realize their potential and improve their quality of life in ways which simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth's life support systems.

--UK's Forum for the Future, 2006

**UW Oshkosh Essential Learning Outcome for Sustainability:**

*Knowledge of sustainability and its applications* is the ability to understand local and global Earth systems, the qualities of ecological integrity and the means to restore and preserve it, and the interconnectedness of ecological integrity, economic well-being, and social justice, in order to analyze complex environmental, economic, and social issues and to respond effectively to them.

**Introduction**

Why have we made sustainability one of our Essential Learning Outcomes for students at UW Oshkosh? And why is it one of the three signature questions that the University Studies Program (USP) is organized around? This is because we recognize that as an institution of higher education it is our responsibility to provide you with the skills, knowledge, and perspective to effectively deal with the challenges of a 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Sustainability is widely recognized as one of these challenges. Knowledge of sustainability and its applications will not only make you more attractive to employers- it will make you an informed citizen who recognizes your responsibility to the communities, current and future, of which you are a part.

This transfer experience is designed to help you develop a greater understanding of sustainability and the skills and knowledge necessary to respond to sustainability issues.

## **Step 1: Contemplating ecological limits**

Sustainability asks that we acknowledge our connection to our natural environment and the impact we have on this environment. It requires that we consider our resource use, as individuals and as societies, and whether our resource use is outstripping the ecological limits of the planet. The “ecological footprint” is one way of measuring our impact on the environment and its implications for sustainability.

1. Please visit the Global Footprint Network and learn a bit about the ecological footprint and how it is calculated and used by exploring the link for “Footprint Basics”:

<http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/>

and by watching this video:

[http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/gfn/page/video\\_overshoot\\_explained/](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/gfn/page/video_overshoot_explained/)

2. Now, calculate your own personal ecological footprint at the following link. Make sure that you explore the ways you can reduce your ecological footprint once you’re done with the calculation:

<http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/calculators/>

3. Please reflect upon the following questions:

What were the results for your ecological footprint? Did these results surprise you? What is one concrete action you could take to reduce this footprint? Is there anything that makes it difficult for you to take such concrete action?

## **Step 2: But sustainability is about more than ecological limits!**

When asked the question, “What is sustainability?” most people focus on environmental issues and concerns. This is certainly a central component of sustainability, as we explored above. However, sustainability is about more than this- it is about how we can promote human well-being and quality of life, for all people, while also living within the ecological limits of this planet. But what do we mean by this, exactly? What is quality of life? How do we measure something like this?

1. Please watch the following TED talk:

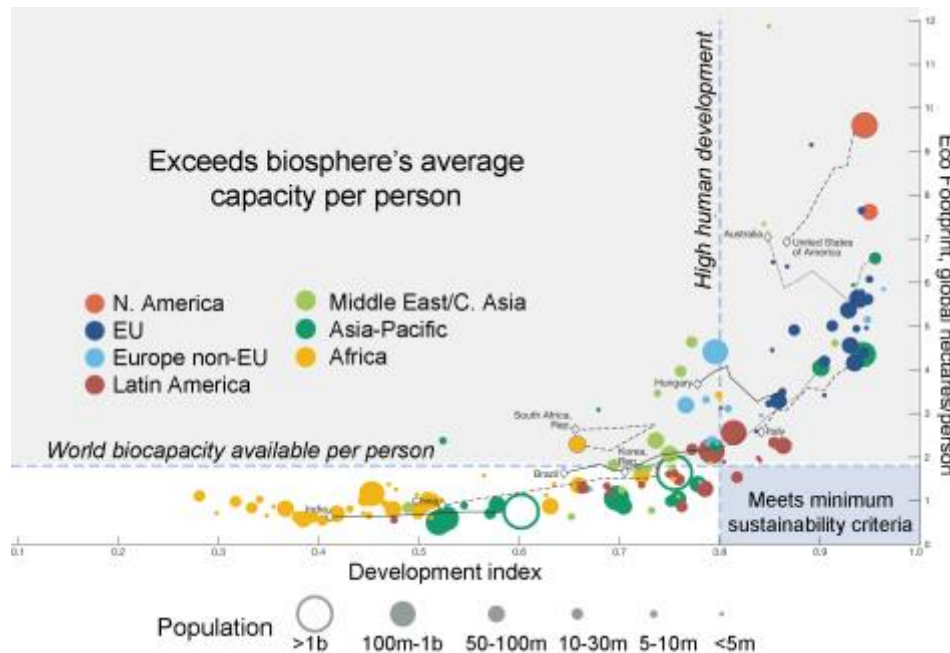
[http://www.ted.com/talks/nic\\_marks\\_the\\_happy\\_planet\\_index.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/nic_marks_the_happy_planet_index.html)

2. After you’re done, go to the website for the Happy Planet Index (<http://www.happyplanetindex.org/>) and click on “About the Happy Planet Index”. Read through the material you find there.

3. Now, please write a brief essay (about 2 paragraphs) focused on the following questions:

How do you think the Happy Planet Index and the definition of sustainability provided at the beginning of this packet are related to one another? If you had to create your own definition or measure of a sustainable society, what would it include? What factors do you think we need to consider?

4. Now examine this graph. It is similar to one from the video that plots the ecological footprint against the Happy Planet Index, except this one uses the United Nations Human Development Index (which combines education, life expectancy, and income into a single measure of well-being). Each circle represents a country. Examine the general distribution of countries in the graph, and locate the United States.



4. Now, please write a brief essay (about 2 paragraphs) focused on the following questions:

Why do you think it is not considered sustainable for countries to have a small ecological footprint if they also have a low human development index (for example, many African countries)? Why do you think there is such disparity in the distribution of countries (many that score high on human development but also have large ecological footprints, and vice versa)? Why do you think there are so few countries falling in the box (in the lower right hand corner of the graph) that represents the “minimum sustainability criteria”?

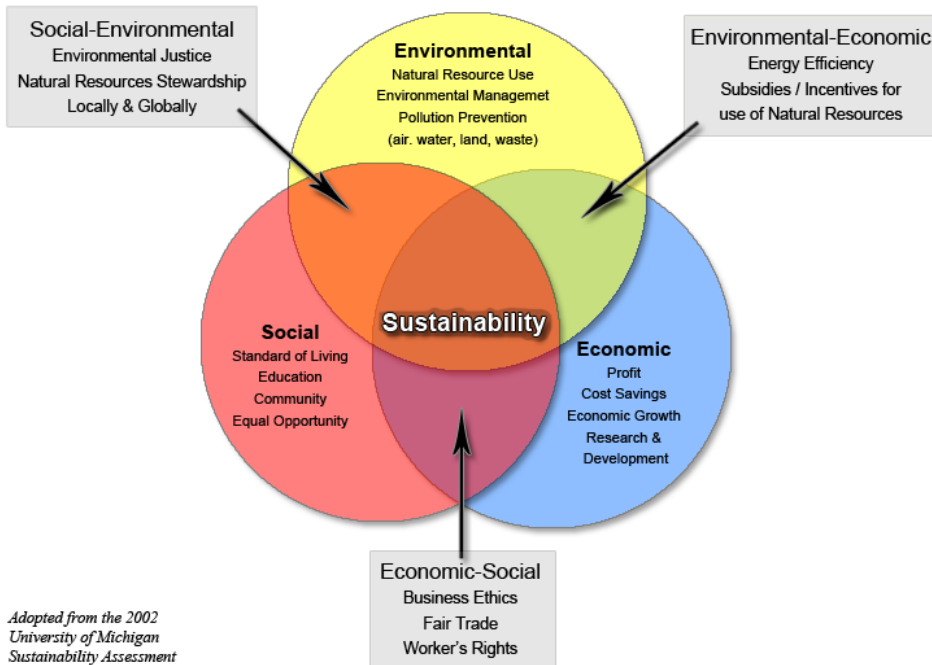
### Step 3: Interconnectedness of the environment, economy, and society

As we explored above, sustainability is not just about the environment, and it is not just about human economic and social well-being. It is about acknowledging the deep interconnections between these three components of human societies, and learning to consider issues and problems from this perspective.

1. Please read the following article provided to you: Edwards (2012), “Moving beyond green.” Focus especially on the three aspects of sustainability- the “triple bottom line”- and the role of universities in advancing sustainability.

2. Examine the diagram below, and reflect on the article you just read. Why do you think that considering all three components- social, environmental, and economic- is such a central part of sustainability?

### *The Three Spheres of Sustainability*



3. Now choose one concrete aspect of our campus community. This can include buildings and grounds, food, energy, things sold in the campus bookstore- for example, Horizon Village, the coffee sold at Mi Taza, the t-shirts sold in the campus bookstore, the number of parking spaces offered on campus- the list goes on. Write a short essay (2-3 paragraphs) addressing the following questions:

What are the social, economic, and environmental implications of this action or item (be sure to consider all three)? When viewed through the lens of sustainability, how does this item or action fare? What is at least one way our campus could improve the sustainability of this item or action?

4. Attend a campus event that is related to sustainability (Fall semester: Earth Charter; Spring semester: Earth Week). After the event, write a brief essay (2 paragraphs) reflecting on the following questions:

In what ways did the event address sustainability? What was your reaction to the event?

#### **Step 4: Sustainability, locally and globally**

As we discussed above, sustainability is all about recognizing connections (for example, between human societies and their environments) and their implications. Sustainability requires that we recognize that we all live within connected systems- both local and global- and that our local actions can have global impacts (and vice versa). For example, that coffee you buy at your local Starbucks had its start as beans grown in a field somewhere very far away, picked by local workers who may or may not have been paid a living wage, and then shipped to your local coffee shop using energy- almost certainly in the form of fossil fuels- so it could end up in your cup. What are the implications of such connections for thinking about how we might create a more sustainable world?

1. Please read both of the following articles:

<http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2012/pollution-poverty-people-of-color-sacred-water-new-mine>

<http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2011/summer/haynes-bottom-bottom/>

2. Now, write a two-page essay reflecting on the following questions:

Re-read the definition of sustainability provided at the beginning of this assignment, and reflect on what you've learned about sustainability throughout this assignment. What do you think is the relationship between this definition of sustainability and the two articles? In what ways do economic and social inequalities contribute and connect to the environmental issues raised in each article? In what ways do these articles illustrate the connections between local, regional, and global systems? And finally, how have these readings contributed to your understanding of sustainability?