

## Toward A Definition of Sustainable Business (2007)

While there has been a lot of talk about sustainable business in the media over the past few years, a clear definition of what constitutes a sustainable business is lacking. Being creatures of ourselves, businesses die just as we mortals die. Some businesses are morphed into other businesses, but even these die after a while. Is a sustainable business one which survives 100 years? Or is it a business which is agile enough to redefine itself as the economy or technology challenges its original mission?

Environmentalists are prone to say that a sustainable business has two elements: 1) it causes minimal impact to the environment 2) the business function is expanded to include renewing or restoring the materials it uses in production.

Hence, a wood and paper company endeavors to replace the trees it logs in the course of its production, a farm uses little or no pesticides and tills the soil so that it can be used again, mining operations restore the earth as best they can, and construction companies use bio-degradable materials in their buildings and design structures that pose limited threat to the surrounding natural habitat. Energy companies incorporate alternative sources of energy into their production mix, and water utilities recover sewer water, treat it and make drinkable.

Across the board, "green" industry leaders take into consideration how their actions impact the environment and the long term effect of their business activities on *terra firma*.

It is heart-warming to read of the many individual efforts underway here in the United States and elsewhere to "go green" but according to an article in the "Environmental Leader" <http://www.environmentalleader.com/> only a small number of Fortune 500 Companies embrace sustainability. According to a **CNN** reporter "the incentives that are needed to push companies in a green direction, whether from government, (competitors), bankers, or other business partners ....., simply don't exist. "For most firms," he writes, "going green remains an investment with questionable or under whelming payoffs."

Two years ago, President Bush hosted a Summit on Climate Change in Washington D.C. The president called for rich and poor nations to set a long term goal for emissions cuts by next summer, but he also stated that developing countries must bear a greater share of the burden of cutting emissions. According to many observers, the president side-stepped the issue of what the United States was going to do and passed the buck to other countries such as China and India. Now President Obama promises to take up the mantle.

Be that as it may, the saying "**Think Globally, Act Locally**" seems apropos here. Individuals and small businesses can work in their neighborhoods to champion

sustainability. If everyone switched to energy saving light bulbs, recycled their plastic bottles, and yes, reused their bath water I believe we could turn the tide on global warming. If everyone rode on bicycles instead of in cars, I know we'd have the problem licked. Personally, I don't see that happening anytime soon.

I was particularly encouraged to read of a gen-tech firm that was growing plants that ate garbage, but equally saddened to read that the Arctic polar cap is breaking up a lot quicker than expected. Closer to home, I hear that Lake Superior is losing water quickly.