

Maine Policy Review

Volume 21
Issue 1 *Sustainability*

2012

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Recommended Citation

Mitchell, George J. . "Sustainability: The Challenges and the Promise." *Maine Policy Review* 21.1 (2012) : 8 -9, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol21/iss1/4>.

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Sustainability: The Challenges and the Promise

by Senator George J. Mitchell

I grew up in Waterville on the banks of the Kennebec River. My mother worked in several textiles mills that drew their power from the river. The economies of Waterville and many other towns depended on the rivers and forests that supplied timber and other natural resources.

Not only did the Kennebec and other rivers provide a convenient source of power, they allowed easy disposal of the waste from the mills. I remember standing on the riverbank with my brothers and feeling the sting in our eyes as we watched the river run choked with the cast-off chemicals from the textiles mills and other industrial facilities. Riverfront houses had to be repainted often, as the chemicals peeled off the paint.

My early experiences in this town built by a river influenced the way I came to think about human needs and the environment. I realized at an early age that people and nature cannot ever be separated.

Although we've made remarkable progress in some areas of environmental protection over the past several decades, including passage of the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and other important legislation, we still have a long way to go in addressing the broader challenge of sustainable development. More than 20 years ago, I wrote about this challenge in my book, *World on Fire: Saving an Endangered Earth* (1991). The central goal of sustainable development is to promote forms of economic and community development that also protect the planet's life-support systems, so that current generations can meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same.

There is an ongoing discussion about the meaning of "sustainable development," but I believe that its essence is its focus on the type of world we want to help create for future generations. How can we make decisions that result in a strong economy, thriving communities, and a healthy environment? How do we balance the need for continuity and change in our society? How can we ensure that future generations have more opportunities, not fewer?

Sustainability challenges arise in many different contexts, including efforts to enhance the livability of our cities and towns, increase our energy security, improve the management of our natural resources, and respond to a changing climate. Regardless of the specifics, these issues are inherently challenging because

they involve complex connections between human well-being and environmental protection, between local and global, between present and future, and especially between knowledge and action.

There is a tendency to think about sustainable development as a pressing challenge for developing nations, a challenge that is all too often out of sight and out of mind for the U.S. and other developed nations. But these kinds of problems exist everywhere. Moreover, efforts by the U.S. to help solve these problems in other regions might be more welcomed, and more successful, if we did a better job of tackling the problems in our own backyard.

One promising effort toward achieving this goal is Maine's Sustainability Solutions Initiative (SSI), in which faculty and students from many universities and colleges across the state are working with diverse partners to solve problems at the intersection of economic, social, and environmental issues. Led by the University of Maine center that bears my name, SSI represents one of the nation's largest and most innovative efforts to learn how institutions of higher education can serve society more effectively.

Given my roots, I have a special interest in SSI's focus on advancing the science and practice of sustainable development in ways that can directly benefit Maine's families, communities, and businesses. But I also commend SSI's efforts to share the lessons it is learning with other regions of the nation and the world.

From my travels throughout Maine and around the world, I have learned that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to sustainable development. Effective solutions to sustainability challenges must take into account the values, needs, concerns, and traditions of the local communities that are striving to create a brighter economic, social, and environmental future. To that end, a focus on the social and cultural context of diverse stakeholders is one of the cornerstones of SSI's approach to problem solving.

The challenges are complex and multifaceted. As described in this issue, teams of SSI faculty and students are working all across Maine in solutions-driven partnerships with all levels of government, business and industry, and non-governmental organizations. They are seeking solutions to a diverse array of problems, including renewable-energy development, urban planning, water-resource management, and the future of Maine's North Woods.

In every project, research teams bring together different kinds of knowledge—including the expertise and experience of citizens. For example, in the Eastport area, researchers are collaborating with local fishermen, along with agencies, business, and nongovernmental organizations, to make sure tidal power is developed sustainably. In southern Maine, a team is working with stakeholders to safeguard the Sebago Lake watershed, which provides drinking water for nearly 200,000 people, in addition to being a source of hydropower and a treasured place for recreation. Another team is engaging with citizens in my home watershed to study alewife restoration and economic development on the Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers, in work that may also yield insights to help to revive the state's devastated groundfisheries.

By working with communities to understand the problems they are facing and search together for potential solutions, we can find ways through complex challenges. In my work as a legislator and mediator, I have learned that relationships form the center of our ability to work across different kinds of boundaries, be they political, ideological, or disciplinary. SSI is taking a unique approach that assumes that success in crossing boundaries and working together is not happenstance, but is a result of cultivation and dedicated effort to finding ways to speak a common language and understand diverse perspectives.

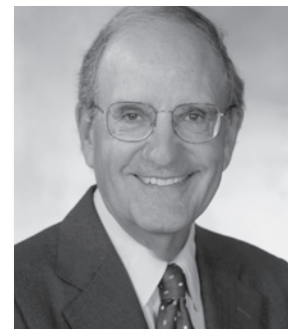
I believe that programs such as SSI are sorely needed in today's world, but I also know that such activities sometimes encounter criticism and resistance due to the disparate and often conflicting nature of stakeholder perceptions and values. It can be difficult to persevere when such efforts encounter setbacks or "get caught in the cross-fire" of public debate. It is important, however, to remain steadfast in the belief that societies can respond to difficult challenges and more sustainably meet the needs of current and future generations.

I've also learned from experience that patience is required for efforts that seek to create a new vision and sense of purpose and take risks in the search for innovative solutions; they take time. With the issues facing us, however, it is clear that we will need durable institutions that can continuously adapt to new challenges as they search for and implement new solutions. I am confident that SSI is one such institution, one with a long-term commitment and capacity to contribute to a better world, beginning in Maine.

In a larger sense, the ethos of SSI reflects one of my deepest beliefs: the importance of public service. The many faculty and students involved have

committed themselves to a goal larger than themselves, a goal of helping to build a better world. In a world with many problems, SSI is cultivating a cadre of educated citizens, flexible thinkers, and solutions-oriented scholars. This initiative has the potential to show how colleges and universities can help society to chart a more sustainable path.

Based on my years in public service, I believe the long-term rewards of such work will more than outweigh the difficulties involved. By articulating a common vision, building broad-based partnerships, and focusing on the needs of others, we can create a brighter future for Maine, the nation, and the world. 🌊



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A U.S. Senator from 1980 to 1995, he was Senate majority leader for six years. His many accomplishments include leading the 1990 reauthorization of the Clean Air Act and authoring the first national oil spill prevention and clean-up law. In 1995, Sen. Mitchell served as Special Advisor to President Clinton on Ireland and led peace talks that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. He is chairman emeritus of the international law firm DLA Piper and the author of four books: *Men of Zeal* (with Sen. Bill Cohen); *World on Fire*; *Not For America Alone: The Triumph of Democracy* and *The Fall of Communism*; and *Making Peace*.