



*Paul Ehrlich and Dick Smith doing what they love, envisioning a sustainable future*

## **Finding & Developing Sustainability Champions**

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Sustainability for humanity should be promoted if people who are potentially sustainability champions, or already emerging as such, can be found and their further development as sustainability champions encouraged and facilitated. For humanity to be sustainable, this must be achieved in regard to environment, economics, health, and social. Here I address the benefits and practicalities of finding and developing sustainability champions across these different areas.

Some champions have emerged in the past and have contributed enormously to the cause of sustainability. An early example was the American John Muir who campaigned for preservation of wilderness. More recent Americans, who have campaigned against pollution, over-population, over-consumption and other environmental issues, include David Brower, Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, William Vogt and Herman Daily. Examples from other parts of the world include Tim Flannery (Australia), James Lovelock (England), Arne Næss (Norway) and David Suzuki (Canada). On the one hand, the list of such people seems long, far too long for me to attempt a comprehensive list here, and yet, from the perspective of the scale of the issue, and the history of concern about it, the list appears short.

Some people have also emerged as critics and deniers of the science of sustainability and the scientists who carry it out, and as proponents of an “unregulated business-as-usual” approach; unfortunately, they have had a profound impact, preventing or delaying sensible responses to growing crises. The classic example of this is provided by the adverse consequences arising from tobacco smoking, a sustainability issue as it relates to the health of individuals and associated costs borne by society as a whole. It is now well known that smoking tobacco greatly increases the likelihood of certain illnesses, with many resulting

deaths and at huge cost to our health-care systems. As Robert Proctor's detailed analysis in "Golden Holocaust" shows, some 100 million people were killed by the cigarette industry in the last century, with perhaps ten times that many doomed in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The lethal threat of cigarette smoking was well established among the scientific community about 60 years ago, and yet a few people, aided and abetted by the tobacco industry, managed to cast doubt over the science and scientists involved, to the extent that appropriate actions to address the issue were delayed by decades. Similar histories have unfolded with regard to acid rain and the ozone hole, and the same situation is presently occurring in the context of climate disruption.

We clearly need more and younger sustainability champions. With continuing increase in human numbers, per capita consumption of resources and waste production, and impacts arising from resource acquisition, moving toward sustainability is becoming increasingly important and increasingly difficult. We therefore need more sustainability champions as leaders ... to do just that. Many of the current sustainability champions qualify as 'seniors' and obviously they, like the rest of us, are ageing. We therefore need the 'next generation' of sustainability champions. So how might we locate such people?

Sustainability champions, actual or potential, can, I believe, be distinguished on the basis of three major parameters, acting in concert: **Significance**, **Influence** and **Presentation**. Sustainability champions, past or present, have all tackled sustainability issues of high to very high **Significance**. Of course, significance is context-dependent and may therefore vary from one region and time to another. The issue, for example, of wilderness protection, though important still, is arguably not as significant now, at least in North America, as it was in John Muir's time. The major global issue of today is obviously climate change. Sustainability champions seek to have significant, sometimes major, **Influence** on human society through encouraging and facilitating changes in what we think and say, and most-importantly, how we go about things. Rachel Carson, for example, was a strong advocate for reduction in environmental pollution and its adverse impacts. Sustainability champions are also distinguished by a high quality of **Presentation**. Paul Ehrlich is well-known for the informative and compelling nature of his talks, books and articles concerning sustainability. No one has succeeded as a sustainability champion without being very good to excellent in terms of significance, influence and presentation.

It should therefore be possible to encourage the development of the 'next generation' of sustainability champions by first recognising them on the basis of Significance, Influence and Presentation, and then providing them with a program of experiences aimed at assisting them with further development of these attributes, especially in combination. Such experiences might take a variety of forms, including training sessions, workshops and mentoring. Programs, offering such experiences, could be established, with applications solicited and/or invited, and possibly competition between applicants for available places. Through the normal application review processes, it should not be difficult to evaluate potential program participants in terms of their existing or potential levels of significance, influence and presentation. At the same time, of course, it would also be possible to look for other worthwhile traits such as intelligence, passion, dedication, determination, and

confidence, though traits such as these would probably not differentiate sustainability champions from other high-achieving individuals.

As it is not presently clear what would be the best 'model' for such a program, I propose to explore and evaluate different possibilities at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) , and to encourage implementation of whatever emerges as best available. We may be guided by existing and previous programs that have been developed elsewhere, such as the Aldo Leopold Leadership Program. This program has had substantial success at training mid-range scientists in leadership skills, though many aspects of it would be unsuited for non-scientists. Future programs might consist of sessions lasting from one to a few days, or they could include courses spanning weeks. They may involve lectures, or group exercises, or both. In order to cover the four pillars of sustainability (i.e., environment, economics, health, social), such programs must necessarily be multi-disciplinary in approach. Because communication is obviously essential, this will warrant significant attention. Designing a program that 'works' will therefore present both opportunities and challenges. Regardless, my initial efforts will be based at UTS, in partnership with Paul Ehrlich and others. We hope that other institutions will do likewise.

*MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to [joan@mahbonline.org](mailto:joan@mahbonline.org).*

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