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Sustainable Living Education: A Call to All Extension

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



POST
A COMMENT



0

Sustainable Living Education: A Call to All Extension

Abstract

Community priorities are shifting in response to the scientific reality and socioeconomic threats of climate change. Improving sustainable resilience in the ways we supply food, water, and energy are creating new ways of thinking about these critical resources. Cooperative Extension is in a prime position to teach individuals and communities how to live and work sustainably. The National Network for Sustainable Living Education has identified six essential steps for creating a national approach to Extension programming on this topic. Our full paper, [A Vision for Relevance](#) was presented to leaders at the National Extension Directors and Administrators meeting in February 2008.

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Question: Should Cooperative Extension galvanize and lead a public shift to sustainable living in response to global climate change?

Answer: The time is NOW for Extension to engage individuals and communities for environmental stewardship through Sustainable Living Education.

Attaining a Sustainable Future for Communities and the Environment

At the National Extension Directors and Administrators meeting (NEDA, 2008) held in February, under the topic of Global Climate Change, this question was posed on the agenda: "What implications does global climate change have for the mission of Cooperative Extension that impacts both traditional and non-traditional clientele?" The National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE), an ANREP initiative, has been heavily involved with this important issue. Our full paper, [A Vision for Relevance](#) was included in the material provided to the NEDA attendees, in order to present our thoughts and ideas for Extension's future role. Indeed, the changes that Extension must initiate within itself were detailed.

Earth's capacity to support populations and communities of humans and other species is being altered by changes in global climate. Individuals and communities are realizing that we cannot continue at our current pace of natural resource utilization. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (2006) issued this statement:

The scientific evidence is clear: global climate change caused by human activities is occurring now, and is a growing threat to society . . . Delaying action to address climate change will increase the environmental and societal consequences as well as the costs . . . In addition to rapidly reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it is essential that we develop strategies to adapt to on-going changes and make communities more resilient to future changes . . . The time is now. We must rise to the challenge. We owe this to future generations.

David F. Hales (2008) wrote, "If higher education is not relevant to solving the crisis of global warming, it is not relevant, period." Extension's publics need our help to understand how climate change threatens Earth's ability to continue providing goods and services fundamental to human well-being. Our clientele need guidance to reduce their CO₂ footprint and prepare to make a living--and a life--in a world whose natural resources are being reallocated by Earth's changing climatic system. Measurable changes are already being documented in species ranges, growing seasons, distribution of water and arable soils, and evapo-transpiration rates. Recent updates to the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map illustrate some of these shifts (Ellis, 2003; ADF, 2008).

How should land-grant educators respond? We should:

- Apply our science and engineering know-how to the task of developing new technologies for energy and water conservation;
- Help our political leaders make a realistic assessment of all the natural resources and ecosystem services our global environment is capable of providing and at what level of sustained demand; and
- Offer our communities a crash course in how to live in synch with Earth's limits.

We need to focus our clientele's attention on the inter-generational transfer of a sustainable world--just as we do with family financial assets and land and timber resources. Ensuring family prosperity through future generations is the real meaning of *sustainable living*.

Education about sustainable living needs to focus on consumption. Consumption patterns in the U.S. are emulated across the globe. We have an obligation to become more resource efficient, beginning with individuals and families. Living in a sustainable manner is about consuming less and consuming differently. Issues as disparate as emotional stress, sedentary leisure, childhood obesity and its cascade of diseases, economic instability, and dysfunctional families all have their origin in our constant consumptive pursuit. Most people can't visualize changing the world, but can understand and act on the imperative to stop "wants" from morphing into "needs."

Opportunity for the Cooperative Extension System to Champion Sustainable Living Education

The Cooperative Extension System is in a prime position to teach individuals and communities how to live and work sustainably. But only if Extension educators unite across the program areas of engineering, natural sciences, and social sciences will we reach our impact potential. To effectively address the need for Sustainable Living Education, Extension must immediately re-focus and re-tool. We need a state-by-state implementation of sustainable living programming to help clientele break from excessive consumption patterns held up as societal norms.

We have the collective knowledge, experience, and national presence to meet this educational challenge, as well as the confidence of our traditional audiences. If Extension is not prepared to be a leader in providing education on this overriding challenge of our time, the public will go elsewhere for it--and indeed, the public is already doing so. The ways in which people obtain information have changed radically in the past 30 years, and Extension doesn't have an exclusive franchise on the delivery of credible information to address practical issues, as we once may have had.

Taking Inventory: Extension Actions for Engagement with Sustainable Living Education

Essential Step A

Educational programs on Sustainable Living must be multidisciplinary. As part of the national land-grant system, Cooperative Extension has the breadth of expertise to teach the entire range of topics that are part of Sustainable Living. Individual patterns of consuming food, energy, housing, household goods, water, recreation resources, and transportation have contributed to our current socially complex environmental problems. Individuals and communities want to learn the linkages between individual actions and environmental impact and how behavioral changes can mitigate those impacts.

Essential Step B

Educational programs on Sustainable Living must holistically address the total energy, water, and carbon footprint of the lifestyle choices of our stakeholders. One's footprint includes: business, development, and investment interests and decisions; farming, ranching, and timbering interests and decisions; household goods and home-life practices; and leisure "toys" and recreational practices. We have experience in all these arenas. And we now have the opportunity to merge our traditionally separate, single-discipline audiences into one--youth through adult.

Essential Step C

Educational programs on Sustainable Living must take place now--with in-service and other professional trainings for our existing workforce. We don't have the luxury of waiting for multi-year planning processes or for specialized educators to come on-board. To start, Extension educators in partnership with advisory committees can form multi-county and multi-state teams focused on planning and delivering multi-disciplinary programs that comprise all subject and issue areas of Sustainable Living. The knowledge and credibility of all team members will be accelerated if their experience of dealing with the issues occurs at both a personal and a professional level.

Essential Step D

Educational programs on Sustainable Living must focus on how choices, decisions, and behaviors affect natural resources, equity, and economic development at the local, regional, national, and global scales. Our programs should identify vulnerabilities and options that enhance agricultural, forest, freshwater, and marine sustainability. They must provide a basis for clientele to develop infrastructure to implement change in their economic sector. Extension has the capacity to develop expert decision making software tools based on scientific data. With these tools, we can help the public evaluate how best to invest discretionary purchasing power to maximize targeted results--reduced carbon footprint, less waste, and lower energy requirements.

Essential Step E

Extension must become the model for others to emulate. We have to walk our talk. Extension staff members will "learn by doing" as we green our own lifestyles, offices, campuses, and 4-H camps.

As a result, we will radically shrink our ecological footprint and visually demonstrate the knowledge and practices we are teaching. The process will be a vehicle for personal re-direction and professional development and a vehicle for teaching others--a "hands-on" project for family members, volunteers, 4-H youth, and adult clientele. Extension administrators must make green institutional investment a priority and provide the resources necessary to achieve it.

Essential Step F

With success at the personal and family level and a constituency ready to effect community change, Extension must help communities rethink their municipal systems that constrain our options for living sustainably. Public transportation, conservation subdivisions, growth management, and revitalization of urban areas all support more sustainable lifestyles for people. We must help citizens and community leaders understand and evaluate their potential.

Re-Discovering Our Land Grant Vision in the Challenge of Climate Change

How might Extension fit into a national strategy for climate change? The United Nations General Assembly paper prepared as background for thematic debate reads as though written for Extension. The document (UN, 2007) encourages countries to develop "effective national adaptation strategies which may include:

- Measures to enhance the scientific basis for decision making;
- Methods and tools for the assessment of adaptation;
- Education, training and public awareness on adaptation, including for young people;
- Promoting individual and institutional capacity-building;
- Technology development and transfer;
- Promotion of local coping strategies; and
- Legislation and regulatory frameworks, which promote adaptive-friendly action" (p. 5).

The call has been made. Are we going to answer it?

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Discussion