



AASHE CONFERENCE 2006

The Role of Higher Education in Creating a Sustainable World

Arizona State University

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POST-CONFERENCE REPORT

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A) CONFERENCE INTRODUCTION:

AASHE 2006 was the largest campus sustainability conference in the history of North America. More than 650 individuals attended from 44 states and 4 countries. This does not include an additional 100 exhibitors and volunteers. National and international corporations, NGO's, and governmental agencies were also actively involved in the Conference. Altogether, every sector of higher education was represented including faculty, students, staff and upper level administrators. Arizona State University (ASU) hosted this inaugural event. A number of examples demonstrated ASU's leadership in sustainability with none being more salient than their announcement of the opening of their new School of

Sustainability. This school will be the first of its kind offering bachelors, masters, and PhD's in sustainability.

The Conference itself consisted of more than 230 presentations focusing on all aspects of sustainability both internal and external to the campus community. These included, but were not limited to:

- ways to facilitate operational and philosophical changes within the institution;
- how to foster curricular development in sustainability, overcoming organizational barriers;
- ideas on how to improve institutional relationships with local and global communities; and
- numerous case studies showcasing college/university accomplishments.

Overall, this conference made a concentrated effort to increase awareness of the social dimensions of sustainability.

AASHE 2006 included presentations from four widely renowned keynote speakers. Each focusing on different aspects of sustainability:

1) **Bill McKibben** - currently works as a visiting scholar in environmental studies at Middlebury College. Prior to Middlebury, he was a fellow at the Harvard University Center for the Study of Values in Public Life. McKibben has made a name for himself as an outstanding writer. He has authored seven books including *The End of Nature*, (1989) which sounded one of the earliest alarms about global warming. He is also a former staff writer for *The New Yorker* and currently his work regularly appears in *The Atlantic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times*, *Harpers*, and *Outside* among others.

2) **Ray Anderson** - Chairman of Interface, Inc., the world's largest producer of commercial floorcoverings. Mr. Anderson founded the company in Atlanta in 1973 and has turned Interface into an environmentally friendly enterprise, reducing its environmental footprint by one third. His book *Mid-Course Correction: Toward a Sustainable Enterprise: The Interface Model*, helped prove to other

businesses that they could protect the environment while increasing profits. Today, Mr. Anderson is recognized as one of the world's most environmentally progressive chief executives, having served as co-chairman of the President's Council on Sustainable Development during the Clinton administration; and been recognized by Mikhail Gorbachev with a Millennium Award from Global Green in 1996. His honors also include the prestigious Mitchell International Prize for Sustainable Development (2001); the SAM-SPG Sustainability Leadership Award (2001); the U.S. Green Building Council's Inaugural Leadership Award (2002); and the National Wildlife Federation's Conservation Achievement Award for Corporate Leadership (2002). He was recently named a Senior Fellow and Leading Voice for Green and Sustainable Design by the Design Futures Council.

3) **Beverly Wright** - Dr. Wright is a sociologist and leading scholar on environmental and economic justice and public policy. She is the founder and director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ), one of the few community/university partnerships that addresses environmental and health inequities in the Lower Mississippi River Industrial Corridor, commonly referred to as "Cancer Alley." She has served on the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), chaired the Second National People of Color Leadership Summit, and is co-chair of the Environmental Justice Climate Change Initiative.

4) **Hunter Lovins** - President of Natural Capitalism, Inc. She has taught at numerous universities including Dartmouth College and the Universities of California and Colorado. Currently a professor of business at Presidio World College, she has founded and grown several businesses. Ms. Lovins co-founded Rocky Mountain Institute, where she served for 20 years as CEO. Ms. Lovins shared a 1982 Mitchell Prize, a 1983 Right Livelihood Award (often called the "alternative Nobel Prize"), the 1993 Nissan Prize, and the 1999 Lindbergh Award. In 2000 she was named Time Magazine Hero of the Planet. She has co-authored nine books, including the 1999 book, Natural Capitalism, and hundreds of papers, including briefings for Presidents Clinton and Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. She is currently working in Afghanistan on a variety of projects, including the Afghan Cluster Competitiveness Project.

B) OBSERVATIONS:

Several observations made the conference quite distinctive and extraordinary. These were:

- o *The diversity of campuses engaged in sustainability was remarkable.* From small to large, private to public, every variety of academic institution was represented and actively engaged in advancing sustainability on their campus. This generated a lot of excitement. Some were excited because they recognized that they were making significant breakthroughs and establishing their institutions as leaders in sustainability. Others were excited because they were discovering new opportunities while at the same time learning "how" to move sustainability forward. The tone of the presentations also spanned the spectrum. Some presenters were self-critical and felt challenged about how to advance sustainability in an environment with little institutional support.
- o *Passionate student interest.* It was obvious that the students who attended the meeting were genuinely concerned about advancing sustainability and frightened about potential future scenarios. The level of student activism and organization that was occurring across many campuses especially impressed us. This was exemplified by two stellar and very powerful student presentations at the global warming plenary. One student was a recent graduate of Middle Tennessee State who told the story about how 89% of the students voted "yes" to impose upon themselves an \$8 per credit tuition increase to purchase renewable energy. Billy Parrish was the other student presenter whose sense of urgency and concern led him to leave his undergraduate studies at Yale in order to coordinate the Energy Action Coalition Partnership. This coalition urges students to take the lead in more environmentally and socially responsible energy use by encouraging them to participate in the annual Campus Climate Challenge.
- o *The social dimension of sustainability was prominent.* There was a concentrated effort by the conference organizers to educate participants that social justice and equity is a fundamental

aspect of sustainability. Keynote speaker, Beverly Wright, told a compelling personal story that reached into the many spheres of sustainability but none more so than the social equity side of sustainability. See below for more details on her speech.

- o *A substantial number of campuses were making bold advances in sustainability as a direct result of strong college leadership.* This was especially the case with ASU whose president, Michael Crow, is leading his campus in its sustainable efforts. For example, in creating the new School of Sustainability. Furthermore, ASU had one of their major donors speak at a general assembly and had James Buizer, (assistant to the President), Co-Chair the conference. Considering the size of ASU (over 60,000 students) and its location (in the desert) we were quite taken back by their assertive public representation and courage to embrace sustainability when considering the daunting challenges awaiting them and other similar institutions. ASU was not the only campus demonstrating strong leadership. There were encouraging numbers of senior staff and directors/managers of campus operations who were there to share their story.
- o *Global Climate Change.* The threat and sense of urgency regarding the issue of global climate change was a main focus of the conference. Evergreeners unanimously agreed that the conference raised our level of awareness and concern for global warming and we now believe the threat to be more imminent and daunting than before.

C) IDEAS FOR EVERGREEN:

- Student engagement: We need give more of our students opportunities to be public leaders: speaking, writing, contributing. As an institution we need to strengthen our students skills in activism and organizational abilities. Our students should be presenting at future AASHE and Greening the Campus meetings.
- Several of the presentations/speeches inspired us to be more active in nurturing our relationship with our local community. This can be done in part through an increase in community-based and service learning programs. For example, we can play an

active leadership role in developing a local food co-op among regional farmers.

- We need to expand our resource base for sustainability work at Evergreen. This can be done through a variety of networks including: establishing an alumni fund, getting students excited about fund-raising and grant writing, and by returning some of the savings from reduced resource use back towards other sustainability initiatives.
- We think Evergreen should definitely sign on to the *Focus the Nation* event and do this collaboratively with students! We need to find out if WashPIRG or other student groups are already in the loop.
- We were entirely impressed by the number of campus employees who were actively participating in the conference who were not students or faculty. We are convinced that if Evergreen could get its staff and operations managers more actively involved in sustainable initiatives we could make much greater strides as an institution.
- Perhaps greater than any other insight, this conference taught us the importance of strong leadership. Many institutions were advantaged by a top-down approach that galvanized overall institutional support for sustainability. This included strong support from college presidents and Provosts who were pushing sustainability at their institution. President Les Purce has a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate his support for sustainability by signing onto the upcoming President's Climate Commitment. It is our understanding that President Purce has already been invited to a special presidents' meeting on November 20 at The Russell Family Foundation to work on this.

D) CONFERENCE OVERVIEW:

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

Bill McKibben, Visiting Scholar in Environmental Studies at Middlebury College:

The emphasis of Bill's message was *urgency*. That is, urgency regarding America's current energy use and the resulting threats of global climate change. He focused on the uncertainty of positive feedback loops and thresholds in relation to global climate change. A quote by NASA climate scientist Jim Hansen supported his argument. Hansen said, in so many words, "we have ten years to reverse our emissions or our world will be vastly different from today."

McKibben then emphasized the critical role of higher education to play a key role in addressing this problem. He then outlined several reasons why colleges and universities are so important:

- Interdisciplinary
- Not completely focused on bottom-line outcomes
- Student-driven Initiatives
- Technological advances - "no longer any excuses for not using renewable energy."
- College operations offer great opportunities for educational insights. Institutions that implement sustainable practices provide invaluable learning experiences.
- Campuses are large communities. If they cut resource use and waste outputs then that alone could significantly improve national sustainability initiatives.

Bill then focused on communities. He stressed that "hyper-individualism" is a major hurdle to sustainable activities. Americans are living in larger homes with fewer people and emitting unproportional levels of greenhouse gases. And this is not only unsustainable but also unfulfilling. For many, the college years are the best years of life. Bill attributed this towards the community-based atmosphere during college years. Post-graduation employment and community life often encourages "hyper-individualism."

Bill concluded by asking, "how can we make our lives richer without buying more things?"

Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface, Inc.:

Ray is the founder and CEO of Interface, Inc. - the world's largest carpet manufacturer. Ray started by clarifying that he is first and foremost an industrialist; he has the most competitive of personalities; and his obligation is to maximize profits.

However, within this frame he found a new way of thinking. He was completely inspired by Paul Hawken's *Ecology of Commerce*. This book, he explained, fundamentally changed his outlook on business and its relationship and responsibility to society. Ray then flipped through pages of the book reading passages that he claimed "floored him" when he read them for the first time. His attention turned to his legacy, his grandchildren, and how he would be remembered.

Today, Interface, Inc. constantly searches for win-win-win situations: ways to reduce toxic outputs, ways to increase profits, and ways his operations can benefit society.

Ray likened the challenge of accomplishing all three to climbing a very difficult mountain he referred to as Mt. Sustainability. He said this mountain has seven challenging faces including: waste elimination, alternative energy use, recycling, transportation efficiency, cultural shifts (changing hearts and minds), and redesigning commerce itself. This last one would entail a complete remaking of the business model from maximizing the bottom line to becoming a "true service economy."

Ray's talk was interspersed with real world examples of how his company (and others) were accomplishing win-win-win situations.

Overall, Ray's talk was inspiring, genuine, and heartfelt and it is no mystery that he has been able to reach out to so many people in the business community.

Ray's final message and take home point was that business leaders should aspire to "win in the market place, but not at the expense of Earth and its resources."

Beverly Wright, Director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice:

Beverly is the founder and director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ) whose main focus is to address environmental and health inequities in the Lower Mississippi River Industrial Corridor (also known as "cancer alley"). What makes DSCEJ extraordinary is strong partnership they have fostered between the local community and the regional universities. Beverly referred to this partnership as "Communiversality."

Beverly's presentation highlighted the strong relationship between industrial pollution, disease, and race. She asked the audience: "Does race matter?" Then answered, "Yes, and for no reason at all..." Wonderful GIS maps, statistics from reputable sources, and personal communications with high-ranking officials and community leaders, backed up her message.

Beverly turned her attention to the Katrina disaster and created powerful images showcasing how this disaster was another case-in-point of environmental and social injustice. She did not speak from an outsider's perspective but rather Beverly told a personal story. She showed pictures of her house, her neighbor's homes, and the people in her community and how they were affected. She talked about how her and her neighbors were forced to take the initiative in cleaning up their property after FEMA falsely told them that all pollutants were at safe levels.

All in all, Beverly's message reaffirmed that we as a nation and as a society have a long way to go before environmental and social equality is reached.

Hunter Lovins, President Natural Capitalism:

Hunter's speech highlighted society's irresponsible use of global natural resources. She focused much of the responsibility on business and quoted Ray Andersen who asked, "what is the business case for ending life on Earth?" She stated how business's fail to incorporate ecosystem services

that are valued at over \$30 trillion annually. When these ecosystems are harmed or destroyed this becomes a cost burden for all of society.

Like, Bill McKibbin, Hunter brought urgency to the sustainability movement. When referring to global resource use, Hunter made it clear that the future is not possible without substantial change. The continued industrialization of China and India will deplete global resources if they continue to follow the US model of extraction and disposal.

Part of the solution is to follow nature's example. Hunter requested that every attendee read *Biomimicry* by Janine Benyus.