PERSPECTIVE FROM THE FIELD

View of Sustainability: An Environmental Consultant's Perspective

Robert P. Sliwinski

Sustainability, the global buzzword of the 2000s, is a vague and ambiguous term from an environmental consultant's perspective. The concept is just too large to incorporate in its entirety when designing, advising, and managing ecological and environmental projects at the local level. One concept I do admire and fully understand is "Think Globally, Act Locally." It's a mantra that many people can relate to and appreciate. It makes the unreachable—achievable. So to incorporate sustainability into environmental consulting, it needs to be broken down to an understandable and usable level—the local level and how it relates to consulting.

As an environmental consultant, my work entails representing my client's interests and opinions, presenting my professional opinions, problem solving and proactive actions through studies, reports, and site management. So how does sustainability fit into this? It doesn't always clearly appear to. Endless copies, piles of papers, huge reports, and driving miles to sites and meetings do not appear to fit into sustainability. So the word *sustainability* is awkward, and its applicability is difficult to incorporate into the daily routine. But when we look at the local level and individual projects, it's the representation of client's interests, presenting problem-solving solutions, and site management alternatives—*that* sustainability can be grasped and incorporated.

Representing the Client's Best Interest

There is a movement in offices to reduce paper consumption, increase correspondence via e-mail, and use electronic editing for files that normally are drafted, printed, and reprinted. But this movement is based more on technology and cost rather than sustainability. However, many clients expect this, and it benefits them by reducing their costs. Consultants also look for ways for our clients to minimize their project impacts to natural resources while maintaining the clients' original objectives. Does this meet the goals of sustainability? Sure, but it's not the sole reason for the decision. Time and costs are the largest driving forces, but the effort can be marketed as sustainability.

Problem-Solving Solutions

Environmental project designs should fit comfortably into the concept of sustainability. However, not all components of a project are worthy of being called sustainable. Often new materials must be used for structural components for longevity and are not always selected from the most sustainable sources. However, sustainability can be accomplished through innovation, cooperation, and donation. For example, Baker's Lake Heronry in Barrington, Illinois, required a reconstruction in 1999 because of the degradation and decomposition of trees, natural vegetation, and simple artificial structures that were placed in the 1980s. Literally, the nesting opportunities for a local population of herons, egrets, cormorants, and night-herons were collapsing and decaying and birds were nesting on the ground rather than in higher locations. Although new materials were used in the design, it was the innovation of reusing materials that appeared to be a good idea, mainly to reduce costs. The local utility company Commonwealth Edison donated 17 "end of life" utility poles that were in good shape. These poles supported the design for eight structures (Figure 1) that would in turn help reestablish and sustain a local bird population, including the state's endangered black-crowned night-heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), which nested near ground level (Figure 2). The design provided elevated nesting opportunities, which freed up the ground level of the island. However, filling up the ground level with sufficient amounts of nesting materials and cover appeared to be difficult without cutting trees and hauling logs and branches to the island. Instead, used holiday trees were placed upright into installed metal sleeves/tubes. Additional holiday trees were placed on the ground around the water's edge and in the interior of the island. These used holiday trees provided nesting opportunities for great egrets and night-herons, and their numbers have been sustained and even increased in the last ten years. Annually, new holiday trees were replaced as supplied by the Village of Barrington. Reuse of materials and resources provides project design with components of sustainability to sustain wildlife populations.

Site Management

Ecological restoration is another facet of the "act locally" mantra. In northeastern Illinois, European buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) has invaded and damaged the ecology of local preserved woodlands and shrublands. Removal of this species is necessary to enable native species to reestablish. In some communities, there is opposition to clearing invasive brush, an action that is viewed as destructive rather than productive. Ecologists have been studying the invasive species issue for the last two decades, and many have accepted that to sustain our woodlands and shrublands, invasive species need to be controlled. Local government agencies are hiring consultants to create plans and conduct removal at an initially high labor cost. However, as a consultant discussing options for invasive species removal with a home-owner's association, the topic of resident volunteer efforts becomes a popular way of reducing costs and getting involved. The home owner does not always see the sustainability part of invasive species removal, but clearly sees ways to reduce costs. Firms also have been involved in corporate workdays where invasive species are removed from degraded woodland communities. These efforts in

doi:10.1017/S1466046609990469

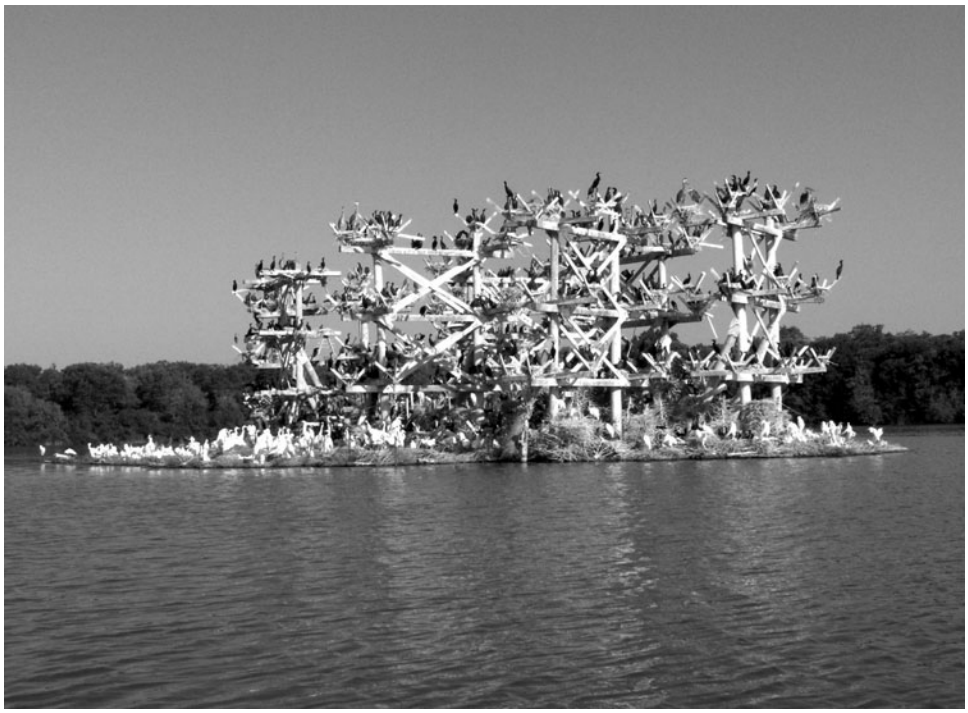

Figure 1. The reconstructed Baker's Lake Heronry in 2009.

Figure 2. An adult black-crowned night-heron at its nest at Baker's Lake.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1466046609990469 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Chicago Wilderness area have caught on and reduced some of the maintenance costs for the local forest preserve districts.

Sustainability is a buzzword that is vague and occasionally unpalatable for environmental professionals. However, placing sustainability in the context of an environmental consultant at the local level to gain clarity can make it not only palatable, but usable, defensible, and marketable.

Address correspondence to: Robert P. Sliwinski, Christopher B. Burke Engineering, Ltd., 9575 West Higgins Road, Rosemont, IL 60018; (phone) 847-823-0500; (e-mail) rsliwinski@cbbel.com.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1466046609990469 Published online by Cambridge University Press