



**Listening to the Public:
Understanding and Overcoming Barriers to Sustainability**

Sustainability Research Initiative

EXCERPT

Findings of daylong dialogues with representative random samples of Canadians conducted in 2006. Findings further confirmed in polling in 2006 and again in 2009.

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B. What is stopping us? Barriers to acting sustainably

Participants were surprised to find that they already shared so much common ground at the outset: the pervasive environmentalism they heard in the room seemed at odds with what they imagined average Canadians believe. Yet as participants saw that their own beliefs and priorities were actually shared by so many of their neighbors, a deeper question surfaced – **if we all care so deeply about the environment and sustainable development, and agree so strongly on the future we want to see, why haven't we made more progress toward it? This question – “what is stopping us?” – quickly became the central focus of the dialogues.**

Listening to everyone [in these initial comments] I am surprised at how much everyone agrees there is a problem, and yet when I walk through the world I see so many people wasting things and throwing away plastic and buying more plastic and ... things that are not biodegradable and not recyclable. So I guess I'm interested in finding the connection between the awareness that we all seem to have and the behaviour that most people seem to be engaging in.

As the dialogue progressed, participants identified six barriers or types of barriers that they saw as key obstacles to acting more sustainably:

1. **Structural barriers**
2. **Mindset barriers**
3. **Information/communication barriers**
4. **Trust barriers**
5. **Isolation: weak sense of community and engagement**
6. **“Sustainability” as a term**

These barriers were consistently identified across all four dialogues, along with a number of steps participants suggested to overcome them.

1. Structural barriers. Participants first noted that there are significant structural barriers that get in the way of their acting sustainably. Too often, participants said, making sustainable choices feels like swimming upstream. As participants discussed this pattern, two key themes emerged:

- Convenience. Many individuals said they find it difficult to make sustainable choices because they are often so much less convenient than the status quo. Participants noted that it is more difficult to find environmentally friendly products than ordinary ones.

A few years ago they started bringing out antibacterial soaps, which are horrendous for the environment. Scientific experts said don't use these products, they're really bad. I don't want antibacterial soap – but I have a hard time not buying antibacterial soap now, because that's all you can buy.

They saw this pattern extending far beyond the supermarket shelves to the way that Canadian life and cities are designed. For example, it is often not very convenient to use public transportation to go to and from particular parts of the GVRD, making automobile use a necessity for those who live or work in those areas.

A car is an essential of life in this region and in this country. Currently, for my job I go from Knoxland to Surrey three times a week. Look at the transportation from bus to Sky Train – what kind of choice do I have? I have to use a car.... I'm using, in my family right now, six cars. But there's no alternative. There's no choice.

I don't have the choice of buying the more expensive organic products. I'm a student. I can't go to the store and say, I'll buy those tomatoes, they cost me \$3.00. I don't have that kind of money, and I know a lot of people don't have that. I don't want to support using pesticides, but I don't have that choice.

- Cost. Even when “alternative” products are available, participants said, they are often too expensive, especially for those with low incomes. Too often environmentally friendly products seemed to be luxuries out of reach for many lower income Canadians.

2. Mindset barriers. Yet as they considered the matter further, participants came to feel that while external forces do shape people’s choices, there are internal barriers that are even more significant. As participants saw it, they – and most Canadians – have a set of expectations and assumptions that often get in the way of their making the sort of environmentally sound decisions they wanted to see:

I have a friend who is a biologist, a Ph.D. He understands ecosystems, he's very conscientious – but he has a garbage bin, and he throws everything into it. He knows it goes into the ocean. He knows that we've got a serious problem with the Georgia Basin, and when I press him on it, it ultimately turns out that it's too inconvenient [to do anything else]. And that sounds silly, and it sounds like it can't be that simple, but I can see it. He had all his mess, and that was his convenient way of dealing with it. That was his habit.

I'm one of those shoppers that goes in a store and I just grab the products that I always buy because I've always bought them – without being aware of what I'm actually buying.

- Habit. Many participants noted that they tended to make choices based primarily on habit. They were more than willing to make more sustainable choices, but in the course of their daily lives they often don't think of it and as a result simply do as they always do. They felt this lack of mindfulness was a significant reason that they did not do more to help the environment.

- All the signals say “buy.” Participants noted the many ways that Canadian society encourages them to over-consume – in fact many felt that not consuming is far more difficult than consuming. They pointed to messages like “keeping up with the Joneses” and “you are what you own.” Many felt that Canadians, especially the young, are “brainwashed” to seek status, meaning and validation in consumer goods, messages that are strongly reinforced by peer pressure. These messages are a staple of the media: advertising and television promote goods from SUVs to hot tubs as symbols of “the good life” while ignoring their environmental costs.

The major value of young people is materialism. How many things can they get, and how much can they show off, and can they wear the latest things and so on. And it's not their fault – that's what they've grown up with – but it would take a sort of revolution to have other values.

TV and media teach to us to buy, buy, buy, buy as much as we can. We have to change that, so that I don't have to own a big fancy SUV to prove to everyone I'm rich.

Overall, participants felt that the consumer mindset makes it more difficult to act sustainably. Moreover, there is little incentive for individuals to take the initiative and act differently when others (including government, business and ordinary citizens) continue to act wastefully and over-consume.

- “We deserve the good life.” Some participants linked this emphasis on consuming with a general sense of entitlement. Canada was such a rich country, they felt, that citizens had come to expect a high standard of living. The resulting assumptions – that everyone should have a single-family home on a large lot, or that every generation should have a higher standard of living than its parents – made Canadians unwilling to redefine or moderate their expectations of “the good life.”

I'm from a small community in northern Ontario and there's lots of space there. I grew up thinking that you had to have a big house with a big yard and that was the only way to go. It was only recently that I actually learned about how people live in other parts of the world and how they actually don't need a whole lot of space to live.... Until we are able to somehow change our mentality that we all want to have our own place for our family then it's very difficult to discuss densification because nobody wants to live in that smaller area.

As we've become more affluent, the next generation has higher expectations.... I never had a car until I was in my 30's. But now, a kid coming out of high school expects to have a car, and a young couple that gets married in their 20's, they feel that they are not performing if they don't have a house or own something.

One of the reasons that we can't change the paradigm in Canada is because we're too wealthy.... We have space, we have resources, we have money, we have easy living, we have access to consumer goods at very good prices and it's going to be very difficult to change that paradigm.

A lot of people feel pretty resigned to some sort of environmental doomsday – resigned to the fact that there's nothing that we can do. There is a sort of apathy among us. So we just do the little bit is really easy for us like recycling at home.

If you look on a shelf of cleaning products in a superstore... there's one that isn't potentially toxic.... People look at that symbolically – everybody else is buying these other products. They're there. They must be being purchased. So how can we [maintain] the mindset of doing no harm?

- “I’m only one person.” A key reason that many did not act sustainably was because they felt on some level that individual acts don’t make a difference. This fatalism was the product of two related perceptions: first the sense that they were alone in their concern for the environment; and second, the perception that the problems were so huge and overwhelming that no one person could make a difference.

- Environmentalism = deprivation. Another barrier underlined by participants was the assumption that environmentalism meant sacrifice and deprivation. If “living sustainably” meant they had to sit in a cold room eating bran, they didn’t want to do it. The challenge, they suggested, was to demonstrate that this is not the case and that being environmentally responsible could be “cool” or even fun. Participants also pointed out examples not only that this can happen but that it is happening. Some noted that “smart cars” – small, high-mileage, low-emission vehicles – are gaining in popularity not only because they are sustainable but also because they are cool.

I don't want to live like a peasant. We have things that are available to us, and I think it's too [narrow] to say we shouldn't have these luxuries.

These new smart cars that are out there -- people buy them. Are they buying them because they want to use less gas, are they buying them because they're less expensive? No.... They are buying them because they are cool.

Instead of banning [something] altogether or shunning it -- create a new substitute idea of what is cool. You work with a culture and try to change it. I don't know how to do this. It's a long and slow and arduous process, probably.

Perhaps, participants thought, environmentally responsible behaviour could be made easier, less expensive (at least in the sense people would have a higher appreciation of the value they received for what they paid), more convenient, and more *fun*. At the same time, participants underlined that this would require more than individual action.

- Human nature won’t change. Another set of assumptions that stood in the way of participants acting sustainably is pessimism and lack of trust in people’s willingness to change. About half the participants felt that “you’ll never get most people to change their lifestyle and give up their big houses and yards” and nearly two-thirds (62%) agreed that “no matter how much you improve public transportation, people will always prefer the convenience of driving their own cars.”

A factor analysis of the values and attitude questions linked these two items with a general distrust of people. Not surprisingly, participants who scored high on this factor were less likely to engage in practices that support sustainability.

3. Information/communication barriers. Participants pointed out that one major obstacle to acting sustainably is the lack of reliable information or feedback on the environmental impact of specific products and practices. This is especially important given that the benefits of acting sustainably tend to be more apparent in the long term and on a larger scale. They are easily drowned out by short-term cost, convenience and other factors. Participants saw this lack of reliable information and feedback as particularly crucial at several points:

○ Prices don't reflect long-term environmental costs.

Participants felt that current prices for goods and services give misleading signals because they do not reflect real environmental/resource costs (e.g. the long-term costs of the resources used to manufacture the product or the cost of disposing of it after use). Many also felt that prices are badly distorted by subsidies, and that if those subsidies were eliminated sustainable options would compare favourably to polluting or wasteful products. Participants strongly supported making prices reflect long-term environmental and resource costs, as long as some protections for the poor are included.

I would like to discuss the myth that environmentally friendly products cost more. I don't think that's true. I think the cost of environmental unfriendly products have been subsidized for years because the true cost of the product isn't built in. The way it is now, if you want environmentally safe products you have to pay more. That's bullshit. Because when you buy disposable things, the cost of landfill is not in the price, the cost of all the other stuff is not in the price.... We've been subsidizing products [like this] to make them cheaper. If their price [reflected their real cost] they would cost far more and the environmentally friendly things would be cheaper.

[What about] labels on each product, -- or on shelves -- so that every time you went to buy the product you were faced with the environmental cost, the way you are with cigarettes... So you're reminded. Each time you buy a disposable Swiffer package, you're reminded what you're doing, instead of being able to be sort of blind every time. I'd like to see that kind of really obvious labeling, not like the little nutrition label, but a really obvious label.

○ Labels don't give us the kind of information we need. Participants also said that product labels often do not provide good information about products' energy and ecological "footprints": information that is essential to making responsible decisions at the point of purchase. Many people wanted to know more about where the things they buy come from and whether they are made in an

environmentally and socially responsible way. But only a few manufacturers and retailers routinely made that information available – and all too often the information was hard to decipher or put into context. Participants called for a kind of “seal of approval” for all products that would explain a product’s environmental impact in clear and accessible language and provide information that could be trusted. A few participants extended this idea to include the product’s “social footprint” as well, suggesting that labels should indicate whether a product was created under fair trade practices or by underage workers.

○ We don't have good yardsticks.

Participants noted that the measures Canada uses to assess performance (such as GDP) tend to reinforce the focus on relatively short-term economic factors. Given that the benefits of more sustainable approaches are often not clear, especially in the short term, this leads to a distorted picture of the value of sustainable approaches. Participants raised a case in point: the benefits of Sky Train far outweigh the subsidy required to keep the system operational. However, discussion of public transportation in the media and among public officials tends to focus on economic yardsticks like capital outlay and profitability – a metric that makes it nearly impossible for any public transit system to be viewed as a success.

As a corrective, participants suggested balancing economically-oriented metrics like GDP with others measuring a broader set of social and environmental factors.

You've got Sky Train that's running about 14 million people a year. Before Sky Train where did those 14 million people come from and go to? Now we have Sky Train running 14 million people a year. Who cares if Sky Train isn't paying for itself?

In Bhutan apparently they have a happiness quotient as a way of assessing how their society is doing. We have the gross national product. Maybe we need to bring in [a measure] that reflects happiness and the future of children.

○ Media's distorted lens. Participants

repeatedly cited misleading media coverage as a critical barrier to action. They felt that the media's current approach to environmental issues focuses too heavily on immediate short-term effects to the exclusion of more remote impacts. In addition, many felt that media coverage encourages public apathy and fatalism. Participants noted that sustainability issues tend to be covered as short-term, isolated stories that get dropped with the next turn of the news cycle. Such a fragmentary narrative diminishes the public's sense of urgency. Even worse, it reinforces the sense that environmental problems are unfixable – too overwhelming and complex for individual action to have any effect.

If corporations are dumping railway cars into our rivers, we just sort of hear about it in the news, but then the next day, back to the teacher's strike or whatever. It's just sort of brushed over. We're not getting enough of that information, and we need that information so that we can take a little more control of our environment.

I think we blame the media for a lot, but I think we can blame the media a lot here. They love to sensationalize, they love to exaggerate, they love to make money off of distress. And if you get the media to change... that's where I think we can make a lot of headway in terms of the environment.

A lot of times, yes, we feel pretty isolated. I think people feel like they can't make a difference. But what this group realized is that we do have a lot of power and I think that is not reflected in what gets shown through the media. The media always talk about the environmentalists like they are people "out there" – [as if they] aren't people like us who are concerned every day with what's happening in our communities and with the environment.

I didn't realize in a random sample of the population you'd have so many people who are so concerned about the environment. A lot of issues certainly have been brought to my attention [in this conversation]. So either I've been ignorant or these issues aren't being broadcast to the population enough, and people aren't aware enough of these problems.

The dialogue also indicated that the media tends to distort Canadians' image of themselves as a public when it comes to sustainability. Many participants began the dialogue assuming that other Canadians really do not care about environmental issues. This sense that they were alone in their beliefs, isolated and outnumbered, made them reluctant to speak up and pessimistic about the possibility of change. As the dialogue revealed the extent to which "typical" Canadians *do* feel that sustainability should be a priority and are willing to act on those beliefs, participants felt powerfully encouraged – and they wanted that message to get out to the general public.

4. Trust barriers. The issue of trust – or more accurately *mistrust* – emerged in all four dialogues as the most fundamental barrier to effective action on sustainability values. When citizens believe that others, especially leaders, cannot be trusted to do their fair share, they are less likely to take action themselves. The discussion made clear that even as companies and governments wonder whether they can trust a public that appears to say one thing about sustainability and do another, the public has exactly the same question about companies and governments, who appear to them to send very mixed signals:

- Business and government send mixed signals.

If participants were going to struggle to make more responsible choices, they wanted to see government and business doing their part. However they did not see that happening at the moment. Participants noted that government and companies call for sustainable approaches but often seem to act in different ways – companies present a "green" face while polluting rivers and streams; governments promote energy efficiency while exempting SUVs from the mileage and emissions standards required for passenger cars.

Faced with such apparent contradictions, participants did not trust that governments and business could or would do as they say with respect to sustainability. For example, participants agreed that they were willing to pay more of the real environmental cost of goods and services, but they were deeply concerned that businesses would simply take advantage the opportunity to rake in windfall profits.

The government can put responsibility onto the corporations, but they will just put that back on the consumer. Right? And I will take some of that. But I'd like it to be more of a sharing. I want the corporation to carry some of the brunt.

*The accountability and penalties have to go beyond monetary. We hear about these big chemical companies – like 3M or Dow – dumping stuff in the river and all they do is pay \$300 million and then they're home free. If we were to read *The Economist* we might know about this, but when we buy our product, it doesn't say by the way we did this and we got fined.*

Others expressed concern that their tax dollars would disappear into a budgetary black hole and not be used for their intended purpose.

- If we don't trust, we don't act. Participants drew a repeated connection between their levels of trust and their willingness to take steps to live a more sustainable lifestyle. As noted earlier, the questionnaires revealed a correlation between participants' sense that other people could be trusted and their willingness to engage in environmentally friendly behaviours themselves.
- Lack of accountability increases mistrust. Participants agreed that the current system does not require enough accountability from government, business or individuals, and that this is a significant barrier to more sustainable behaviour. Without greater accountability and transparency, participants felt, governments, businesses and individuals will continue along the path of least resistance.

We talked about communication between levels of government, business, the consumer. All the parties that are involved have to be talking to one another. The left hand has to know what the right hand is doing. The left hand has to be able to trust the right hand.

We talked about using the media as a way to market [sustainability]. There's all kinds of ratings and standards that come up – like rankings of universities or best companies to work for. But this is all marketing, this is all PR driven. People get seduced by these things and they're not always actually a fact... There is a lot of false information that goes out with the marketing.

Can you trust businesses to actually do what they're supposed to do? We've had a lot of information thrown at us where businesses are not actually doing what they say... they're not accountable at all.

Participants wanted to see a much stronger regulatory climate for businesses – one that offers real incentives to behave responsibly and real consequences for violations. Many participants felt that the current system doesn't work well. Too many companies simply chalk up fines as part of the cost of doing business, and participants felt that stronger measures were necessary – for instance requiring companies to indicate on their product labels if they have had to pay fines for violating environmental laws.

Participants were especially wary that businesses and government were out to “spin” them. A “sustainability seal of approval” for products was a nice idea, some participants said, but what was to keep it from becoming just another empty marketing tool? When the chips are down, companies are out to make a profit, and they may try to manipulate the public to gain market share.

Participants also expressed significant mistrust of governments. They felt strongly that government *should* be responsible to them. However, they feared that government and politicians were far more influenced by special interests, and they called for greater transparency and accountability from governments.

I don't have trust or faith in government policymakers They go on their campaign and they preach on what they're going to do for you, but they turn around and do something else. It's always about economics – they want revenues.

The thing that I learned today, perhaps the biggest thing, was that if this truly representative of the population in greater Vancouver then there are considerably more people in support of policies and goals that I would define as green, than I thought before I came here today, and if that is the case, then I would say that government in general, the various levels, have not been implementing the policies, the things that we want, at least not to the extent that we want them.

To be able to say [governments] are trustworthy, we need transparency. The more we push for transparency, that's where we can get the trust. They must be accountable, responsible, for whatever they do. We have to know about it. If they tax us we want to know what it is they are taxing and what they're going to use it for. Everything has to be transparent.

At the same time, participants did not let themselves off the hook – ordinary citizens too need to be more accountable and responsible for their actions both as consumers and as citizens. As consumers, they felt that they should pay more attention to the sustainability impacts of their purchases and their lifestyles. If consumers were educated, committed and vocal about their priorities, they felt, companies would respond to those demands. Many participants noted that this was happening already with respect to organic foods and high mileage vehicles, but they felt that far more concerted effort would be needed to move environmental concerns higher on businesses' list of priorities.

Consumers and consumers' choices may force them to change – if we have the information.

We can't depend on our government and corporations to take responsibility. Because that's not where they're at. If we don't buy their products, if we boycott the stuff that destroys the environment, if we say we're not going to be part of this, that's when the changes are going to come about because they'll feel it in their pocket. That's the only way they're going to make changes because that's where they are in their head. It's our responsibility.

We get the government we deserve. Unless we play a more active role as members of the public, we can't expect government to play a stronger role as leader in this effort.

We do need some sort of government legislation in order for this stuff to actually happen, but in order for that to happen we as a group of citizens have to actually get the government to listen to us. We actually have to be proactive and talk about these issues. We can't just leave it to the environmental groups -- let's join the environmental groups. Let's go in as a group of citizens and make them listen to us. Otherwise the government isn't going to change. They're still going to care about what they care about now which is mainly money.

Participants also underscored their obligation as citizens not only to vote and participate in the political process, but also to contribute in other ways to making sustainability a front-burner issue.

I was totally shocked by the statement about Canada and the discrepancy between what we say we care about and what we're actually doing. I was quite indignant about that and thinking about how wrong that was and then, as we talked during the day about what we're doing ourselves, I realized that I'm one of the members of the Canadian community and what am I doing? I am kind of halfheartedly being environmental and I have all kinds of great excuses and procrastination. So one of the big things today was I thought if I'm expecting Canada to be a role model in the world, which is what I hope for from our country, then I better step up to the plate too.

Who we trust is fragmented and scattered. In the course of the dialogues it became clear that no one group or individual will be able to step in and “fix” the trust issue. Participants pointed to individual organizations and individuals as somewhat trustworthy, but in today’s world they were not willing to trust any single source. Instead they described trust as something that they constructed by drawing on and cross-referencing many different sources. In the end, trust grew out of the conversations in the community or communities of which they were a part.

Who do I trust? Actually, for me, trust resides in a fragmented place in the world. There are certain university professors I might trust a little bit. The guy over there? I might trust him a little. But trust is dispersed throughout the community, it doesn't reside in a single place.

5. Isolation: weak sense of community and engagement. In all dialogues, participants said that without a stronger sense of community and engagement it would be more difficult if not impossible to build trust or move toward effective action on sustainability. More specifically, participants underlined:

- Lack of community and meaning. Many felt consumer society is too often characterized by isolation and lack of meaning: they pointed to factors like the breakdown of the family, the increasingly frantic pace of life and a tendency to substitute consumer goods for meaningful connection with others. This pervasive sense of isolation and lack of community support makes it harder for individuals to feel responsible for others or to recognize their ability to make a difference in the world.

We're a materialistic world.... I heard a statistic that 50% or more of families are single parent families now. And so what happens is the family structure obviously has separated and the kids are not getting that same love and affection, especially from the parent that had to move out. So what happens in return is that the parent that's not at home doesn't want to create any friction, and they only have limited time with them, so they tend to buy them things. And that's how they fill that need. And it's very unfortunate. So I see a lot of kids getting that quite easily today.

Life 40 years ago was a lot slower. Today I can't get over the way young people have to rush and run to get everything done. It's harder now to stop and say no, this doesn't feel right, I want to back off and think about it. They don't have time to do that.

More generally, participants saw community as a powerful antidote to over-the-top consumerism and materialism. For many participants, community – whether physical (in the form of a denser walkable neighborhood) or a more abstract community of shared values – represented an opportunity to break down that isolation and build a shared sense of meaning. Several expressed this idea in terms of slowing down, escaping the race to accumulate money and material possessions, and establishing a different, more caring and connected model for community.

But clearly, materialism does not work. Because ... no one is ever satisfied if that's their value. They just have to keep having more and more and more.

Very often we see NIMBYs, the local minority, when it comes to making decisions in the city for planning, and I thought this was a terrific forum for really seeing what people feel. With a random sampling of people, you get a sense that a lot of the things that you see [presented as] negatives in the news and the media are actually things that most people want to see go through.

I think the three major players of government, industry and the individual, we really have to work together on this one because each one has a separate role to play but an integrated role. An individual can do certain things, government certain things and industry can do certain things, but together, we can work and we integrate them together using a multifaceted integrated approach, including all parties, will end up getting away from the us versus them mentality. It's not us versus them, it's us, period.

- Few opportunities for engagement. Overall, participants drew strong links between effective public engagement and a general sense of responsibility among citizens – the more people are engaged, the more responsible they feel for the outcome, and vice versa. Such engagement also creates a sense of being empowered to make a difference. However, participants felt that they had few opportunities to become involved, and most had little idea of how to do so effectively. Governments did not seem interested in seriously soliciting citizen input in setting objectives for sustainability and reviewing results, and many highly-publicized “consultation” efforts seemed more ritual than real.

Participants emphasized that creating more opportunities for public engagement was an essential part of overcoming the barriers to acting more sustainably. They told us repeatedly that the path to success on these issues lay in developing better ways for citizens, business and government to act together.

6. The term “sustainability” itself. Interestingly, many participants suggested that the very term “sustainability” may be more of an obstacle than a help in efforts to engage the public in creating an environmentally and socially responsible way of life. They raised several objections.

- Abstractions and “buzz-words” don’t move us. The most common criticism was that that the term is too abstract, and too far removed from the practicalities of daily life. Many found it uninspiring and vague, and several participants suggested that the term reinforced the idea that the problem is overwhelming and alienating. Several also felt that “sustainability” was little more than a buzz-word for bureaucrats and technical experts, they did not feel they knew what it was or how to measure it, and they frequently fell back on more familiar terms like “green,” and “environmentally friendly.”

Overall, participants were more moved by tangible impacts than by abstractions. For instance, when asked to list reasons that would motivate them to pay extra for a more energy efficient house, participants’ top reason was individual health benefits (it is healthier for the people who live in the house and will reduce air pollution), followed by economic benefits to individuals (it will pay for itself over time and protect against future energy cost increases). More abstract benefits – e.g. conserving resources for future generations, doing the forward-looking thing – came much further down their list of priorities. Similarly, when asked how much they worried about various environmental problems, participants cited immediate and tangible concerns like air and water pollution first, while global effects (loss of tropical rain forests) ranked much lower. Participants agreed that it was far easier to start with a local perspective and expand it to encompass the global than the other way around.

Everything that we’re saying [about sustainability] just comes off as so Utopian and idealistic. It’s a huge job to break it down and make it practical and achievable. It’s something that we have to do, but it’s so phenomenal, and I think people are tired.

We’ve got a nice definition up there, but I personally have no sense of scale of how far away from sustainability we are as a society or as a planet. Nobody in our group had any idea where we were relative to sustainability, how close we actually were or were not to sustainability on a number of measures of sustainability – or even for that matter what the measures of sustainability are.

I made a comment earlier this morning that sustainability didn’t mean a thing to most of the people in the marketplace and I still don’t think it does. If you’re talking to a forest industry person you can understand that if you plant more trees 100 years from now you will have trees to cut. You have some kind of sustainability. But if you buy a new automobile, what does sustainability mean? It’s an absolutely useless word. I think we’ve tied it in as a buzz word to a whole bunch of things and it has become meaningless.

I think ‘sustainability’ is an abstraction and abstractions don’t motivate people. Abstractions mean absolutely nothing to people. I also think our definition of sustainability involves future generations, but the “what’s in it for me” factor is completely and utterly absent.

- Sustainability — one word, many meanings. Participants also noted that the word “sustainability” means different things to different people. For example, some were troubled by its connotation of trying to maintain our *current* lifestyle and standard of living, a goal that struck participants as entirely the opposite of what the term should try to convey. Several noted a fact that appeared in their materials: if every person on the planet consumed as many resources and produced as much waste as the average Canadian, we would need four more planets like earth to meet our needs. This state of affairs, they felt, was just what we do not want to sustain.

I think a lot of people think of “sustainability” as being able to maintain your current lifestyle. With the increase in population, I don’t think that’s realistic. When you look at China developing, the buildings, the people there, Asia in general, third world countries – if they all start consuming resources like us, something has to give.