CHAPTER 10

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE TO SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we explore the inextricable, yet often unrecognized links between environmental justice and sustainability in the context of sustainability education. The current, predominant orientation of sustainability discourses in higher education is one of environmental sustainability. At the university level, themes associated with sustainability are therefore usually taught in departments of environmental science and environmental studies, emphasizing ecology, resource management, and environmental economics.

This pedagogical approach means that aspects of sustainability having to do with justice and equity are, if at all, dealt with in departments and disciplines traditionally outside environmental studies such as sociology, anthropology and law. The domination of ‘sustainability as science’, together with its polarization against ‘sustainability as justice and equity’ is not only an inaccurate representation of the reality of sustainability issues, but also imparts a distorted picture to students. As a result, it is possible to graduate from university programs with credentials implying expertise in sustainability issues with a full understanding of the science of sustainability, but not the fundamental justice and equity issues that are inseparable from holistic considerations of sustainability.

Using case studies, we make the case that the development of pedagogy and curricula around sustainability in higher education should take account of the centrality of justice and equity issues as well as the natural sciences, and we put forth environmental justice as an analytic lens, conceptual tool and logical companion to sustainability. We explore the current reality of sustainability discourses, environmental justice discourses, examples of dissociation between the two, and make suggestions as to how the latter might inform the former in the context of sustainability studies in higher education. Pedagogical implications of this perspective, which we touch on in our case studies include, among others, emphases on experiential learning, participatory research, teamwork, reflection and discussion,

1 In this chapter, we will use ‘environmental justice’ as an overarching phrase which incorporates issues of social justice as we see the delineations between environmental justice and social justice as somewhat arbitrary.
contextualized learning, and straddling boundaries not only between disciplines, but between theory and practice.

**SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSES**

*Environmental perspectives*

While many current sustainability discourses do not take more than a passing account of the linkage between environmental degradation and social justice and equity, it is worthwhile exploring what *is* often meant by those who see sustainability primarily through its environmentalist lens. Redclift (1987) argues that the ‘limits to growth’ debates of the 1970s in general, and the 1972 UN Stockholm Conference in particular, shifted the collective environmental thinking of the day towards its current *environmental* sustainability-focused paradigm. The current, prevailing definition of sustainable development comes from a 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report known as the Brundtland Report.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Brundtland definition of sustainability is the so-called ‘futurity principle,’ that is, the incorporation of notions of the welfare of future generations into our current moral sphere. It argued that “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (WCED, 1987, p. 43) By 1991, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) had also updated its 1980, conservation-based definition of sustainability. It was rewritten to suggest that sustainable enterprises are those based on “improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems.” (IUCN, 1991, p. 10).

However, Kula (1998) suggests the roots of current sustainability debates are much older than the 1970s and 80s. Concepts of sustainability in forestry are found as early as the mid-nineteenth century when forest managers such as Von Thunen, in 1826, and Faustmann, in 1849, wrote of opportune harvesting times to ensure that forest yields were sustained over time and not depleted for the sake of short term gain.

It has been the relatively recent recognition of the scope of our impact on the natural world, and thus our ability to alter the opportunities for future generations, that has created an intellectual climate in which the concept of sustainability, long known in agriculture, forestry and fisheries, has been applied to the human enterprise more broadly. According to Kula (1998, p. 152), “the sustainable development debate is essentially about the claims of future generations which have been brought to prominence by environmental problems that have no precedent in human history.” He argues that our natural capital must be the central element in our definitions of sustainability. He designates a proportion of this as “critical capital” which is necessary for human survival: the ozone layer, the carbon cycle, biodiversity, etc. This, the so-called “constant natural capital stocks criterion” (Rees, 1995), must be kept constant from generation to generation for two reasons.