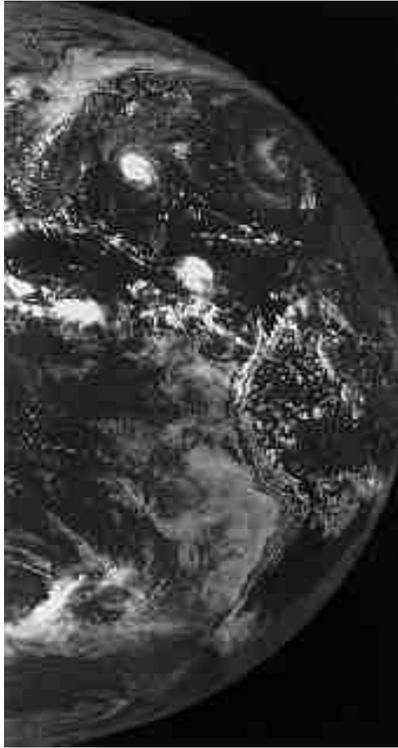


# Introduction



*President Clinton asked the Council to recommend a national action strategy for sustainable development at a time when Americans are confronted with new challenges that have global ramifications. The Council concluded that in order to meet the needs of the present while ensuring that future generations have the same opportunities, the United States must change by moving from conflict to collaboration and adopting stewardship and individual responsibility as tenets by which to live.*

IN JUNE 1993, when President Clinton created the President's Council on Sustainable Development, he asked us to find ways "to bring people together to meet the needs of the present without jeopardizing the future."[\[1\]](#) He gave us a task that required us to think about the future and about the consequences of the choices this generation makes on the lives of future generations. It is a task that has caused each of us to think about human needs, economic prosperity, and human interactions with nature differently than we had before.

No one can predict the future--how people will live, or what exactly they will need--but it is possible to foresee the likely effects of some of today's decisions and to make choices that honor the interests of present and future generations. In the nearly three years of the Council's work, in our meetings across the country, we heard concern that despite America's great wealth, power, and technological prowess, Americans cannot assume that the future of their children's lives will be better than the present. Those who met with us see, as we do, trends that lead in troubling directions and opportunities that must soon be seized or lost.

**The recommendations in this report are not only for government, but also for the private sector and citizens since government by itself cannot overcome apathy, spur innovation, or inspire new values.**

We view this challenge with considerable optimism because the potential benefits of knowledge are essentially inexhaustible; because global attention to developing sustainably is growing; and because many communities, companies, and individuals are independently taking first steps toward responding to the need for change.

But optimism is not complacency. Opportunities for change and anecdotes of progress do not by themselves redirect global trends. There are substantial obstacles to overcome that require conscious and concerted action, sometimes by government, sometimes by the private sector, or sometimes by citizens in communities or as individuals--but often, all sectors need to be actively involved. The recommendations in this report are not only for government, but also for the private sector and citizens since government by itself cannot overcome apathy, spur innovation, or inspire new values

## **New Challenges for Americans**

These are remarkable times. This is an era of rapid and often bewildering alterations in the forces and conditions that shape human life. This is evident both in the altered nature of geopolitics in the post-Cold War era and in the growing understanding of the relationship between human beings and the natural world.

The end of the Cold War has been accompanied by the swift advance of democracy in places where it was previously unknown and an even more rapid spread of market-based economies. The authority of central governments is eroding, and power has begun to shift to local governments and private institutions. In some countries, freedom and opportunity are flourishing, while in others these changes have unleashed the violence of old conflicts and new ambitions.

Internationally, trade, investment, information, and even people flow across borders largely outside of governmental control. Domestically, deregulation and the shift of responsibilities from federal to state and local governments are changing the relationships among levels of government and between government and the private sector.

Communications technology has enhanced people's ability to receive information and influence events that affect them. This has sparked explosive growth in the number of organizations, associations, and networks formed by citizens, businesses, and communities seeking a greater voice for their interests. As a result, society outside of government--civil society--is demanding a greater role in governmental decisions, while at the same time impatiently seeking solutions outside government's power to decide.

But technological innovation is changing much more than communication. It is changing the ways in which Americans live, work, produce, and consume. Knowledge has become the economy's most important and dynamic resource. It has rapidly improved efficiency as those who create and sell goods and services substitute information and innovation for raw materials. During the past 20 years, the amount of energy and natural resources the U.S. economy uses to produce each constant dollar of output has steadily declined, as have many forms of pollution.<sup>[2]</sup> When U.S. laws first required industry to control pollution, the response was to install cleanup equipment. The shift to a knowledge-driven economy has emphasized the positive connection among efficiency, profits, and environmental protection and helped launch a trend in profitable pollution prevention. More Americans now know that pollution is waste, waste is inefficient, and inefficiency is expensive.



Even as their access to information and to means of communication have increased, citizens of wealthy industrialized nations are becoming cynical about, and frustrated with, traditional political arrangements that no longer seem responsive to their needs. The confidence of many Americans in the large institutions that affect their lives--such as business; government; the media; and environmental, labor, and civic organizations--is eroding. Individual citizens have lost faith in their ability to influence events and have surrendered to apathy, or, worse, to anger. We saw striking contrasts between communities struggling with disaffection and despair, and communities where energized and optimistic citizens have become engaged in shaping their own future.

Bringing about positive change is the challenge that the United States, and we as a Council, face. We believe that significant change is both necessary and inevitable. American society has been characterized by its capacity to embrace and profit from change. But how can communities be mobilized to leave future generations a cleaner, more resilient environment; a more prosperous nation; a more equitable society; and a more productive and efficient economy--one that is competitive internationally? The situation is especially difficult because the pace and extent of today's changes are unprecedented, reflecting the local consequences of the interaction of economic, social, and environmental forces at the global level.

## **Global Changes That Affect Us All**

Since the end of World War II, the world's economic output has increased substantially, allowing widespread improvements in health, education, and opportunity, but also creating growing disparities between rich and poor. Even within wealthy nations, including the United States, the gap between rich and poor is widening.[\[3\]](#)

Tomorrow's world will be shaped by the aspirations of a much larger global population. The number of people living on Earth has doubled in the last 50 years; the equivalent of the population of the United States was added to the world total during the course of this Council's work.[\[4\]](#)

**Prosperity, fairness, and a healthy environment are interrelated elements of the human dream of a better future. Sustainable development is a way to pursue that dream through choice and policy**

Growing populations demand more food, goods, services, and space. Where there is scarcity, population increase aggravates it. Where there is conflict, rising demand for land and natural resources exacerbates it. Struggling to survive in places that can no longer sustain them, growing populations overfish, overharvest, and overgraze.

Economic growth and innovations in agricultural technology allow many of the world's people to improve their lives as global population increases, but growth and improvement are not without consequences to the Earth's natural systems. Some of the resources used, such as minerals and fossil fuels, while plentiful, are finite; once used, they are exhausted and cannot be renewed. Living resources--plants, animals, and fish--are renewable, but can be destroyed. Human ingenuity has developed alternatives for scarce resources, but that does not mean that depletion of resources has been--or will be--free of serious human and natural consequences. In fact, the demands of a growing human population and an expanding global economy are placing increasing stresses on natural systems.

And while the exhaustion of finite resources may result in human and economic dislocation, the destruction of renewable resources often has far broader ramifications because they are part of a dynamic and interdependent natural system. When a forest is destroyed, species lose their habitat and disappear. The resulting erosion affects river and coastal resources, and, in many cases, rainfall patterns change.

In the late 20th century, the effects of human activity on natural systems are not only visible, they are observable from year to year. In the 130 years from 1850 to 1980, about 15 percent of the world's forests disappeared. During the next 10 years, another 6 percent--an area larger than California, Texas, New York, and Montana combined--was cut and not replanted.<sup>[5]</sup> The expansion of human population and the destruction of forests, grasslands, wetlands, and river systems bring an accelerated loss of species diversity. This diversity is the source not only of a wide range of human benefits--25 percent of new medicines, for example--but also the key to the ecosystem's resilience in the face of change.<sup>[6]</sup> The pressures on natural resources are myriad. For example, pollution, coastal development, and intense fishing reduce ocean fish stocks. While the number and size of fishing fleets are increasing worldwide, fish harvests are falling.<sup>[7]</sup> Human activity, primarily the burning of coal, oil, and gas, releases pollutants that are changing the chemistry of the Earth's atmosphere--changes that may eventually affect the Earth's climate.

Economic growth has often been accompanied by pollution, affecting both human health and the environment. Even though many wealthy nations have made remarkable progress in reducing pollution, the focus of industrial expansion has shifted to developing nations where environmental protection sometimes may not be regarded as affordable. Even though pollution controls and efficiency in developed nations have started to offset some of the global effects of growth, global pollution is increasing.

Because global economic, social, and environmental trends are connected, Americans' hopes for the future are linked to the rest of the world. Americans compete in a global economy shaped by global trends. American power and interests are global in nature, and the lives of Americans are affected by global environmental changes. The United States, with its high standard of living, is the largest producer and consumer of goods and services, and the largest producer of wastes on Earth.<sup>[8]</sup> What Americans do affects the lives of people in every nation, and changes in their lives eventually affect Americans.

The U.S. economy, although still the world's largest, is no longer dominant; it is part of a global marketplace. U.S. enterprises can no longer thrive by looking only to domestic markets and

domestic competitors. The fastest growing markets are not in the industrialized countries, but in those countries whose economies are in the process of becoming industrialized. Banks and private investors create huge international capital flows, seeking opportunities wherever they occur. Exports represent 7.3 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product. Imports are 9.5 percent of U.S. consumption. Burgeoning international trade now exceeds \$4 trillion per year. International currency trading exceeds \$1 trillion per day.[\[9\]](#)

The paradoxical challenge that the United States and the world face at the end of the 20th century is to generate individual economic opportunities and national wealth necessary for economically healthy societies while, at the same time, lessening the environmental risks and social inequities that have accompanied past economic development. Both in the world and in the United States, there will be more people and they will aspire to better lives. Responding to those aspirations, particularly if prevalent patterns of consumption continue, will require the production of more goods and services. The challenge of sustainable development is to find ways to meet those needs without destroying the resources upon which future progress depends.

## **Pursuit of Common Goals**

Prosperity, fairness, and a healthy environment are interrelated elements of the human dream of a better future. Sustainable development is a way to pursue that dream through choice and policy. Work, wealth, community, and the environment are interwoven into the fabric of everyday life and the life of the nation. Sustainable development is the framework that integrates economic, environmental, and social goals in discourse and policies that enhance the prospects of human aspirations.

The Council had hard and frequent debates about the term economic growth, and heard it discussed by members of the public as well, at almost all of our meetings. In the end, we found agreement around the idea that to achieve our vision of sustainability some things must grow--jobs, productivity, wages, profits, capital and savings, information, knowledge, education--and others--pollution, waste, poverty, energy and material use per unit of output--must not. We agree on growth, and agree that it must be defined and measured with care. The issue is not whether the economy needs to grow but how and in what way.

An economy that creates good jobs and safeguards public health and the environment will be stronger and more resilient than one that does not. A country that protects its ecosystems and manages its natural resources wisely lays a far stronger base for future prosperity than one that carelessly uses its assets and destroys its natural capital. A society that invests in its children and communities, equitably providing education and opportunity, is far more likely to prosper than one that does not make such investments and allows the gap between rich and poor to widen.

By recognizing that economic, environmental, and social goals are integrally linked and by having policies that reflect that interrelationship, Americans can regain their sense that they are in control of their future and that the lives of each generation will be better than the last. Thinking narrowly about jobs, energy, transportation, housing, or ecosystems--as if they were not connected--creates new problems even as it attempts to solve old ones. Asking the wrong

questions is a sure way to get misleading answers that result in short-term remedies for symptoms, instead of cures for long-term basic problems.

Seeing choices in terms of tradeoffs and balance reflects a history of confrontational politics. It pits vital necessities against each other in a false contest that inhibits exploration of the best solutions, those that link economic gain, ecological improvement, social equity, and well-being-- solutions that build common purpose from shared goals.

The United States is a democracy with powerful traditions of individual liberty. What happens in American society ultimately depends on the values that guide the choices that individuals make-- which is a function of their commitment and understanding. People act according to their perception of the intersection of their needs and wants, their values and conditions, and the events that affect them. But the narrow and immediate interests of individuals, organizations, or government officials do not necessarily coincide with the long-term interests of a larger community at home or abroad. Although people can act in the interests of the larger community, they rarely do so alone. Because each fears losing separately, all lose together.

### **Moving Forward: From Conflict to Collaboration**

How can more than 261 million individual Americans define and reconcile their needs and aspirations with community values and the needs of the future? Our most important finding is the potential power of and growing desire for decision processes that promote direct and meaningful interaction involving people in decisions that affect them. Americans want to take back control of their lives. Communities throughout the country are demonstrating that it is possible to shift from conflict to collaboration when citizens find common values to guide community action. Trust can be restored, hope can be expanded, and people can find ways to lead prosperous lives in harmony with the environment. Throughout this report, there are recommendations to create structures that will involve more people and a broader range of interests in shaping community vision and making public policy. These will improve decisions, mitigate conflict, and begin to counteract the corrosive trends of cynicism and civic disengagement that afflict society.

More collaborative approaches to making decisions can be arduous and time-consuming (as we have learned over the past nearly three years), and all of the players must change their customary roles. For government, this means using its power to convene and facilitate, shifting gradually from prescribing behavior to supporting responsibility by setting goals, creating incentives, monitoring performance, and providing information.

The federal government, in particular, can help set boundaries for and facilitate place-based policy dialogues. These are dialogues that focus on the resources and management of conflicts of particular places or regions while giving more opportunity, power, and responsibility to communities to address natural resource questions that affect them directly and primarily.

For their part, businesses need to build the practice and skills of dialogue with communities and citizens, participating in community decisionmaking and opening their own values, strategies, and performance to their community and the society.

Advocates, too, must accept the burdens and constraints of rational dialogue built on trust, and communities must create open and inclusive debates about their future.

## **Stewardship As A Guide**

Stewardship is an invaluable guide to action. Members of the Council were powerfully moved by testimony from a group of senior clergy and lay leaders representing a remarkably broad spectrum of religious groups. They said that the call to care for the Earth is an inescapable component and a rigorous standard of faith. It is a human impulse as well as a moral imperative. In so many modes--intuitive, aesthetic, spiritual, religious--humans know that by protecting the Earth, they find a sense of place and purpose and fulfill a moral obligation to the future.

The intuitive and essentially moral commitment Americans have to preserving Earth's beauty and productivity for future generations is best expressed in the concept of stewardship. Principles of stewardship help define appropriate human interaction with the natural world. Stewardship is more a perspective than a science; it is a set of values that applies to a variety of decisions. It provides moral standards that cannot be imposed but can be taught, encouraged, and reinforced. Instilled in individuals and institutions, it can motivate resolve for voluntary change. Principles of stewardship can illuminate complex policy choices and guide individuals toward the common good.

Stewardship is a workable perspective for all professions. For government, it can refocus policy on the long-term needs of the economy. For advocates, it can mean embracing the needs for prosperity, environmental protection, and social equity and well-being. For corporate America, it can profitably shape a business' strategic vision and inform decisions on the shop floor. For families, it can provide a framework for rethinking customs of consumption. This report suggests a variety of means to inform, encourage, reward, and support stewardship.

## **Individual Responsibility**

Another important emphasis of the report is on individual responsibility. No set of policies, no system of incentives, no amount of information can substitute for individual responsibility or counteract apathy. Information can provide a basis for action. Vision and ideas can influence perceptions and inspire change. New ways to make decisions can empower those who seek a role in shaping the future. However, our recommendations will be meaningless unless individuals acting as citizens, consumers, investors, managers, workers, and professionals decide that it is important to them to make choices on the basis of a broader, longer view of their self-interest; to get involved in turning those choices into action; and, most importantly, to be held accountable for their actions.

The combination of political will, technological innovation, and a very large investment of resources and human ingenuity in pursuit of environmental goals has produced enormous benefits for Americans. This is an achievement to celebrate, but in a world and a nation that steadily uses more materials to make more goods for more people, we recognize that we will have to achieve more in the future for the sake of the future. We foresee a world in which zero waste will become an ideal for society even as zero defects has become so for manufacturing.



We are convinced that the change in the form and nature of the civic discussion that we propose can make the issues of sustainability a bridge between people and institutions. That, we believe, is the essence of sustainable development: the recognition that the pursuit of one set of goals affects others and that we must pursue policies that integrate economic, environmental, and social goals.

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[1] Executive Order No. 12852, 29 June 1993, amended 19 July 1993, 42 U.S.C. 4321.

[2] Since 1973, the amount of energy needed to produce each constant dollar of gross domestic product has declined nearly 30 percent. See U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, *Monthly Energy Review: October 1995*, DOE/EIA-0035(95/10) (Washington, D.C., October 1995), p. 16, fig. 1.8 and table 1.9.

[3] Global gross domestic product has doubled since 1980. See World Bank, *World Tables 1995* (Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 28-29, table 7; and U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994), p. 470, table 716.

[4] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *World Population Profile: 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994), p. A-1, table 1; and World Resources Institute, *World Resources 1994-95*, prepared in collaboration with the U.N. Environment Program and the U.N. Development Program (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 268, table 16.1.

[5] World Conservation Monitoring Center, *Global Biodiversity: Status of the Earth's Living Resources* (New York: Chapman & Hall, 1992), p. 253, table 18.3; *World Resources 1994-95*, p. 305; and World Resources Institute, *Global Biodiversity Strategy: Guidelines for Action to Save, Study, and Use Earth's Biotic Wealth Sustainably and Equitably*, prepared in collaboration with the U.N. Environment Program and The World Conservation Union (Washington, D.C.: World Resources Institute, 1992), p. 7.

[6] Walter V. Reid et al., *Biodiversity Prospecting: Using Genetic Resources for Sustainable Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Resources Institute, 1993), p. 7.

[7] Eduardo A. Loayza, *A Strategy for Fisheries Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1992), p. xi; U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Bulletin of Fishery Statistics: Fishery Fleet Statistics* (Rome, 1988); and *FAO Yearbook Fisheries Statistics 1993*, vol. 76 (Rome, 1993), p. xi, "World Catch."

[8] The United States has the largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world. See *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1994*, p. 446, table 684 (for U.S. GDP); and p. 862, table 1366 (for GDP comparisons). Estimates of the U.S. share of world resource consumption range from 20 to 30 percent. In 1993, the United States consumed approximately 24 percent of world energy. See U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, *International Energy Annual: 1993*, DOE/EIA-0219(93) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1995), p. vii. U.S. consumption of raw materials in 1993 equaled nearly 30 percent of the world total. See U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, "Changing Minerals and Material Use Patterns" (presented at the Annual General Meeting of the Academia Europaea, Parma, Italy, 23-25 June 1994), figs. 5-1 and 5-2. The United States is the largest producer of waste per capita among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. See OECD, *OECD Environmental Performance Reviews -- Netherlands* (Paris, 1995), p. 78, fig. 4.2.

[9] Based upon 1993 merchandise exports of \$464.7 billion, merchandise imports of \$603.4 billion and a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$6.4 trillion. See *World Tables 1995*, pp. 76-77, table 19 (for 1993 import/export data); and *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1994*, p. 446, table 684 (for GDP). International trade data are from the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development, *Handbook of International Trade and Development Statistics 1989* (New York: United Nations, 1990), pp. 2-3, tables 1.1 and 1.2. International currency trading data are from Anthony Ramirez, "Automation Drives Surge in Currency Trading Volume," *New York Times*, 20 September 1995, sec. D, p. 3.