

## Discipline-specific Attitudes to 'Sustainability' Perspectives from the Arts and Humanities

In order to gauge existing understanding of, and approaches to, sustainability, colleagues from within the Arts and Humanities were asked a series of questions. The disciplines that were polled are as follows:

- Archaeology
- Art History
- Classics
- History
- Landscape History
- Music
- Philosophy
- Theology and Religious Studies

This document also introduces you to many of the scholars whose work has been incorporated into this module.

*N.B. all replies are personal perspectives and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of their Departments or institutions.*

**Naomi Sykes**

**Lecturer in Archaeology, Department of Archaeology,  
University of Nottingham.**



### **Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

I find this an exceptionally difficult term to define – it means so many different things in different contexts. But that is not to suggest that the term is meaningless. The fact that different people can have different perspectives on 'sustainability' is perhaps what makes the term so powerful: it encourages debate. That said, I find the debate about definitions slightly tedious – it diverts people's attention from action.

If I had to define 'sustainability', I suppose I perceive it to be about how everything – plants and animals, including humans – should live within means and in balance at a local, regional and global scale. This is, of course, rather difficult to achieve as the world is complex (environmentally, socially, culturally, economically) and so sustainable approaches must be integrated. The problem is that integrated thinking is not easy at a large scale because the number of variables become unwieldy; therefore sustainable approaches need to start at the smaller scale and build up. It is this small-scale action that creates the multiplicity of different definitions of sustainability...For this reason I don't really care how people define sustainability, just so long as their definition is one that leads to the creation of a world that exists within its means and in balance. I object, very much, to the term being hijacked for political ends – used cynically to sell products or in attempts to make businesses appear ethical.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

I believe that archaeology has incredible potential to help bring about sustainable futures and that archaeologists have the responsibility of realising this potential. Most research on sustainability deals with the present and attempts to predict what will happen in the future, based on observations over short time-depth. Archaeology provides deep-time *empirical evidence* about how and why things changed in the past, over thousands of years, not just decades. We can highlight episodes of societal/economic prosperity and collapse, environmental depredation or resilience, and indicate the factors responsible. Importantly we can also identify past human attitudes and responses to their environment. For instance, archaeology shows that the worldview prevalent today in the West – that humans are somehow separate from, and superior to, 'nature' – is a fairly recent development and that whenever similar ideologies have been held, they have brought dire consequences for the cultures involved. Archaeology provides information on every aspect of human life in the past and therefore it has lessons to teach about every aspect of human life in the present and future.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

In addition to providing a deep-time context for the present day, archaeology, and other disciplines in the Arts and Humanities, can play a vital role as educators by communicating the issues that surround sustainability. There are many facts and figures about the threats to the present-day global environment but people find them easy to ignore: our disciplines can make the issues 'real', engaging and understandable – this is perhaps the greatest strength of the Arts and Humanities. We can also offer examples of how human actions in the past have resulted in positive change through an ability to adapt and find innovative solutions to problems. This positive message is key if we are to encourage people to rise to future challenges rather than resigning themselves to inertia.

**Lloyd Weeks**  
**Associate Professor in Archaeology,**  
**Department of Archaeology,**  
**University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

I understand sustainability to mean the long-term viability of a particular cultural practice or activity. In archaeological terms, I tend to think of issues such as agricultural systems and how they respond (or fail to respond) to environmental change, or their ability to be applied in contexts away from their point of origin. Another issue of interest to me is the long term sustainability of pyrotechnological industries such as metallurgy and pottery production in arid lands, given their high demand for fuel. There are, of course, more exclusively "cultural" practices (rather than technologies) that can be considered in terms of sustainability, such as for example inter-personal and inter-group social relationships, economic and political formations and so on.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

Archaeology offers a unique long-term perspective on the viability of technical, social and political systems and on modes of human response to internally- and externally-driven change. Archaeology may ultimately be important in demonstrating that sustainability is an unrealistic goal, which should be abandoned for a capacity that is abundantly demonstrated in the archaeological record – adaptability!

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

As archaeologists with a long-term perspective on change, we can improve our understanding of the challenges of sustainability precisely by interrogating the cultural record of past human societies and understanding the changes that we can observe. More generally, I think that the Humanities are critical to the sustainability debate; one which is currently dominated by the sciences, due to their (key!) role in identifying and quantifying environmental change, and also by economists who are modelling its possible economic impact. Humanities must emphasise that, although environmental change and possible economic downturn are currently driving considerations of sustainability, our anxiousness about sustainability is generally focussed upon its potential effects on our society and the ways in which our society will respond. Given its broad perspective on human societies past and present, Humanities should be playing a leading role in the debate over these matters.

**Gabriele Neher,  
Lecturer in Art History, Department of Art History  
University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Sustainability to me is one of those terms where different meanings morph into each other, and where a number of discourses seem to be implied.

There is first of all the 'obvious' meaning of sustainability in an environmental sense; this to me carries connotations with regards to issues such as a printing, VLEs. Delivery of paper-less teaching, exploration of environmentally friendly practices. I find this a stimulating way of thinking about sustainability in a practical way as I see this as linked to responsible husbandry of limited natural resources. In a connected sense, I see it as my responsibility as a lecturer in a professional environment to demonstrate good citizenship and maybe inspire similar approaches and concerns in the students I am guiding towards their degree.

Then this conjures up a cluster of connotations connected not to the delivery of teaching but the content of teaching; here, sustainability evokes ideas about environmentally-related practices. This I can find more challenging as my subject expertise may not relate directly to such issues; I have made an effort though to identify areas where students may engage with the subject of sustainability in their work, should they so wish.

The third cluster of ideas is about longevity of practices and building content and delivery that has a logic to it and a reason for being sustained.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

This to me is an issue about active, good citizenship, but not in a politically-motivated way. It is the Department's responsibility to strive to the highest environmentally friendly standards in the delivery and administration of its teaching, but the proviso has to be that the main driver remains the very best quality of what we do. Content and quality of delivery come first, and then the concerns about doing so in the most responsible manner.

From the point of view of concerns with sustainability, I would argue that at a fundamental level art history captures and reflects people's desire to interact and engage with the world around them, in a creative and visual manner by using things to create art, or by using made object to comment on their environs. There is a close, symbiotic relationship between resources and their consumption, and the creative interpretation of this, so awareness of context is something that is inherent to the discipline. By expanding this to discourses about social responsibility, etc, Art History has a theoretical engagement with key concerns related to sustainability

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

Questioning and understanding processes and reactions fundamental to what it means to be human is at the core of all Arts and Humanities subjects. Art History is no exception and as a discipline often focuses on a deep understanding of particular moments in time, drawing on synergies created by sister disciplines such as archaeology, classics, history, literature, geography, philosophy for example, as well as looking for patterns and trends. Knowledge and education, and the communication of these patterns is key, and this takes me back to the social responsibilities of universities. And the fundamental need for the freedom to explore.

**Mark Bradley,  
Associate Professor of Ancient History,  
Department of Classics, University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

My impression, and that of several colleagues I have spoken to, is that this is an unhelpful, catch-all piece of jargon that covers so many areas of enquiry that I suspect it will be difficult to form a coherent or workable event or course out of it. Its uses within the university context seem to allude often to the institution's engagement with a wide range of environmental issues that tick various government boxes, particularly those focussed on optimizing, preserving and reusing resources and infrastructures. But I suspect that a module title with such a vague (hexasyllabic) term will not be attractive to students.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

Preserving the literature, philosophy, history, art and language of ancient Greece and Rome as sources of information, ideas, reflection and inspiration for modern societies.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

Conduct research and provide teaching on the history of the discipline in modern Europe: several colleagues in Classics already do so; we already run a course on 'Classics and Popular Culture' which examines the continuing impact of ancient Greece and Rome on modern film, theatre, literature, art and architecture etc., and we are developing a new second-year core module ('Studying Classical Scholarship') which will examine how scholarship about the classical world across the last 200 years has shaped how we approach the Greco-Roman past.

**Ross Balzaretti,  
Associate Professor, Department of History,  
University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Living in such a way that future generations do not have to suffer for what we do the planet now. Hence, trying to use 'natural' resources in ways which do not exhaust them; preferring wind over fossil fuel for power would be a case in point. But there are many other difficult questions to grapple with such as population increase (and how best to stop it), pollution of all kinds (and how to lessen it), how to maintain 'progress' for less developed parts of the world in the face of a sustainability agenda largely promoted by the West, what to do about 'conservation' (of plants, insects, animals etc.).

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

All disciplines which deal with the past potentially have a very important role in sustainability discussions, as through these studies we come to know what past environments were like, how people coped (or did not cope) with environmental and climate change, how people have argued for 'progress' and how others have resisted this. Traditional History – based mostly on written documentation – can only deal with a relatively short time period. Understood more broadly however as 'the past' it draws on many cognate disciplines, including most obviously archaeology but also many other research methods including those of hard science. It is really important that students should engage with these issues at degree level, as environmental history for example.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

The points raised by the previous question are clearly relevant here.

Understanding where the 'conservation movement' came from in the mid-twentieth century and how it has developed is one area which historians can contribute to, as can examining much earlier antecedents to critique what has become an established (and very Western) history of environmentalism.

Thinking about past incidents where environmental issues have risen to the fore and examining what was and was not learnt from discussions about them is also important: for example the 'Torrey Canyon' oil spill in 1967. Historians can also examine past conflicts about 'preserving' the past and the development of ideas of 'heritage' (cf. the National Trust) and see how these do (and do not) fit with ideas of a sustainable future (cf. recent debates about the appearance of wind turbines seemingly overriding their purpose). 'Sustainability' is obviously a contentious idea, potentially encompassing everything, and so it needs to be constantly critiqued: Humanities disciplines are probably best placed to do this. Lastly, and probably most importantly, historians can criticise policy makers by keeping a close watch about how they present the past in public, reminding them for example what they said in the past about promoting a sustainable future.

**Robert Lambert,  
Lecturer in Environmental History, Dept of History,  
Lecturer in Tourism and the Environment, Nottingham  
University Business School,  
University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Sustainability to me is about all life on earth. It is about all living things, not just the human condition, and it embraces that other buzzword of the 1990s, 'biodiversity'. As an environmental historian, naturalist, birder, Antarctica expedition observer, and TV wildlife documentary contributor, my view of this most contested of terms is shaped by the blending together of my professional research interests and personal passions for Nature and the natural world, and by my fierce commitment to looking back into our environmental past to then look forward as we seek a rich and complex accommodation with the natural world in the twenty-first century. Sustainability to me is also wrapped up in stark imagery, of the Earth from Space photographed by the NASA Apollo missions in the late 1960s/early 1970s, or Brigitte Bardot cuddling baby harp seal pups in 1977 on the pack-ice of Newfoundland, and of the *Torrey Canyon* oil tanker aground on rocks off Land's End in 1967. These all speak to us about the way that we have used, harnessed and manipulated Nature over time, but also the way that we have (in recent decades) rallied to protect and embrace it. They speak to us of a 'spaceship' Earth, of a shared humanity, of a common future: and of the traumatic realisation that we have nowhere else to go. Sustainability is not an ultimate destination, rather it is a journey; and it is a journey that we must embark on, with many stops along the way. In the same way that I now baulk at the public and media and NGO over-use of the term 'wilderness' and much prefer the more appropriate term 'wild land'; so, I fear that sustainability has been appropriated and diluted by all sectors in society in the modern world into a jazzy buzzword, and thus I seek solace in what the pioneering conservation thinkers in the USA coined 'wise use' as they battled with deeply held conflicts over the purposes of American National Parks in the early twentieth century. Somehow 'wise use' better captures the human attitudinal and perceptual angle of the sustainability challenge, and when allied to biodiversity (all of life on this planet) it surely is the most important of historical stories and relationships.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

First and foremost I champion the cause that the idea of sustainability has a history, as I champion the idea that the environment has a history! There still remains a powerful perception that 'sustainability' as an idea just popped up onto the governmental, public and media scene sometime in the mid-1980s and gained fuller recognition over the 1990s. That might be true of the term 'sustainability', but the idea has been around for a great deal longer, and has been debated for decades, going back into the tumultuous decades of social change at the end of the nineteenth century in the Western World.

Sustainability, wise use, seeking an accommodation with Nature was at the heart of the Thirlmere reservoir debate in the English Lake District in the 1870s, it was at the heart of the Hetch-Hetchy dam debate in Yellowstone National Park in the first decade of the twentieth century, it was at the heart of thinking by

George Perkins Marsh in the 1860s and of Aldo Leopold in the 1940s and of Frank Fraser Darling in the 1960s. So, wearing my environmental history cap, the primary role of that discipline is to blend together the ecological history of the planet with the socio-economic history of humankind, as the two only make full sense when seen together. And yes, good scholarly and accessible environmental history can inform current and future environmental policymaking. We should not be prisoners of the past, but we can seek deeper understanding of our present by recognizing where we have come from, and we can use it to inform future challenges and opportunities. Environmental history also challenges us to think just what a historical source is, as it seeks to blend traditional historical research with scientific inquiry and practice and ecological study. I am also challenged to think differently on the issue wearing my tourism studies cap; here the focus is on 'balance', on how the three-legged stool of sustainability (the environmental, the economic, the social) can be stabilized in tourism destinations and operations and practices around the world, most especially in my area of interest, wildlife tourism or eco-tourism in wild places. The social science research here is often case study based, and seeks to illustrate management challenges and stakeholder interactions, whilst also then drawing bigger and wider conclusions and reflections.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

The most obvious way is that we need, in the Western World, a much more widely accepted recognition of the huge importance of the socio-cultural view of Nature. Nature is not just for scientists. Indeed, Nature is not for us at all, Nature is for Nature. But the non-scientific view of the natural world is so often dismissed as irrelevant, yet it is the way that most of us interact with the planet. And the political clout (and mass membership) of the BBC *Springwatch* and *Autumnwatch* and RSPB millions who seek a connection with animals and landscapes is a force within British society that we ignore at our peril. They speak to us of a much more basic and fundamental relationship with the natural world. The simple act of feeding the garden birds is a hugely formative stepping stone for many millions in this country as they embark on their own personal sustainability journey. And as 'environment' academics, I firmly believe that it is our responsibility to translate and broadcast stepping stone socio-cultural (and historical) environmental evidence not just within the seminar room at university, but also to wide public audiences. There is a huge thirst for this knowledge out there. We must as well work with partners in the scientific and NGO policymaking world, to urge upon them the relevance and value of our work to their future understandings and planning. We must also seek to interact with the coming waves of young voices (the future 'environmental generations') and present to them the truth (as best we know it) so they do not succumb to myth and muddle.

Dr Rob Lambert is on the Steering Group of a new think-tank:

**[www.newnetworksfornature.org.uk](http://www.newnetworksfornature.org.uk)**

**Richard Jones,  
Senior Lecturer in Landscape History,  
Centre for English Local History,  
University of Leicester.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Sustainability means the global development of social, economic, political and cultural practices, informed by philosophical and religious frameworks, which work in harmonious union with Nature rather than against it. Sustainable practices must engender conditions which will ensure the future survival and well-being of the *whole* human race. A sustainable future demands radical reconfiguration of what we are currently doing (most acutely, of course, in the developed and rapidly developing world) and will require a total re-examination of how we have come to understand our place in the world. Sustainability will only come through the relinquishing of power, the rejection of the notion of anything so improbable as human domination over Nature, and an acknowledgement that our lives must once again take greater account of the Rules of Nature. Sustainability will only derive from dynamic systems; people must be free to make radical decisions based on alternative understandings of our true relationship with Nature. Policies which seek to protect and encouraged current practices, and which offer impediments to the implementation of new ideas or a return to the old, must be overthrown. We must put in place the foundations of a society that acknowledges that change (particularly to *personal* circumstance) is inevitable, a society that is comfortable with the idea that the continuation of life is not based on the continuation of current 'ways of life', a society that accepts and embraces the idea that our futures will involve personal and communal sacrifice, that we may be required to return to simplicity rather than strive for greater complexity. Sustainability, then, means the creation of a society that beats to the drum of Nature not Man, a society where the natural/cultural divide has been accepted and rejected as a false dichotomy.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

Few disciplines have a greater responsibility, or hold greater potential to inform upon current debates surrounding sustainability, than landscape history. The landscape is a memory palace, the greatest repository we possess of information relating specifically to the vexed question of peoples' relationship with the environment. From the physical evidence of the landscape can be read the past successes and failures of human endeavour. It is here that we best study why some societies have enjoyed greater levels of resilience and sustainability than others, and where we can isolate the underlying factors leading to such stable and self-perpetuating states. Contrariwise, it is in the landscape that we can witness the catastrophic social and economic effects of the mismanagement of the environment. Since sustainability can only assessed when the long-term

impact of human decision-making can be viewed, the deep-time perspective offered by landscape history provides the only temporal scale over which the true sustainability of any society, system, process, or practice can be properly judged. Landscape historians should therefore be active in taking their findings to the very heart of government, ensuring that the decisions of today's policy-makers and bureaucrats take account of the often brutal lessons drawn from the past.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

In the developed world, several cultural barriers stand in the way of developing more sustainable ways of living. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) through their shared text, the Old Testament, all insist upon human dominion over Nature. Differences of interpretation exist between these three great religions, of course, but fundamentally they acknowledge and promote an asymmetrical relationship between people and Nature, in which the former is given precedence over the latter. Traditionally these religions were far more attuned to the notion of balance (and thus sustainability) than they have now become under the influence by other powerful exogenous social, political, and philosophical movements. In the West, for instance, it is just now becoming possible to judge the catastrophic consequences of Enlightenment ideas such as the insistence upon the separation of Man and Nature; or the irrationality of rational thinking which insisted upon the superiority of the human mind over the laws of nature; or the rise of science and the rejection of simple readings of Nature's workings together with the celebration of the intellectual over the massed wisdom of folklore representing the accumulated knowledge of mankind achieved over many millennia. To this we might add the insidious effects of capitalism promoting individualism over community, over-exploitation over sufficiency, and much more besides. Such paradigms have both shaped, and can be read through, the cultural record. And it is only through the study of this cultural record that we can begin to demonstrate just how imperfect, one might say dangerous, these ideas have become. For currently, far from promoting sustainability, they stand in the way of its achievement. We are duty bound, therefore, to return to these ideas, to subject them to critical analysis, and to seek out those hidden or forgotten alternatives which they have succeeded in obscuring.

*Richard Jones is author/editor of several works that he has made available for incorporation in this module:*

2012. *Manure Matters: Historical, Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives* Ashgate Press.

In press. *The Medieval Natural World - Seminar Studies in History*, Longman

**Sarah Hibberd,  
Associate Professor, Department of Music,  
University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Primarily associated with the environment (the natural environment) and our place in it, and our responsibility for its future. There are competing elements – financial, environmental, cultural, convenience, etc – and so it is difficult to establish stable models of sustainability. There also seems to be a gulf between global issues – climate change and resources – and how we as individuals live (to what degree does the fact I use roll-on instead of aerosol deodorant really make a difference to the planet's sustainability when we consider the extraordinary level of emissions created by industry – esp, say China, the US...? etc).

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

I don't think most people (though I may be wrong!) associate the term with cultural activity, and I'm not sure we have a 'responsibility' to grapple with sustainability. That said, music is a social construct, and there are productive ways in which music and sustainability might be considered from the perspective of representation, and from the perspective of creativity. And we do have a responsibility to think about music's political application, and avoid hiding behind its 'ineffability'.

Knowledge and understanding of our history help us to understand our present and the choices we make for the future – including those that might potentially lead to climate change and the end of the world... Music is rarely a neutral ingredient in advertising, propaganda, and other politicised representations. Alternatively, one might think about music as one of the most sustainable cultural activities of all (singing leaves no ecological footprint at all, and the only resources required are human; though there are of course highly unsustainable musical activities).

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

Music (specially representational genres such as opera, film and theatre music, programme music) can help to illuminate catastrophe in a highly emotional way (e.g. films such as Independence Day, about the end of the world... or indeed the advertising/propaganda of political parties, environmental groups, in which music and image create compelling scenes of disaster and its impact). These can be examined as meditations on the catastrophes that might result if we do not think about sustainability and the future of the planet. Music can help manipulate us into sympathising with a particular point of view, even taking action, and is a powerful political tool.

One might think about music (esp performance) in this sense as something that can be incorporated as a sustainable activity within a community, which can enrich that community and 'sustain' it emotionally as well as be a sustainable activity.

**Robert Adlington,  
Associate Professor, Department of Music,  
University of Nottingham.**

**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

It makes me think of two distinct (probably interrelated) definitions: an eco/environmental-oriented interpretation; and one more focused upon challenges to cultural continuity raised by the speed of social change.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

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**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

I'm not an expert in either field, but I've come across bits of research which might have a relevance. With regard to the first, there is debate for instance about the relative carbon footprint of established and new means of music distribution and consumption: academic research has been undertaken (commissioned by Microsoft) on the environmental cost of CD production versus online distribution, (e.g see weblink 1), and its fairly predictable conclusions (= computers are good) have sparked lively debate in the pages of music journals like *The Wire*. The original research was not by music scholars or musicians, but some of the follow-up is likely to be. More generally, there is an emergent field of ecomusicology, with a society and a recent colloquy in the leading American musicology journal (e.g. see weblink 2). Acoustic ecology is a related field, in which a number of composers (especially) have been invested for some time (e.g. see weblink 3)

Possibly of more pressing importance to music undergraduates are the challenges presented to musical cultures by social change. Economic retraction is having an immediate impact upon musical organisations dependent upon public finance, and private benefactors have also been affected. The spread of global commerce continues to have an irreversible effect upon regional musical cultures. The possibilities of online music sharing pose a threat to the livelihoods of creative musicians. Training young musicians to have a good understanding of such developments, to develop resilience and flexibility in the face of them, and to have the capacity to argue effectively for the deleterious cultural effects of some of these kinds of change, represents a distinctly contemporary challenge for our discipline. I'm not myself sure of where to start, but lessons can certainly be learnt from the history of patronage, a cultural institution that has never adhered to a single model for long (crowdfunding being one of the latest twists). Ethnomusicological research would be a good place to look for insights into the positives and negatives of cultural interaction over time, but I'd need to put some work in to find good examples.

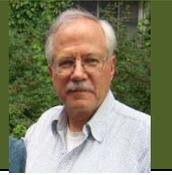
**Weblinks**

1 <http://download.intel.com/pressroom/pdf/cdsvsdownloadsrelease.pdf>

2 [http://www.ams-esg.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/JAMS\\_Ecomusicology\\_Colloquy.pdf](http://www.ams-esg.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/JAMS_Ecomusicology_Colloquy.pdf)

3 <http://wfae.proscenia.net/journal/index.html>

**Jeff Todd Titon,  
Professor of Music, Department of Music,  
Brown University.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Sustainability in its most basic sense is something's ability to continue for the foreseeable future. That something can be an idea, any living being or group, a place or environment, an institution, an activity or process, an inanimate object, and other things as well.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

In my discipline of ethnomusicology, so-called applied ethnomusicologists are concerned with the sustainability of people making music: that is, with musical cultures, with music-making all over the world. Most ethnomusicologists believe in musical and cultural equity: that all musics have the right to continue to exist, and that all music-making practices do as well.

Also, within ethnomusicology and related fields, an emerging discipline called ecomusicology is addressed directly to issues involving the relationship of sound and music to the environment and the sustainability of the planet and its life.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

In part by calling attention to ways in which sound and music are critical to life on planet Earth, and how their continuance and sustainability is also critical to the planet's future. Ecosystem health, for example, is dependent in large part on communication among inhabitants, and much of that communication takes place through sound. Interfering with sound interferes with the health of the ecosystem and its inhabitants. The history of cultural institutions and their impact on the sustainability of sound communication is not very promising, but examining that record and determining wise policy for sound futures is imperative.

*Jeff has made a considerable amount of his research available for incorporation in this module and his thoughts on sustainability and related issues may be found on his blog <http://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com>*

**Andrew Fisher,  
Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy,  
University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Sustainability is rather nebulous and attempting to distil a necessary and sufficient definition is impossible and unhelpful. It is probably better thought of as a family resemblance term where things are related in a significant non-trivial way yet have no 'essential' elements in common. We cannot point to something and say: 'now *that* is sustainability' but that is not to say it isn't useful to employ the term.

Primarily it is about a *world-view*; that is to say, it is about a certain set of interconnected views which inform how one perceives, acts and reacts in the world. Because sustainability is thus internalised, properly understood it informs *all* things. Hence 'world-view' is truly *the world*; incorporating, social; academic; spiritual; emotional; recreational etc. realms.

Sustainability is about being cognizant that we are part of a global community; it is about coming to believe that we have responsibilities and obligations to others – even to those who do not exist. It is to think about our communities in terms of inter-subjectivity and, relatedly, to see the concept of individual reduced and lessened.

Often this outlook is characterised in terms of 'the environment' or 'green issues'; however, this is too narrow. In fact, to talk in these terms is probably counterproductive as it gives the impression that it is something that is can be 'ticked off', 'done' or 'completed', which it is not. True, it is about such things as being responsible 'users' of the environment, but it is also bigger than this. It is about recognising we are all 'environment' and recognising that we need to reconceptualise ourselves and what we expect from our lives.

For instance, everyday notions such as 'luxury' and 'me-time' and 'what we are 'owed'' need to be rethought and/or abandoned. Sustainability then is also political and spiritual. It demands us to rethink and disentangle notions such as 'happiness', 'value', 'rights', 'responsibility', 'sin', 'sacred' etc, as well as reflecting on the direction and importance of our existence. It challenges the 'Western' anthropocentrism, and asks tough questions about what we are all doing here.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

Philosophy is about challenging presumptions, justifying beliefs and about conceptual ground clearing. What does that mean in practice? Well, for example, if sustainability is about a world-view and subsequently it is political, spiritual, economic etc. Then we need to stop and question the very discussion of 'sustainability'. By talking in terms of 'sustainability' are we creating '*sustainability missionaries*' intent on evangelizing people to a very specific value set? Are we pushing certain notions of liberalism, certain teleological conceptions of value? We need to interrogate these issues and seriously reflect on the values etc. associated with sustainability before a wholesale adoption. Put crudely, it is part of a philosopher's job to ask – and try and answer– 'what's so good about sustainability anyway?'

There are many other roles for the philosopher. Another question which the philosopher can/should ask -and attempt to answer - regards the feasibility of

introducing 'sustainability' within the current 'Western' outlook. If sustainability demands a radical re-think and a different approach to our lives how much are current systems hindering/helping this change? A good example of this is the question of how much the values of sustainability clash with the economic feasibility of sustainability. Again, put crudely, it is part of a philosopher's job to ask questions such as this: 'if the only way to 'sell' sustainability to people is in economic terms, then have we really sold sustainability at all?'

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

Philosophers and others in the Arts and Humanities are very well placed to help improve societies' understanding and implementation of sustainability. That is because one of the many things we do well is education. That is to say, the disciplines of the Arts and Humanities are about transforming the whole person, creating space and the skill set for people to think openly and honestly about sustainability. Part of this process is about pointing out that such issues are not wholly new and that Arts and Humanities is full of relevant discussions which can inform current debates and local, national and international level.

**Neil Sinclair,**  
**Lecturer in Philosophy, Department of Philosophy,**  
**University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

- A *practice* is sustainable insofar as general involvement in that practice now is compatible with future generations taking part in the same practice.
- A *lifestyle* is sustainable insofar as the adoption of that lifestyle, with its attendant level of well-being, is compatible with future generations living lifestyles with comparable levels of well-being.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

A key job of philosophy will be to articulate and clarify the useful meaning of the term 'sustainability'; clarifying what it is and why it might be worth striving for. Here, as elsewhere, philosophy can cut through conceptual tangles so that we can address practical problems more efficiently.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

I'm not clear what the 'cultural record' is, or what 'processes of cultural change' might be in this context. But in terms of understanding the challenge of sustainability, clearly articulating what the challenge is and providing a public space where solutions can be considered will be important. Much of the hard work will be in convincing people of the reality and urgency of problems of climate change and the underlying deficit in scientific literacy that drives much of the resistance to accepting the reality of climate change.

**Simon Oliver,  
Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology,  
Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Nottingham.**



**Q: What does the term 'sustainability' mean to you?**

While 'sustainability' is a very frequently deployed concept in contemporary political and ethical discourse, it might be defined in a number of different ways. In the late 1980s, the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland report) defined a sustainable state as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' Of course, this begs huge questions. For example, how do we know what the needs of future generations might be? What constitutes a 'need'? Nevertheless, this definition seems to capture the concept of sustainability in its most basic form: not depleting the resources available to us which enable the flourishing of life (including diversity) in perpetuity.

**Q. How do you perceive the responsibilities of your discipline in grappling with sustainability?**

It was common in the 1960s to argue that religion, and specifically Christianity, is significantly responsible for the environmental crisis. This thesis was proposed most provocatively by Lynn White in 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' in *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-7. While White's thesis has since been very heavily qualified by historians and theologians, it nevertheless points to the important role played by shifts in the theological imagination of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which contribute to a significant change in the understanding of humanity's place in relation to nature. For ancient and medieval theologians, creation was regarded as a system of signs which had meaning; they possessed a transcendent referent. The 'two books tradition', in which nature and scripture were interpreted alongside each other, provided a sophisticated hermeneutical scheme whereby humanity found its place *within* a system of created signs. Of equal importance was the understanding of creation as 'gift'. Just as with gifts given between people and communities, the gift of creation mediated a relationship between creator and creation. During the Reformation, significant changes in the hermeneutics of nature and scripture led to an increased understanding of nature as a resource for humanity's use. Nature no longer possessed intrinsic meaning (and therefore value); nature had become a 'natural resource' with a purely functional value to humanity. Moreover, increasingly literal readings of the Bible suggested that, as a matter of historical fact, the earth had once enjoyed a perfect 'Edenic' state to which humanity, by manipulation of the natural through technology, could return. While it seems that the development of the natural scientific investigation of nature, the economic exploitation of science in the form of technology and increasing industrialization in the nineteenth century were the immediate causes of the environmental crisis, theological shifts during the Reformation has a significant impact on the cultural and philosophical imagination which allowed the non-sustainable exploitation of nature.

This narrative implies that there may be theological and philosophical resources lying deeper within the tradition which can contribute to an analysis of the environmental crisis and issues of sustainability. In particular, recent examinations of the doctrine of creation and the concept of gift (somewhat in

opposition to the modern language of 'rights') can be deployed, along with Biblical traditions which demonstrate very significant concern for humanity's relationship with wider creation. For example, the Old Testament concept of 'jubilee', in which relationships between humans and between the human community and the land are periodically renewed, have recently been used in addressing the global debt crisis. While the science of economics generally proceeds on the assumption that human beings have unlimited wants while nature provides limited resources, theology does not accept the unfettered nature of the human will in this way. The Biblical concept of 'enoughness' – of taking what is 'enough', which is less than *could* be taken from natural resources – is often combined with the notion of a 'Sabbath rest' to counter the dogma of economic growth and the frantic culture of perpetual production which lies at the heart of modern capitalist economics.

The discipline of Theology and Religious Studies therefore has very significant responsibilities in tackling environmental and sustainability issues, not least in countering the view that our approach to the natural world can proceed according to purely secular assumptions and norms.

**Q: How can we help to improve understanding of these challenges, through interrogation of the cultural record and analysis of processes of cultural change?**

The current political debate concerning the environment and sustainability occurs on the assumption that there are only two legitimate options: the free market *or* state intervention. Moreover, the debate also proceeds according to a dualism between nature and culture. One strategy is to opt for more 'nature' by rendering human consumption, exchange and experience more 'natural'. This is often the approach of the green movement. However, this often reflects a very romanticised and sentimental nineteenth century view of the natural as a realm whose intrinsic order and balance is upset by any kind of human cultural influence. On the other, one could reject the notion of a distinct 'natural' realm and, instead, opt to maintain sustainability by cultural means. Whichever strategy is adopted, there remains a sense that humanity is not fundamentally part of the natural order; nature stands over and against human culture. Tracing the genealogy of this conceptual scheme (which is strikingly distinct from earlier theological and philosophical imaginings of the human in relation to nature) will help us to understand much more clearly the origins of the sustainability crisis and the means by which a cultural re-imagination may produce more profound and *sustainable* change.