

Currently I am involved in a project at Ohio University which is focused on the issue of sustainability. Even though the topic of sustainability has been getting more attention recently, not everyone knows what it is or how to do something about it.

There is no one-size-fits-all definition for sustainability, even though the general idea is not new. "The Great Law of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederation" is often cited as a model for sustainability. The Iroquois say that in every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the next seven generations.

In modern terms, sustainability is the ability to meet our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. I am the fifth generation to live on our family farm. I am very interested in leaving it in good shape for the next five generations.

One aim of our project is raising sustainability awareness through courses we teach. The ultimate goal is to help our communities develop strategies through which we can locally (personally) change our lifestyles to minimize our adverse effect on the environment and resources.

One way to raise awareness is to understand the implications of the choices we make in our daily lives. Let's take bottled water as one example.

According to "Datamonitor," a market research company, bottled water is now the second most popular beverage in the U.S. (Soda pop is number one.)

Industry estimates are that about 1500 plastic bottles of water are consumed EVERY SECOND in the U.S., even though about half of the bottled water consumed is sourced from municipal tap water (Beverage Marketing Corporation).

As we all know, plastic is made from petroleum, a non-renewable resource. To appreciate the amount of petroleum that is required to get a bottle of water into your hands, picture that bottle filled one-fourth full of oil. That's the amount of petroleum required to manufacture one bottle and transport it to the consumer. According to calculations from the Pacific Institute, that amounts to 17,000,000 (seventeen million) barrels of oil each year being used just by the U.S. bottled water industry.

Next we should consider what happens to all those plastic bottles. Plastic doesn't just go away. MSNBC has reported that only about one out of every six plastic bottles is recycled. The other 84% will go to landfills where they will stay for a long time. Some estimates say plastic water bottles require 700 years to decompose.

But living a sustainable lifestyle is not always simple. We make choices every day, like "paper or plastic?" And just when we think we know the best choice, there's often another side. In this case, the plastic bag's trade association, the Film and Bag Federation, claims that plastic bags consume 40% less energy and produce 80% less solid waste than paper bags.

At the very least I encourage you to learn more about these issues.

To learn more about Ohio University's Office of Sustainability, visit:
www.ohio.edu/sustainability

You can learn more about local recycling efforts at sites like this one:
www.wasteabate.org