

Museums in Search of a Sustainable Future

BY DOUGLAS WORTS

2003 was known in Alberta as the 'Year of the Coal Miner.' It was a gesture that paid respect to those economic, technological and social foundations of the province that were laid by the hearty souls who extracted coal from the earth. Knowing well the importance of honouring the province's past, Museums Alberta chose for the theme of its annual conference "Sustainability: Mining our Resources." As an urban museologist invited to address the topic of sustainability at the 2003 MA Conference, and being someone who associates the use of non-renewable resources with our current state of unsustainability, I puzzled over how to bridge what seemed to be a vast chasm between the two thematic focuses of the conference - mining and sustainability. The task made me nervous!

While pondering the challenge, I realized that tackling issues of sustainability during the Year of the Coal Miner actually made sense. I started at the obvious place – by acknowledging that mining has contributed to our collective wellbeing and to the development of our society. It was important to list what mining involves:

- the search for material that has value – often in difficult to find places
- extracting the material – which also can be arduous, requiring specialized knowledge
- putting the extracted material to use – often requiring that the material be transformed in some way.

In order for this to be done, mining requires:

- awareness of what resources are available
- a vision of what is possible if one can access the raw material
- hard work
- an ability to transform the raw material to optimize its value.

This article has been adapted from the keynote address presented at the Museums Alberta 2003 Annual Conference in Lethbridge, Alberta.

Today, mining is a significant industrial reality that has an important history, as well as serious implications for our future sustainability as a society and as a species on planet Earth. It is outside the parameters of this paper to explore the topic of mining today. However, mining is also a valuable metaphor for museums. It allows us to explore how our museums can best 'mine' our cultural values, histories, attitudes and behaviours in ways that enable us to look forward toward a world that can be sustained.

The challenges of 'sustainability' will demand of us every bit as much vision, consciousness, hard work and ability to undergo transformation, as mining has required over the generations. And like mining, the techniques and solutions used to operate museums in one time period are not necessarily the right solutions and techniques for another time – our time.

'Sustainability' is a troubled term. We encounter it being used frequently these days, in an incomplete sense, to refer to very different things – to sustain the growth of our profits; our standard of living; our social ideals; our ability to do largely as we please (within the law). At its core, sustainability is a fairly simple concept – it means the continued existence of humans within the biosphere – and it's a goal that few would argue with. The confusion comes when one tries to decide what precisely is to be the focus of action designed to support sustainability? Some museum professionals feel that the goal of sustainability is simply to preserve museums as they are. Others feel that it is necessary to foster new growth in the museum sector. There is a contingent of museum folk who are committed to shaping their museum to help sustain the local community. There is even a group that subscribes to the goal of reinventing museums in order to work towards both local and global

sustainability. Sorting out these various definitions is confusing.

If we step outside our various museum roles for a moment and consider ourselves as simply citizens of the world, I don't think there would be much argument about the importance of sustaining several things:

- health and well-being of ourselves and our families
- living in communities that we enjoy and in which we participate
- having financial resources that enable us to address our needs
- to lead lives that we consider meaningful and worthwhile.

There must be countless ways to embrace these goals and direct our lives towards achieving them. Each of us has an opportunity to define for ourselves what we mean by sustainability and how we will move toward it – or not.

This paper will provide a glimpse into the complex topic of sustainability and open the door to how museums can better address our current culture – which is, I will argue, completely unsustainable. I hope that you will find that you are frequently asking yourself how the issues being introduced relate to you in your personal life, as well as how they relate to the operation of your museum.

It may seem like a contradiction, but sustainability is actually about change, (i.e., not remaining the same). In the same way that the private sector, government and other parts of our society continuously undergo change, it makes sense that our cultural organizations reassess their relationships to an evolving world and alter their operations accordingly. Either by choice, or by external forces, museums will change, because the world we live in can't be sustained as we live now, and if we try to hold museums still, using traditional markers of success and

performance, we do a disservice both to museums and to the communities they purport to serve.

I believe museums will become more linked to the cultural needs of their communities and as they do so they will have to answer some very basic, but difficult, questions:

- what do communities actually need in order to be sustainable?
- how can museums define themselves in terms of the cultural needs of community?

By the end of this paper, you may think differently about your museum, your community and your role in the interaction of these two. Starting on the road to sustainability will almost certainly feel uncomfortable, because change is always difficult. It is especially hard when the change involves redefining some or all of one's vision, mission, skills, methods of assessment and power structures. But museums have exciting opportunities to re-envisage how cultural organizations relate to the larger cultural sphere of the society – its values, its reflectiveness, its behaviours. Museums can become more than niche forms of edutainment, tourist destinations and venues for weddings or corporate events. Such a fundamental re-thinking of museums will require that individuals who guide and operate museums not only consider the institutional assumptions that have laid at the core of museum work for a long time, but consider their personal relationship to the culture of our communities and the rest of the biosphere.

A) WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

Back in the 1960s, humans began to be exposed to significant imagery of Earth from space. I still recall the vivid TV images of Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon, which was broadcast live on July 20, 1969. Through NASA photographs, humanity at large (at least in the West)

developed a new sense of the living whole of our planet. For centuries the Earth was known to be a globe of complex systems floating in space, but the interconnected systems of life had a new image that was more tangible than had been imagined before. At the same time, an imperative emerged for individuals to develop a new consciousness of the complexity of Earth, and our place in it. We were able to see North America in relationship to the rest of the world. It was obvious that we were separate, but connected. We could better visualize the different realities that exist across the planet. Globalization was already a strong and growing reality in the world, but the concept was so abstract for most people who live their lives in relatively small spheres. Once human beings were able to visit space and look down on the whole Earth, we all could picture our world more easily.

But in a practical sense, our lives are connected to more manageable areas of the planet than to the planet as a whole – e.g., a country or a province, or a city. We can relate best to places that we travel to, live in and experience in our day-to-day lives. It is here we have a better sense of our wellbeing. But, as we become more focused on where we live, it is also more difficult to retain a sense of the Earth's whole and to feel connected to the needs of the global community.

In our society, museums and other cultural organizations help us understand our cultural past so that we can live more consciously in the present. Museums at their best have the potential to act as mirrors (both literal and symbolic) that engage us in a process of self-reflection and learning. They strive to be places of fun, social interaction and meaningful experiences. But do our museums have anything to do with the future and our sustainability? Could they play a more vital role in shifting our values towards a lifestyle that is sustainable?

We first must define what is meant by sustainability.

Sustainability is "... meeting the needs of today's world without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"

Brundtland Commission
World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987

Sustainability is a huge concept embracing the globe, its ecosystems and human needs (not only for our generation but generations to come as well). It is a global concept, yet one that has manifestations in daily life for all communities and every individual. It is important to remember that sustainability is not a destination. Rather, it is a path, a process, an attitude, values - I say this because change is a constant part of life and new balances constantly have to be negotiated - nothing is static, including sustainability. A definition of a 'sustainable community' helps to make this point.

A sustainable community is a smart community. It achieves economic, environmental and social health by:

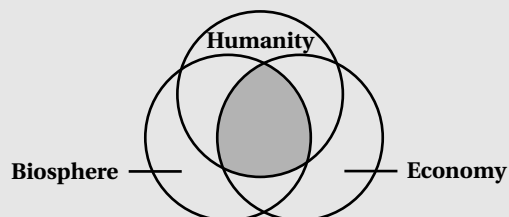
- *making the most efficient use of resources*
 - *generating the least amount of waste*
 - *providing high quality services to residents*
 - *living within the carrying capacity of its natural resources (land, water, air).*
- Sustainable communities preserve or improve quality of life while minimizing impact on the environment.*

Federation of Canadian Municipalities

This definition was developed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. One of the striking aspects of it is the reference to 'carrying capacity' of the environment – which is the ability of the biosphere, and the local ecosystems, to support life - human and other. There are limits to what our environment can support and we need to be individually and collectively conscious of these limits. If humanity is to stay within the Earth's carrying capacity, how we live our lives, both as individuals and as communities, is important.

The classic model of sustainability was developed by the Brundtland Commission in 1987.

**Sustainability is
a Matter of Balance**



Comprised of three intersecting circles, this model posits that sustainability occurs when the human, environmental and economic considerations overlap in a state of balance. What comprises each sphere? The following three lists provide a glimpse into what was intended to make up the three parts of this model.

Society

- Social equity
- Economic equity
- Adequate housing
- Opportunities for education and employment
- Democracy
- Good health
- Adequate food
- Diversity

Economy

- Equitable distribution of wealth
- Responsible resource management
- Full cost accounting (including costs of natural resource extraction & cost of polluting bi-products)
- Responsible human resource management

Environment

- Clean air
- Clean water
- Clean soil
- Biodiversity
- Ecological integrity

As one considers the contents of this model, it is worth remembering that the frame of reference is the globe. A principal issue in our sustainability is the population of the world and the rate at which it is growing. Currently the global population is almost six and a half billion people, with projections by the United Nations that this number will reach 9 billion before the population plateaus. Although population growth

is not an evident force in the West, globally, it is an unavoidable reality that affects the social, environmental and economic spheres of the sustainability model. It certainly has implications for the Earth's carrying capacity.

You will notice that some of the attributes of the three spheres have qualities that suggest they also belong in other parts of the model. For example, economic equity has both social and economic dimension. This is so because the spheres do in fact overlap. If human issues were separate from the environment and the economy, then actions within any specific sphere might be possible. However, this is not the case. Some of the limitations of our societal reality will come from the economic and environmental spheres.

Let's look at a few instances where our societal realities intersect with the environmental and economic spheres. It is obvious that humanity depends on the environment for its existence. Without it, we would not exist. We rely on the environment for our food, air, water, housing, entertainment and more. It is equally obvious that the capacity of the environment to support life is dependent on the health of our ecosystems. But these abstract truisms are not well reflected in our collective day-to-day actions. Human beings seem to be on a steep learning curve relating to what ecosystems need in order to be healthy and thereby provide us with a supportive environment in which to live. We often forget that we are just one species within a complex system that relies on biodiversity.

Also, the economy is arguably not an independent sphere – because it is so clearly a subset of human activity. However, because economics has been elevated to occupy a central place in our world – linking human and environmental spheres – it has been given status as a full sphere. For the

economy to be in balance with the other two spheres, it is important the attributes listed above be firmly in place. Without the ethical and moral parameters provided for in these attributes, economics can be hijacked by theoretical assumptions, such as that of the possibility of 'unlimited growth' – which can never be true when it is dependent on a closed system that has physical and biophysical limits. A good example of how our society subscribes to an ungrounded economic view of the world is the privileged place that the Gross National Product has in how governments and business assess our well-being. Gross National Product, or GNP, is a measure of the movement of money in our society. The more money moves and changes hands, the better the GNP ratings. Mark Anielski, an accountant from Edmonton, and a leader in the sustainability field, brought my attention to a compelling quote about GNP:

"The Gross National Product includes air pollution and advertising for cigarettes, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors, and jails for the people who break them. GNP includes the destruction of the redwoods and the death of Lake Superior. It grows with the production of napalm and missiles and nuclear warheads. And if GNP includes all this, there is much that it does not comprehend. It does not allow for the health of our families, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It is indifferent to the decency of our factories and the safety of our streets alike. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, or the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. GNP measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

Robert F. Kennedy, March 18, 1968.

Robert Kennedy's quote provides a powerful reminder of the benefits of finding measures of well-being that are more textured and complex than GNP. There is a clear opportunity for museums to contribute to a dialogue that develops effective measures of cultural health and well-being.

In my view, this simple three-sphere model is a powerful tool in grasping the large concept of sustainability, but it does have some limitations. One of these is that it is hard to see how an individual can relate to this model in a practical way. It may be true that it is our collective action and reality that will determine the future of the planet, however the base unit of the collective is the individual, and we need to understand how the model affects us at that level. Secondly, there are no provisions for cultural or spiritual dimensions – considerations that have mediated human relationships with both environment and economy for thousands of years. It is through our cultural and spiritual practices that individuals and collectives have related to the large and mysterious forces that have converged to create life on the planet. If we are to have a chance of redefining our relationship with the Earth as we approach its physical and biophysical limits, we need to spend more time and energy on our cultural and spiritual perspectives. Culture demands a place in our lives beyond that of 'leisure time' and entertainment.

This raises the question of what do we mean by culture. Recently, I created a working definition which may at least provide a reference point for debate and discussion. I defined culture as:

"...the sum total of all values, collective memory, history, beliefs, mythology, rituals, symbolic objects and built heritage which reflect the manner people relate to those aspects of life which: a) they can know and control; as well as, b) those they cannot fully understand or control, but to which they need to have a conscious relationship."

I found it significant to divide up human relationships with the world into the two categories – the things we can know and control and those that we can't fully know and control. The latter are those aspects of life that we remain unconscious of unless we can find a way to relate to them. Historically, this has been done through rituals, symbolic activities and materials, religion and cultural practice. Without an acknowledgement of what we can't know and control, we become arrogant and vulnerable to being broad-sided by the forces in the world that don't much care about the human status quo – e.g., natural disasters, social dissent, disease and more.

If culture were to become a fourth leg that stabilizes the three-legged sustainability model stool, it might have the following attributes:

- inclination to be reflective
- a commitment to community dialogue and decision-making
- a sense of relatedness and connection to other people and the environment
- an awareness of one's own history and that of others
- faith in one's creativity
- an appreciation of different systems of knowledge
- an ability to relate to symbolic and spiritual dimensions of life, as well as the practical
- humility that comes from recognizing what cannot be fully known or controlled.

Culture implies that these activities are engaged by individuals and by collectives and all are attributes within the reach and purview of museums.

But in order for any agent of awareness about sustainability, including museums, to be able to figure out how to facilitate society moving towards sustainability, we need some way of knowing where we are on the path, and whether we are progressing or regressing – and that requires feedback.

B) FEEDBACK LOOPS – HOW DO WE KNOW IF OUR CULTURE IS HEALTHY?

We need feedback in all aspects of our lives – to sense danger, to be drawn into intimacy, to know when we should eat or sleep, etc.. Sometimes feedback comes in the form of a smile, other times it comes in our ability to detect symptoms of disease. Our successes and failures in life are often dependent on how well we read feedback. In this section, I will explore some of the feedback mechanisms currently in use in our society to reflect on our well-being and link these to emergent cultural needs and opportunities for museums.

GDP

The most pervasive feedback loop that attempts to shed light on our societal health is a financial one – the Gross Domestic Product (or GDP), or its close relative the Gross National Product (GNP). GDP measures the amount of money that changes hands within an economic system. It is commonly thought that when money is spent, it contributes to economic activity and everyone benefits. This is often the case; however, GDP has many blind sides that render it wholly inadequate as a sustainability indicator, unless other feedback mechanisms are put in place as well. Most important is that fact that GDP does not account for the negative effects of economic activity that detract from quality of life. For example, money that is spent on medical response to a car accident contributes to positive GDP growth but takes no account of the human suffering and material loss from such events. Wars and disasters are amongst the greatest stimuli of an economy because huge sums of money are spent on them – and GDP rises. Another example of the limitations of GDP as a well-being indicator is that when industry extracts resources from nature, there is no account for the loss of the resource. The only costs that are

calculated are those associated with extraction and processing – even though the resources are no longer available in nature after they are used up. Similarly, during and after the processing of materials, polluting byproducts are released into the environment. These often have deleterious effects on human health and the resiliency of the environment – yet these costs are not figured into the costs of the product. These are considered ‘externalities’ – unintended impacts on third parties – and our society is not very good at taking these into consideration. My contention is that our societal attitude towards the economy and consumption reflects our cultural state of relative unconsciousness regarding our relationship with the world. These are vital cultural issues that are just waiting to be taken up by museums as focuses for community-based reflection and dialogue. But before turning to that topic, it is useful to examine two feedback loops that provide insights into more comprehensive views of human well-being and sustainability.

ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT

The best form of feedback reflects both on local realities, as well as links the local to the global. One very interesting sustainability feedback mechanism is the Ecological Footprint. It was developed by William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel at the University of British Columbia in the mid 1990s and published in a book called *Our Ecological Footprint*, in 1995. The Ecological Footprint, or ‘EF,’ is a measure of the ‘load’ imposed by a given population on nature. It represents the land area necessary to sustain current levels of resource consumption and waste discharge by that population. By calculating the amount of productive land required to produce what we consume (e.g., from forests, croplands, and productive seashore), as well as measuring the land masses required to reabsorb our waste, one can calculate

the ecological footprints of individuals, households, companies, cities, provinces, countries and the world. An effective image that conveys the concept of EF is the terrarium. If one were to build a glass dome over a given human or group of humans, how big would it have to be in order that life could continue indefinitely, as we live it today? What size of dome would you need to sustain your lifestyle?

EF is a great feedback tool because it can be used to provide information at all levels - allowing individuals to see their own footprints in relationship to the average for a city, or a country and then compare these to what the biosphere can actually handle. In a comparison of footprints according to national averages published by Redefining Progress (a sustainability think-tank in California), Canada has the third largest footprint in the world, measuring 21.8 acres per capita, just behind the United States and the United Arab Emirates. Current estimates are that over 70% of the North American footprint comes from our use of energy – largely because of the production of greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels that require

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colossal forests to neutralize CO₂ emissions and produce oxygen. Notice that the world footprint is 5.6 acres per person, but the actual capacity of the biosphere, given the population of over 6 billion people is only 4.7 acres per person. Humanity is already in a position of ‘overshoot’ – using more of nature than can be regenerated - and we are seeing the results of burning up our ‘natural capital’ in such phenomena

as climate change and extreme weather (like the fires in BC and the droughts in the prairies during 2003). The biosphere has distinct limits that demand our attention, or we will threaten the very system we depend on for life itself. And with the limits of our biosphere being reached, and exceeded, the notion of people using their 'fair share' of planetary resources is becoming increasingly important. Some may argue that Canada has more productive land than we currently use – and therefore we are living within the carrying capacity of the country. However, the peculiarities of global population distribution and economic development can't justify some people consuming more than four times their 'fair share' of resources while others are left with one quarter of what is their due.

Ecological Footprint Country Rankings

USA	24.0 acres / person
Canada	21.8 acres / person
United Kingdom	13.2 acres / person
France	13.0 acres / person
Costa Rica	4.8 acres / person
China	3.8 acres / person
India	1.9 acres / person
Bangladesh	1.3 acres / person
World Footprint	5.6 acres / person
Sustainable Footprint	4.7 acres / person

Adapted from "Footprints of Nations," Redefining Progress, 2004

Like it or not, the economic, social and environmental effects of globalization have created a new layer of cultural reality for people around the globe. The virtually unhindered movement of people, goods, money, natural resources and pollution require that each of us develop a heightened awareness of our relationship to others on the planet. How will we deal with the idea that, if all people lived like we do in Canada, an additional three planets would be required to accommodate everybody? And, with the people of Asia transforming their economies and social structures, it won't be long before a traditionally small-footprint (per capita) part of the world will be consuming and polluting like we do. How will humanity acknowledge and respond to the emerging situation in which our species has grown so much that we threaten to collapse the very environment that has given us our success? Developing new mechanisms of effective feedback is part of the answer – and the Genuine Progress Indicator is another example of a progressive indicator.

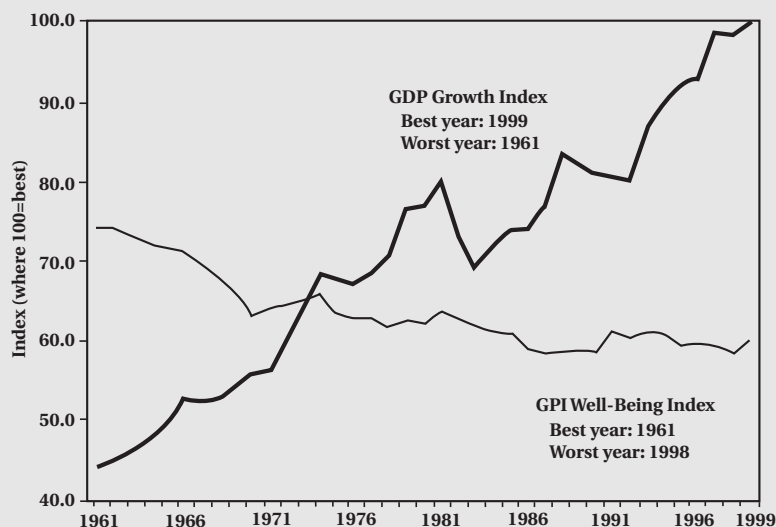
GENUINE PROGRESS INDICATOR

Is it possible to calculate the GDP for a province or country and then systematically adjust it to reflect the real costs that have traditionally not been tallied? Mark Anielski, an accountant who is associated with Edmonton's economic think-tank The Pembina Institute, has done just that. This type of calculation is referred to as the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI).

Although Alberta's GDP growth has been strong over the decades, the GPI for Alberta (and the rest of the country for that matter), reveals serious long-term damage to the environment, as well as the creation of an increasing number of social and economic

problems. The graph below, which compares Alberta's GDP and GPI, illustrates the discrepancy between financial growth and the slow erosion of general well-being. It is a trend that would likely be revealed if similar comparative assessments were conducted in other provinces across the country.

Figure 1: The Alberta GPI Well-being Index versus Alberta GDP Index, 1961 to 1999



Source: Alberta GPI Accounts 1961-1999

The following set of GPI indicators provides a sense of the complex calculations that were used in the Alberta assessment.

GPI Indicators

Economic

- Economic growth
- Economic diversity
- Trade
- Disposable income
- Weekly wage rate
- Personal expenditures
- Transportation expenditures
- Taxes
- Savings rate
- Household debt
- Public infrastructure
- Household infrastructure

Personal-Societal

- Poverty
- Income distribution
- Unemployment
- Underemployment
- Paid work time
- Household work
- Parenting and eldercare
- Free time
- Volunteerism
- Commuting time
- Life expectancy
- Obesity
- Suicide
- Drug use (youth)
- Auto crashes
- Crime
- Voter participation
- Educational attainment

Environmental

- Oil and gas reserve life
- Oilsands reserve life
- Energy use intensity
- Agricultural sustainability
- Timber sustainability
- Forest fragmentation
- Parks and wilderness
- Fish and wildlife
- Wetlands
- Peatlands
- Water quality
- Air quality-related emissions
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Carbon budget deficit
- Hazardous waste
- Landfill waste
- Ecological footprint

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS FOR MUSEUMS

You may be wondering what all this has to do with museums. There are a couple of answers to this question. First, these feedback loops shed light on the condition of our society and the cultural values that are producing the state of our world. Even though museums historically have chosen to play a more passive role in civic engagement, around socially charged topics, they are capable of stimulating high levels of public reflection and discussion about topics relating to our 'culture of unsustainability.' Secondly, this examination of societal well-being indicators begs the question 'how do museums measure success?' Do museums have adequate feedback mechanisms to guide their operations towards the most valuable cultural outcomes for the society? How might existing performance indicators for museums be improved and used to better connect community members to the cultural issues of our time? It is worth reviewing what museums traditionally use as their measures of success. The following is a fairly familiar list of indicators that museums tend to use to gauge their effectiveness – most of which are fairly quantitative and corporate (as opposed to cultural) in nature.

Traditional Museum 'Success' Indicators

- | | | |
|---------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| - Attendance | - Sales in gift shop | - Balanced books |
| - Revenues | - Media coverage | - Corporate events |
| - Memberships | | |

Some might say that a museum's financial statements offer the best insight into its well-being – because they tell us whether our organization is fiscally solvent. Others argue that it is attendance figures that provide the best indicator of museum health, because these demonstrate our popularity with the public. Unquestionably, these are important considerations when thinking about the well-being of organizations, but the cultural health of a community is not the same thing as the fiscal stability of a museum.

If we accept that there is value in the corporate model of assessing institutional well-being, one indicator that seems reasonable to examine is the 'cost per visit'. Ultimately, museums always justify their existence in terms of a public good. The principal manifestation of how that good is actually delivered is through visits. Using Statistics Canada data, the following chart illustrates the average cost per visit of operating a variety of types of cultural operations.

Canadian Cultural Organizations: Cost-Per-Visit

1997-8	Attendance	Expenditures	Cost Per Visit
All Museums	26,173,000	\$646,350,000	\$24.70
Community Museums	3,886,000	\$47,281,000	\$12.17
History Museums	9,009,000	\$205,994,000	\$22.86
Art Museums	5,783,000	\$207,530,000	\$35.88
Historic Sites	16,073,000	\$163,464,000	\$10.17
Archives	746,000	\$120,073,000	\$160.95
Nature Parks	60,239,000	\$299,799,000	\$4.98

The 'cost per visit' of museums in Canada indicates that visitation is heavily subsidized. In some ways, this is as it should be, since the cultural health of community is in the interests of governments, businesses and individuals alike. Having worked in museums

for over twenty years, I am fully aware that some visits are worth every penny of the average costs listed here. When visitors become truly immersed in a reflective, learning or social exchange, both the individuals and society benefit. But such visits seem to be the exception rather than the rule. The audience research I have done tells me that the phenomenon of 'grazing,' or wandering slowly, rarely stopping, and scanning the materials of museum exhibits is the norm in many museums. In my own museum, we find it hard to extend the average time of looking at artworks (that visitors physically stop in front of) to more than about 8 seconds. And it is relatively rare for a visitor to look at any individual artwork for longer than about 15 seconds. At that rate, it continues to be a mystery just exactly what visitors leave with. Having conducted a lot of tours and workshops in galleries, I understand something of the potential of artworks to provoke, stimulate and calm viewers - but less than 10% of visitors normally engage in programs that encourage such focus. When I have interviewed people about their 'grazing' experiences in the galleries, it is very common for visitors to have little to say because they looked so quickly at so many objects. All of this leads me to believe that the museum community has to better define what it means by success - and there is much to be learned and much to be gained by developing a set of indicators for museums that are linked to a 'culture of sustainability.'

C) MUSEUMS PURSUING SUSTAINABILITY

Increasingly, the museum community around the world is attempting to develop new ways of being relevant and effective. Museums Alberta has taken great pains over more than a decade to develop the Museum Excellence Program (MEP) in order to support just this sort of evolution. The MEP's use of self and peer assessment strategies has

been designed to reinforce the central goal of creating effective public engagement and relevant impacts, as well as encouraging the use of best practices. Through the strengthening of professional practices that achieve these goals, as well as by developing new skills and methods that contribute to tangible public outcomes, the MEP is finding a balance between museum traditions and charting a new road into the future.

Building on their *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* policy framework, as well as their national program to bolster museums' relationships with communities, the American Association of Museums (AAM) has developed a new national program called *Mastering Civic Engagement*. This initiative promotes the importance of museums finding novel ways to relate to individuals across their increasingly diverse communities - which is no easy feat. Contrary to what one might imagine, the challenge is not creating new relationships between the many constituencies and the museum - many already have one. The problem is that for many people their relationship with museums is either negative or indifferent. Certainly, some people are very positive about museums and make them an important part of their lives. But others have a negative view of museums - seeing them as boring, elitist, or 'not relevant to me'. Still others are indifferent. For many, their views of museums as something that is 'good for society,' but 'not for me,' becomes a difficult obstacle for museums to overcome as they try to transform attitudes and foster new relationships with the public. There are a lot of citizens who don't visit local museums because they have already seen them at some point in the past. Even if they enjoyed their visit, they know that many sites don't change much over time. They may visit museums when they travel, or even take in a special exhibit every five years or so. But for many people, they

simply don't see a very direct or energized relationship of local museums to their lives. Many feel that the generally passive nature of too many exhibits, the use of explanatory labels and frequently impersonal settings do not have enough appeal to compete with other leisure-time activities. Shifting the core public associations with museums long enough to engage them in new ways is a tough nut to crack.

It seems that what the AAM wants to accomplish through their 'civic engagement' program is to shift the museum field's current relationships with various publics so that our institutions are more positive, more conscious and more engaged or active. There are five domains in which museums could work towards improving their relationships with community – awareness; self-reflection; respect; trust and communication.

Five Domains of Civic Engagement

Awareness:

- of the realities that affect peoples' lives on a day to day basis
- of the needs and wants of community, as perceived by community members
- of how people use their time – not only leisure, but also work, school and family time
- of the goals, dreams and fears of community members
- of how different communities set priorities.

Self-Reflection:

- about the museum's core values and philosophy
- about past practices (e.g., systemic exclusion of Aboriginal art – declaring it to be ethnological and not artistic expression)
- about the museum's methods of creating priorities (how transparent are they?)

- about how 'success' is measured
- about the skills that are assumed to be required to operate the museum and to provide 'leadership' (e.g., are curatorial, education or business skills sufficient? Are other skill sets such as community development, conducting cultural research, and facilitating cultural engagement?).

Respect:

- for communities and the ways that culture lives in those communities
- for the different ways that people perceive the world and make judgments about it
- that is built with understanding and empathy
- that knows when to listen and when to speak.

Trust:

- that comes from mutual comfort between the museum and community
- that comes the sharing of information and decision-making
- that comes from open processes of setting priorities
- that understands the importance of different voices and perspectives
- that comes from a willingness to negotiate.

Communication:

- that is multi-lateral, where all parties speak and listen
- that acknowledges the importance of language in any relationship
- that includes not only ideas, but also emotion, imagination and other experiences.

The efforts of the AAM will help museums to engage their local communities in new ways – and that is likely to shift the foundations of how the public views museums and open up new potentials. Although civic

engagement is necessary for sustainability, it may not be sufficient. It is possible to engage a local community, yet not address the unsustainability of our lifestyles. In order to bring sustainability into the equation, an additional set of criteria for planning and assessing museum activities will be required. There is at least one museum group that is attempting to address this gap – The Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities (WGMSC).

The WGMSC is a group of about eight people committed to sustainability who work in a range of museum facilities and universities across Canada. We started the group four years ago, and since then have been delivering conference workshops on museums, culture and sustainability, as well as developing reference materials, some of which are now available through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities website.

WGMSC has developed a framework for assessment that may be useful for any museum that is developing programs with the goal of engaging communities and being geared towards sustainability. The Critical Assessment Framework (CAF) uses three lenses to examine the relationship of a museum program to its community. These are the Individual, the Community, and the Museum. It is most useful as a reference in discussing and assessing the relative merits of various program strategies.

Critical Assessment Framework

a) Individual Level

When considering a new public program initiative, ask how well the program will:

- Contribute new and relevant insights
- Capture imagination, stimulate curiosity
- Affirm, challenge, deepen identity
- Encourage personal reflection
- Enhance ability to think critically and creatively
- Provide opportunity to examine and clarify values
- Demonstrate relevance and make connections to daily life
- Help deal with complexity and uncertainty
- Increase responsible action

b) Community Level

Ask how well the program will:

- Address vital & relevant needs/issues within the community
- Generate information and connection at the personal, community, provincial/territorial, national and global level
- Engage a diverse public
- Encourage social interactions and debate
- Stimulate intergenerational interactions
- Link existing community groups to one another

- Initiate or enhance long term collaborative relationships
- Have tangible impacts in community

c) Museum Level

Ask how well the program will:

- Challenge personal and institutional assumptions amongst staff and collaborators
- Be guided by clearly articulated goals, objectives and outcomes
- Use the most effective vehicle for achieving goals
- Identify and value staff skills and resources
- Empower, transform and affect all who are involved
- Create a community of learning within staff
- Engage key players / champions / detractors early on in the process (external and internal)
- Include multiple perspectives
- Engage different learning styles
- Integrate different dimensions of sustainability
- Integrate scientific, local and traditional knowledge
- Act as catalyst for partnering community organizations

Adapted from Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities, 2004

It is my hope that museums increasingly will maximize their potential to be culturally relevant by being much more responsive to the needs and realities of their communities. It is hard to conceive of a more pressing issue today than our ability to create a bridge to a sustainable future, particularly in our rapidly changing world. Being responsive to critical issues in ways that brings history into a vital relationship with the present and engaging citizens in active ways not only justifies public funding of cultural organizations, but it also makes sense that there are cultural mirrors that enable a society to see itself more clearly and adjust its actions accordingly. But many questions remain regarding how we will assess our societal needs and what types of mirroring and engagement strategies can be developed. Will exhibitions, the traditional mainstay of museum programs, continue to consume the bulk of our limited resources? If not, what alternatives can we imagine?

to supplement their onsite operations. This may involve using the mass media, community forums and the education system in new ways.

An important aspect of such a shift will be to articulate the cultural needs of our communities – and that requires communication with communities. Historically, few if any museums use research to identify and gauge the most pressing issues on the ever-changing cultural landscape. There are exercises within Museum Alberta's MEP, as well as in the American Association of Museums MAP III program, that are designed to help museums open this sort of line of communication with their communities. These are not expensive or elaborate research projects, but rather are simple initiatives, the main ingredient of which is a genuine interest in responding to the community rather than developing a marketing plan for the same old fare.

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It seems reasonable that the first step would be to start judging museum successes in terms of the outcomes and impacts they have on individual lives and communities, instead of using traditional outputs measures (e.g., number of exhibitions mounted or programs delivered). This would be a huge shift – for two reasons. The first is that we have no tradition of planning our activities to have community-based impacts. Generally, we don't really know what the cultural needs of the community are, and so have little experience in planning to address those needs. The second reason is that in order to achieve outcomes-oriented goals, museums may have to develop new strategies

One doesn't have to look too far to find museums that are already moving down the path towards sustainability. The following is a list of some of many ways that museums are having success in this regard:

- a. Greening Projects:** In a bid to find energy efficiencies that both save operating costs and lower emissions, some museums are either retrofitting for sustainability, or in some instances are building new facilities with energy efficiency in mind (e.g., Nanton Lancaster Air Museum, with input from Sustainable Calgary).
- b. Conduct Community Needs Assessments:** For example, the Museum Alberta's Museum Excellence Program provides numerous opportunities and supports for museums to undertake this type of assessment.
- c. Reviewing core values, missions, structures and processes:** For example, museums that are currently

undertaking the MEP, incorporating the AAM's "Excellence and Equity" principles, going through a MAP III Review or embracing the philosophy of "Mastering Civic Engagement."

d. Working with Communities –

Negotiating Needs and Actions:

For example, Glenbow's work with First Nations, especially related to collection, storage and use of sacred objects.

e. Develop Audience Research

Initiatives: The Glenbow has a history of such research.

f. Community Watch Programs:

Environment Canada has done great things in this regard – especially the Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Network (EMAN) which had developed many programs in which citizens provide data on sightings of birds, frogs, etc..

g. Literacy Programs: For example, CMA's 'Reading the Museum,' and projects like 'Blue Ink in my Pen' at the Edmonton Art Gallery (see Lon Dubinsky's reports on this program).

h. Develop Indicators of Success:

There is a need for the entire museum community to build on the Critical Assessment Framework of the Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities.

i. Links to Sustainable City

Organizations: For example, create opportunities to consult groups like Sustainable Calgary and promote the role of culture in sustainability work-like the Nanton museum did.

Museums have a great opportunity to become increasingly proactive agents of cultural reflection and action. The time has never been better to begin redefining the parameters of museum work so that the cultural wellbeing of our communities looms large in our institutional missions. What this might look like for museums is still rather unclear, however, the following list of attitudes and actions may provide the basis for a good discussion:

- honour, respect and trust the diversity within community
- embrace the many forms of creativity within those communities
- create a network(s) of cultural organizations, rather than stand-alones
- develop individual, community and organizational performance measurements for museums
- place relevant, contemporary issues and community needs at the centre of museum work
- develop new museum competencies (e.g., not simply object-based, academic expertise, but also multi-stakeholder negotiation skills, facilitating symbolic experience, community consultation, etc.)
- plan for public art in communities that actually stimulates reflection and generates dialogue
- encourage individuals to develop their personal creativity.

Whatever else can be said about sustainability in our world, one thing remains certain – that the values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that currently shape our lives will change. If we, collectively and individually, are able to fully acknowledge the scale of the challenges facing our times, it is possible to engage this change consciously, intelligently and humbly. Museums have a role to play in

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facilitating this process by providing for 'places of the muses' – physical and psychological places where people engage in deep reflection, insight and communication. By redefining the parameters of museums and bringing them into line with the pressing issues of the 21st century, our institutions can

help bridge the sustainability gap that separates the world we have created and that which we want to pass on to future generations.

As the world continues to develop, whether it is economic and social reforms in Asia and Africa, or the reinvention of western consumer-based cultures, the following quote from the United Nations appropriately identifies what we stand to lose or gain – both culture and soul.

“Development divorced from its human or cultural context is growth without a soul.”

Our Creative Diversity, UNESCO, 1995

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