

ELEMENTS:

Big Vision for the Big Island— Step by Natural Step

Words :: **Andrea Dean**

Envision this: You woke up this morning and had a delicious fruit salad comprised of all locally grown fruits—mango, papaya, banana, dragon fruit—and topped with fresh cream from the local dairy, sprinkled with roasted macadamia nuts, and drizzled with organic honey. Feeling so energized by your colorful and flavorful breakfast, you walked the short distance to the local bus stop, where you caught the clean, quiet, hydrogen-powered bus to the airport. Your short interisland flight on go! was powered by locally produced biofuel. Local farmers, scientists, politicians, and business leaders all came together and helped create a vibrant new economic sector by growing biofuel crops on marginal agricultural lands. Inexpensive leases and tax breaks make it all work financially. On board, you are flipping through the in-flight magazine, and you notice that it is printed on 100 percent post-consumer recycled paper with soy inks. You are a bit thirsty. Good thing you brought your own reusable water bottle, and the flight staff is happy to fill that with cold, filtered water for you. Since the airline has decided to make all operations zero waste, more and more people like you have learned to bring their own water bottles. And the airline sells really great steel water bottles, with the go! logo, in case you forgot yours.

When you step off the airplane at Keahole-Kona, you feel the sun on your face and the wind in your hair. You take in a deep breath of clean, fragrant Hawaiian air. You step to the curb, and your business colleague is there to pick you up and take you to your meeting in her company car—an electric car, which is powered with solar on-site. On your way to the meeting, you see people walking and biking on the nicely landscaped bike lanes that are set back from the road. Where there used to be denuded plantation and pasture land, you now see productive farms—mixed-use agriculture with trees dripping with fruits, other crops growing under the trees, and farm animals rotating through the system.

You arrive at the building where your meeting is and the first thing you see is the solar array on top of the building. You come to find out that the entire office building is a green building and is LEED Platinum certified.

As you sit down to your business meeting with a group of truly excellent people who like and respect each other, you think how lucky you are to be making money at this great job. You had always wanted to "do something good" in your professional life, and since the locally based green economy in Hawai'i is growing like wildfire, you were able to get a job that was aligned with your values.

OK—wake up and smell the Kona coffee!

I am guessing that this is not your reality—yet. But before I totally pop your bubble, I want you to know that there is serious sustainability strategic planning underway!

One of the most common problems in sustainability planning is getting everyone in a company, community, or county to agree on what sustainability is. The Natural Step framework takes all of the guesswork out of defining sustainability. And this is important, because when you want to make sustainable decisions, you have to understand the constraints and the possibilities.

The Natural Step framework, developed by Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert, is based upon four system conditions that make up the definition of sustainability.

In a sustainable society:

1. Nature is not subject to systematically increasing concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust.
2. Nature is not subject to systematically increasing concentrations of substances produced by society.
3. Nature is not subject to systematically increasing degradation by physical means.
4. People are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs. (Think of people displaced or living in war zones because of oil acquisition, people working in sweatshops, villages polluted with electronic waste.)

How does that sound? It sounds hard to meet all four system conditions, doesn't it? Before you think about giving up on sustainability because it is too hard, let me tell you that the Natural Step philosophy includes meeting people where they are. We recognize that sustainability is a journey, and "green perfection" is not accomplished overnight. Many companies and communities

have found when trying to work within the four system conditions that incredible innovation has emerged. And this has translated into a market advantage and profits.

A recent study by the firm A.T. Kearney, entitled "Green Winners: The Performance of Sustainability-focused Companies during the Financial Crisis," looked at ninety-nine companies identified as having a strong commitment to sustainability and compared their performance with industry averages. The analysis found that in sixteen of the eighteen industries studied, companies committed to sustainability outperformed industry averages by 15 percent over the six months from May to November 2008. From a market capitalization perspective, this superior performance averaged \$650 million in protected market capitalization per company. The question, though, is why? It turns out that green business is good business. "Our study indicates that the market rewards specific companies," said Dr. Daniel Mahler, author of the study. "We find common characteristics among the leading companies that show that sustainability goes far beyond the narrow definition of being environmentally friendly."

Since its inception in 1989, the Natural Step framework has been used by well-known corporate giants such as Nike, Interface Carpet, Starbucks, Home Depot, and the Canadian winter-destination community of Whistler, British Columbia. The framework is "scale-neutral," so the size of the entity using it does not matter. It can be used by businesses, communities, non-profit organizations, and individuals.

Thanks to the foresight of Alex Frost, the Hawai'i County Resource Center (Big Island) has been using the framework. After a recent training session on the Natural Step approach, Hawai'i has thirty people from government, nonprofit, education, and business ready to help others start their journey towards sustainability. So, if you share the compelling vision of Hawai'i as a model of modern sustainable living and working, start taking the journey—step by Natural Step. Wake up and smell the Kona coffee! Take that first sip, take a bite out of that juicy mango, and let's go.



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