



Strategic Communications and Marketing
News Bureau

[Research News](#) [Campus News](#) [For Faculty and Staff](#) [For Journalists](#) [About](#)

What are the guiding principles of 'environmental sustainability'?

APRIL 14, 2008 9:00 AM

BY [NEWS BUREAU](#)

Expert Viewpoints

Humanities



[View Images](#)



William C. Sullivan, a professor in the department of landscape architecture, is the director of the campus's Environmental Council. The council is hosting the Environmental Horizons Sustainability Summit April 23-24 at the Illini Union. Sullivan earned his doctorate in natural resources, with a concentration in environment and behavior, at the University of Michigan. He has taught environmental design at Kansas State University and at Michigan, as well as at Illinois.

There has been a good deal of talk about environmental sustainability lately. What's all the buzz about?

William C. Sullivan, a professor in the department of landscape architecture, is the director of the campus's Environmental Council.

I think the buzz is because people are coming to realize that moving toward environmental sustainability has never been more pressing – and the opportunities never more exciting.

Global warming is upon us. Ecosystems have been degraded to the point that many no longer contribute life-preserving functions. In many areas, biodiversity is in freefall. The threat of pandemics is rising. Persistent pockets of severe poverty exist around the world. We are rapidly depleting our supply of oil and fresh water.

Together, these conditions threaten the way we live and place our security in considerable jeopardy. But the exciting part is that these conditions also present tremendous opportunities to connect our scholarship to the most pressing challenges of the 21st Century. By focusing our attention on solutions related to energy, climate, water, and biodiversity, we can have a huge impact on the health and well-being of our society and more broadly, the people of the world.

Just like other complex ideas such as love or courage, sustainability is a rich concept. What do you mean by sustainability?

You're right, there are a number of definitions of sustainability. But for the most part they seem to agree that by sustainable, we mean that something will last and that is equitable. Environmental sustainability ensures that social, economic and ecological processes are maintained so that both the short and long-term quality of life and the health and diversity of natural ecosystems are not compromised.

Are there some basic principles of environmental sustainability?

Oh yes, good question. Here at Illinois, we have five principles that inform our work on sustainability:

1. Limits. There are biophysical limits to the expansion of human societies imposed by the carrying capacity of nature. We must keep these limits in the forefront of or planning and decision-making.
2. Interdependencies across time and space. The world is interconnected and interdependent in intricate ways. Our use of resources has impacts in faraway places and those places have impacts

- on us. Achieving sustainability will depend on creating sustainable communities across the globe.
3. Triple-bottom line. Sustainability requires balancing economic, social, and environmental priorities. The need for development is often confused with the need for economic growth alone. This is flawed. Many human needs can be satisfied by improved environmental quality and a safe and engaged social life. Sustainability requires us to consider the triple bottom line, not just the financial bottom line.
 4. Equity. Sustainable practices require equitable distribution of opportunities, wealth, and quality of life across communities and nations – now and in the future. We have a responsibility towards others now, and towards future generations, to ensure that our children and grandchildren can gain access to resources necessary for a good quality of life.
 5. Precaution. There is a great deal that we do not know about nature's functioning, about our dependence on it, about the economics of conservation, and much more. In recognition of the fallibility of our understanding, we will sometimes take action in advance of scientific proof (e.g., restrict the release of radiation or toxins) on the grounds that delay in implementation may be costly to society, the environment, and to future generations.

How can Illinois help lead the way to solving toward sustainability?

We are already leading in a variety of ways. A great number of individuals and units on the Illinois campus are engaged in discovery, learning, and management related to environmental sustainability. Here are links to a few of them:

- [Environmental Council](#)
- [The Center for Advanced BioEnergy Research](#)
- Renewable Energy Initiative
- [Energy Biosciences Institute](#)
- [Solar Decathlon 2009](#)
- [Miscanthus Research](#)
- Building a Lasting University Environment (BLUE)

This article was imported from a previous version of the News Bureau website. Please email news@illinois.edu to report missing photos and/or photo credits.

Read Next

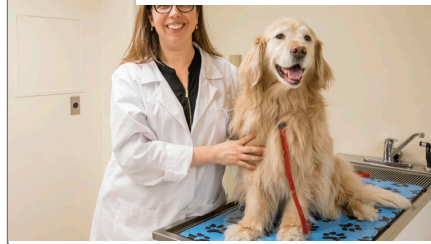
EXPERT VIEWPOINTS



What can researchers learn from last month's unusual meteor activity in the US?

Last month, at least two major, but unrelated, meteor events occurred

VETERINARY MEDICINE



Unlocking how dogs' fungal ear infections evade treatment points vets to drug stewardship

Outer ear infections in dogs are very common,

ANNOUNCEMENTS



Four Illinois students receive Goldwater scholarships

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — One University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign sophomore and three

News Bureau

507 E. Green St
MC-426
Champaign, IL 61820
Email: stratcom@illinois.edu
Phone [\(217\) 333-5010](tel:(217)333-5010)

Strategic Communications and Marketing



Explore Campus

[University Admissions](#)

[Careers at Illinois](#)

[University News](#)

[Visit Campus](#)

Connect with Illinois

[University Alumni](#)

[Giving at Illinois](#)

[University Calendars](#)

[University Directory](#)

Access University Resources

[Emergency Services](#)

[McKinley Health Center](#)

[Connie Frank CARE Center](#)

[University Library](#)

[About Cookies](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Accessibility](#)