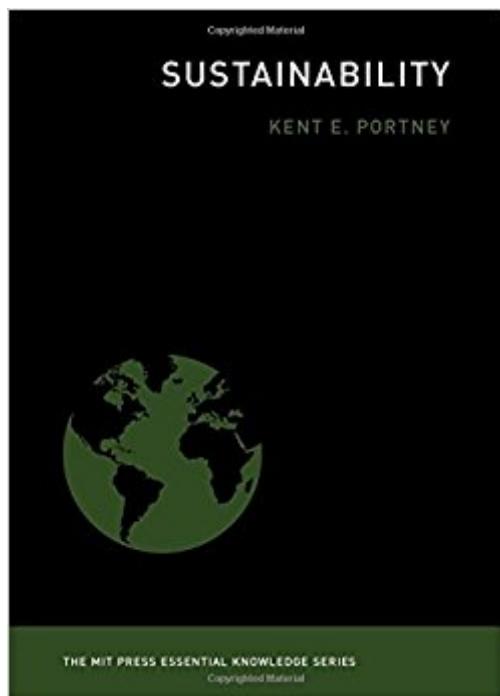


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# Sustainability (The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series)



## Synopsis

The word "sustainability" has been connected to everything from a certain kind of economic development to corporate promises about improved supply sourcing. But despite the apparent ubiquity of the term, the concept of sustainability has come to mean a number of specific things. In this accessible guide to the meanings of sustainability, Kent Portney describes the evolution of the idea and examines its application in a variety of contemporary contexts -- from economic growth and consumption to government policy and urban planning. Portney takes as his starting point the 1987 definition by the World Commission on Environment and Development of sustainability as economic development activity that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." At its heart, Portney explains, sustainability focuses on the use and depletion of natural resources. It is not the same as environmental protection or natural resource conservation; it is more about finding some sort of steady state so that the earth can support both human population and economic growth. Portney looks at political opposition to the promotion of sustainability, which usually questions the need for sustainability or calls its costs unacceptable; collective and individual consumption of material goods and resources and to what extent they must be curtailed to achieve sustainability; the role of the private sector, and the co-opting of sustainability by corporations; government policy on sustainability at the international, national, and subnational levels; and how cities could become models for sustainability action.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This volume in the 'MIT Press Essential Knowledge' series encompasses a tremendous amount of information on a complex topic in a relatively small space. (Choice)

Kent E. Portney is Professor and Senior Fellow in the Institute for Science, Technology, and Public Policy at Texas A&M University. He is the author of *Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously* (MIT Press).

This is a very useful introduction to sustainability, but one that's a bit unusual. Ever since the term caught on as a concept in the late 1980s -- according to Google's Ngram tool, by 1990 it was 10 times more frequent in English than it had been in 1980; by 2008 it was a 70x multiple -- it's been said to rest on "three E's": environment, economy and equity. Typical introductions tend to emphasize one or another of that triad in some depth, especially the first. While the first chapter of this book does give a bird's-eye view of the three E's, the subsequent chapters head off in a different direction: politics and governance, especially though not exclusively from a US perspective. For example, Chapter 2 describes the proposed and enacted laws in several US states that \*ban\* the pursuit of sustainability-based objectives. (All of the bills and statutes seem to have roots with the Koch Brothers.) Other chapters discuss the relative roles of private enterprise and various levels of government in pursuing sustainability, and the special attention the concept has received from cities. Personally, I wish more space had been given to some of the equity aspects especially: e.g., efforts to make cities more sustainable often lead to gentrification of parts of the central city, but this isn't discussed. (See, e.g., the 2003 volume edited by J. Agyeman & al., *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*.) Also, even a brief overview like this could have been a little more serious about the economics aspects. The distinction between weak and strong sustainability is never mentioned, despite its importance for policy. And I was surprised to see Robert Solow, the founding father of weak sustainability, and Herman Daly, an early proponent of ecological economics, cited jointly for the notion "that there is a need to take the biophysical environment and ecosystem services into account when assessing and measuring economic growth" (@113). This belies the fact that Daly and Solow are quite far apart on how seriously they take this view, as Daly went to some pains to point out in his 1999 essay, "How long can the neoclassical economists ignore the contributions of Georgescu-Roegen?" (reprinted in *Ecological Economics and*

Sustainable Development: Selected Essays of Herman Daly). The book includes a glossary (minus any definition for the title concept *per se*), a good list of references and, as is becoming customary in academic press books, a mediocre index. The author's style is generally readable, but occasionally he falls back on lists and catalogues, such as a long list of urban sustainability measures stuffed into a sentence more than a page long (@177-178). But these flaws are relatively minor. Even if you've read other books on sustainability, this one provides a complementary and useful perspective.

Very good book. Clearly written.

I've read a few of the books in this MIT Press series and they have all impressed me so far. Sustainability contains a brief overview of 'sustainability' which can be here outlined as 'approaches to environmental solvency' because the book covers a wide range of angles on the topic of sustainability: its scientific applications, its social realities, its political realities, etc. 'The environment' is a nebulous concept so we shouldn't be surprised to find that the same is true of 'sustainability.' If you can accept that a book on this topic will be a bit scattered, then you can appreciate it. -Ryan Mease

There is no such thing as sustainability. The joke is on you.

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