
MUSEUMS, CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

An Interview with Douglas Worts

What is sustainable development?

It is a holistic world view that aims to meet the needs of today's population without diminishing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainable development includes not only environmental considerations, but also economic, political, social and spiritual ones as well. One of the most commonly quoted facts is that 20% of the world's population consumes 80% of what humans produce. This imbalance in the distribution of wealth, as well as in social and political power, is unsustainable—especially as industrialization and globalization affect the world.

How will sustainability happen?

Much of the focus of sustainability is on environmental biology, global economics, international law, good science and sound international policies. But this is not enough. It will require the participation of humanity at large and a shift in core values. If we are to avoid environmental and social disaster, individuals must become more conscious of our individual and collective impacts on the environment and each other.

What is the role of museums?

Through the public dimension activities of our organizations, museums can foster public consciousness of the needs and impacts of human life. Achieving a viable future globally will require a strengthening of local communities in ways that encourage reflection,

dialogue and action—a role that museums have the potential to perform, even though it's not their traditional function. Museums bring together both relevant information about cultural objects and deeper, symbolic experiences of those objects that have contemporary resonance. Bridging the gap between information and personal experience will be crucial for securing a sustainable future. Drawing on the past, fully engaging the reality of the present and imagining options for the future (each on individual and collective levels) is a tall order. Yet, museums have collections and insights that can provide access points into the experiences and wisdom of the past; objects that can help to focus on contemporary issues; and spaces that can bring people together to imagine and work toward an acceptable future. Such a vision challenges museums to rethink many of our core assumptions about our role(s), the values we support, how we communicate and how we assess our impact.

How did you get involved in this area?

For years, I have questioned the role of museums, their contributions and their relationship to the cultural needs of an ever more complex society. Through my participation in the LEAD-Canada (Leadership for Environment And Development) and LEAD-International programs over the past year, I now think that sustainable development might provide a conceptual reference

point that could help to reframe the role and potential of museums.

You recently received a scholarship to conduct research. What is the purpose of your study? What will you do?

Yes, the Canadian Museum Association recently awarded me a scholarship to conduct a study entitled, "Education in Museums: the Potential Role of Museums in Sustainable Development." By 1999, more than half of the population of Toronto will not have been born inside Canada. In this environment, what will define the collectives to which individuals belong? I am hoping that my research will encourage dialogue within the museum community about clarifying missions and developing new performance measures for our work. My intention is to report on the study broadly, including through VSA.

If readers are interested in learning more, what can they do?

To get a better sense of the field of sustainable development, visit the website for LEAD-International <www.LEAD.org>. Also, LEAD-USA will be up and running in 1999, so those interested in participating in the training program and representing the needs of the museum and cultural sectors should think about applying.

Douglas Worts is an educator/evaluator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, teaches Museum Education at the University of Toronto, and is an Associate of LEAD-Canada.

VSA

Visitor Studies Association

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