

ASSOCIATION OF PACIFIC RIM UNIVERSITIES (APRU)

Theme: Global Challenges – Pacific Perspectives

Symposium: APRU Responses to Asia-Pacific Issues

Stephen J. Toope, UBC – Thursday, July 1, 2010

ASK FOR THE MOON

Universities' Responsibility for Sustainability

My thanks to our hosts here at the University of Auckland and to the APRU Secretariat, and my greetings to you all from Canada and from The University of British Columbia. It's a pleasure to be with you again.

On April 20th, I received an invitation from Stuart [*McCutcheon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Auckland*] to speak at this symposium on the topic of UBC's sustainability initiative. On that same day, an oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. And although the two events would seem not to be connected, I have been unable to think about one without considering the other ever since.

I have watched and listened to as much coverage of the oil spill as my heart can take, and after a few weeks my ears became attuned to the

sound of a very strange refrain: it was the voices of newscasters explaining to viewers who do not live on the Gulf Coast of America why they should care.

It astounds me that, a full generation into this Internet-driven era of global awareness, there are still people who do not understand that we are all connected.

Robert Bringhurst, a Canadian poet who has also translated works from many languages including aboriginal ones, says the lands *are* the universities, *are* the libraries. In an essay called "Poetry and Thinking" in his book *The Tree of Meaning*, he says, "Sun, moon, mountains and rivers are the writing of being, that literature of what-is. Long before our species was born, the books had been written. The Library was here before we were. We live in it. We can add to it, or we can try; we can also subtract from it. We can chop it down, incinerate it... bury it under our trash. But we didn't create it, and if we destroy it, we cannot replace it"

The oil spill that began April 20 [and that gushes on still, 72 days later] is rightly being called the worst environmental disaster in human history. *And yet* ... American environmentalist Bill McKibben points out

that “bad as this is, it’s only a small and visible symbol of the greater damage we do each day simply by burning coal and gas and oil. If that [oil] now washing up [on shore] had ended up safely in the gas tanks of our cars, it would nonetheless have done great damage. It’s all dirty.”

And yet ... an announcement last month from the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization reminds us that the environmental degradation due to global livestock production – from deforestation to water pollution to biodiversity loss to climate change – is on par with that of the transport sector and, based on growing demand from developing countries, due to double by the year 2050.

The world’s senior environmentalists are calling climate change the worst problem humanity has ever faced. There is no question in my mind that at this moment in time, the habitability of the planet and our survival as a species are truly at risk. In the face of these extreme, and extremely frightening, statements, what is the responsibility of the people in this room? What I’m asking is, what is the role of the university? These are complex global challenges, yes, but to what extent are they also “Asia-Pacific issues?” Most importantly, what

solutions might we, the universities in this network, be able to discover by working together?

I believe that the Asia-Pacific region can and must be the global epicenter for the sustainability agenda for the 21st century. A significant component of the fate of the planet and its peoples will be decided by what happens here in the coming decades. With the wide range of cultures and societies we represent at varying levels of social and economic development, this region will be a test-bed for social and cultural sustainability: our ability to live in harmony not only with the planet but with each other. We are dealing intensively with issues of social justice, equity, sustainable livelihoods, and corporate social responsibility.¹ But I have come to believe that all sustainability issues are social sustainability issues. Whether we are developing clean, renewable energies, growing green businesses, or relearning to grow our food ourselves, we are searching for ways to meet our needs without compromising those of future generations. We are looking to sustain human society, and I believe many of the answers lie here, with us.

¹ This paragraph from John Robinson's response to my request for feedback.

I last spoke to this group about UBC's sustainability initiative in 2008, and I will speak today about the progress we have made since then as well as about my changing sense of the place sustainability must hold in a university's academic and operating models. My message today differs from that of two years ago in terms of the level of urgency that exists now, and in the degree of responsibility I believe universities bear for sustainability at the global level. My message today is an invitation: I, and the faculty, staff, and students at UBC, want to work with you. I want us all to work more closely together. We share a sense of place characterized by our proximity to, and dependence upon, one another and the ocean that connects us. We have a long history of close relations and we enjoy many strong connections. But if those connections are to bear up under the kinds of challenges I'm speaking of, then we must renew our commitment to strengthening our ties, finding our commonalities, respecting our differences, and pursuing solutions across disciplines, across institutions, across an ocean, together.

I believe that a university's responsibility to the global sustainability agenda is threefold:

1. First, a university must use its **voice**. It must make a clear and very public commitment to sustainability at every level, from

academics to operations, and it must educate and inform all communities in which it enjoys an influence.

2. Second, a university must be a **model**. It must become what UBC calls a 'living laboratory,' undertaking to make its own environmental, economic, and social ecology sustainable, as well as working with communities, businesses, institutions, and governments to demonstrate the power and possibilities of working in partnership. Universities cannot demand that governments and corporations do better unless they can demonstrate what they mean.
3. And third, a university must provide the **means** for change. In other words, through research, development, and commercialization, it is up to universities to help provide the technologies, processes and systems to support systemic change, and to share them as broadly as possible wherever they are needed.

I ask a lot of a university, I know. Many might accuse me of asking too much. We have a saying in North America when someone seems to be asking for too much; we say, *You might as well ask for the moon!* But you see, I was a small boy when an American president asked for the moon *and got it*. He said, "We choose to go to the moon ... not

because [it is] easy, but because [it is] hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone.”² So I believe in aiming high, and I am willing to accept the challenge, and unwilling to postpone it.

Let me tell you what UBC is doing in terms of raising its voice, modeling sustainability, and providing the means for change.

First, **voice**. Since the start of this year, UBC has been operating under a renewed strategic plan, called *Place and Promise*. It is comprised of nine commitments – not aspirations but promises – one of which is to explore and exemplify all aspects of economic, environmental, and social sustainability. We have reconfigured our budgeting system to align funding for both academic and operational initiatives with the deliverables of our strategic plan. Operationally, every element of the University’s operations has been costed out over a 25-year time horizon. Academically, a team headed by Dr. John Robinson, Executive Director of Sustainability for UBC, has developed the Sustainability Academic Strategy, which responds to the burgeoning demand for sustainability education. The strategy provides

² Idea borrowed from an article by Bill McKibben (June 15) in the *Huffington Post* (online) asking President Obama to take a stand on climate change and lead.

opportunities for students in any faculty to incorporate elements of sustainability learning into their course of study. In addition to making UBC a more attractive place to learn and work, the strategy takes advantage of the fact that the best way to raise our voice is to raise 70,000 voices; that's the number of students, staff, and faculty at UBC who can take sustainability messages, models, and methods into their home communities.

Modeling. We call UBC a 'living laboratory.' That means two things: one, that we're using the physical entity of the University to test sustainable technologies and systems; and two, that we're demonstrating the power and possibilities of partnerships with other institutions, with business, government, and even our own alumni. With respect to the first, we've retrofitted nearly 300 academic buildings on our Vancouver campus, reducing greenhouse gas, or GHG, emissions by 8,000 tonnes a year and energy costs by \$2.6 million. The savings will pay for the retrofit before 2020. Our public transit program has increased student and staff transit ridership by 185 percent, cutting GHG output a further 16,000 tonnes per year. Our garbage composter diverts 300 tonnes of waste food per year, and since 2006 increased recycling has diverted a further 46 percent of solid waste from landfills. Our Okanagan campus is undertaking a geo-

thermal project with the goal of making it the first carbon-neutral campus in Canada and perhaps the world. And our Vancouver campus is part of what is now called UTown@UBC, which includes increased student and staff housing, childcare, and amenities such as a full-size grocery store, reducing the need to travel to and from our campus, which is separated from downtown Vancouver by a large and beautiful public park. Early this year, we publicly committed to eliminating 33 percent of our GHG emissions beyond 2007 levels by 2015, and by 100 percent by 2050.

With respect to partnerships, we are working to build strong connections at local, regional, national, and international levels, in the hope of increasing our collective effectiveness against sustainability challenges, and to show that concerted effort is both possible and necessary. Global efforts such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Conference of the Parties may not have achieved their aims, but that doesn't mean that the intentions behind them were wrong. What it may mean, for now at least, is that we build strength and effectiveness at local and regional levels and grow from here. I'm energized by the strong relations we share with so many of your institutions, and I'm excited by expanding partnerships in Asia, and China in particular.

The sustainability challenges presented by the two sectors I mentioned earlier – the environmental and economic costs of non-renewable resource extraction, and the environmental degradation caused by livestock production – are set to grow exponentially because of the economic rise of China and India, two highly populous countries. The prevailing concept of economic growth is intrinsically linked to resource extraction and access to animal protein. Fast cars and fast food for everybody. It is tempting for sustainability leaders in the west to counsel against both now, to preach, *Do as we say, and not as we have done ourselves for decades*. But it is up to us, I think, to sidestep the preaching and help find real solutions together for people on both sides of the Pacific. A first step will be finding a new paradigm that can shift our thinking about growth.

Business partnerships. The UBC Sauder School of Business offers an MBA in sustainability and business. Dr. James Tansey's Centre for Sustainability and Social Enterprise works with the business community to refine and enhance business practices in such areas as carbon markets, sustainable transportation, food security, and aquaculture. Notably, the Centre was engaged by the Vancouver Olympic Committee to assess the impact of the 2010 Winter Olympic

Games and to determine ways of making future Games more sustainable.

In May of this year, UBC formalized an agreement with the City of Vancouver in an example of partnership with government. The two parties created the Greenest City Action Team Scholars, whereby UBC graduate students work on issues of green economy and jobs, greener communities, and human health to help advance the City's long-term sustainability goals.

Alumni partnerships. Within the next year, UBC is set to launch the most significant alumni engagement and development campaign in Canadian history. We intend to bring the learning curve full circle by engaging an unprecedented number of alumni in mentoring students, volunteering on campus, returning to UBC to continue their learning, and helping commercialize important new innovations through their businesses.

Lastly, the University is providing the **means** for change. The UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, the first of its kind in Canada, has been instrumental in making Vancouver a model for dense, highly livable urban design. The UBC Clean Energy Research

Centre is Canada's only interdisciplinary facility dedicated to improving existing energy technologies and developing new sustainable energy sources. Researchers are working on everything from renewable energies to clean-burning engines, fuel cell systems, and advanced hydrogen production methods. UBC's Faculty of Land and Food Systems researchers are exploring sustainable protein sources for developing regions as well as bio-fuel development. This year, UBC will open the Centre for Interactive Research on Sustainability. The new centre is designed to accelerate the adoption of sustainable building technologies and urban development practices in society. It will also be the greenest institutional building in North America.

UBC is proud of the leadership role it plays in sustainability modeling and innovation. We're doing so much, but the scope and scale of the problems are such that we cannot solve them alone. So let me extend my invitation again: let us work together. Contact UBC's international office, or get in touch with our researchers directly. More than anything, I would like to return to this group in a year and talk not about UBC's sustainability initiative but APRU's.

I mentioned the Olympics earlier. If you had the chance to see the Opening Ceremonies that took place in Vancouver this past February,

either live or on television, you may remember that one of the performers was a poet named Shane Koyczan. He delivered part of a poem entitled "We Are More" and he was speaking about Canada, but he could have been speaking about our young group and about the connections we're building through APRU. I'd like to leave you with a few lines from that spoken poem:

we are an idea in the process
of being realized
we are young
we are cultures strung together
then woven into a tapestry
and the design
is what makes us more
than the sum total of our history

...

we believe in generations beyond our own
knowing now that so many of us
have grown past what used to be
we can stand here today
filled with all the hope people have
when they say things like "someday"

...

and all of our aspirations will pave the way
for those who on that day
look towards tomorrow
and still they say someday

If those who come after us are to have a 'someday' they can look forward to, then *our* someday must be today. We can't wait for someone else's plan; we need to lay our own. We need to raise our voices as one voice. We need to model what we mean by sustainability by effective coordinated action. And we need to provide the technological, process and systematic means for others to follow our lead. I know ... I may as well ask for the moon. But in fact it's not the moon I want at all but something much closer to home. I'm only asking for *this* place. *This* planet. This Earth. Let's work together.