

# Defining Moment

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“Going green,” “eco-friendly,” and “sustainability” are words and phrases that have been popping up everywhere from the evening news to corporate press releases. Here at the University, we have a policy in place that begins: “As it engages with the world, Syracuse University will continue as a leader in promoting and practicing sustainability. The University defines sustainability as balancing the needs and aspirations of the present with the preservation of choices for the future.” But are we all clear about the definition of sustainability and related terms? What do we really mean when we tell others we are going green, using eco-friendly products, or getting on board with sustainability? To help clarify those definitions and make sure we are all on the same page, I decided to do a little Internet investigation.

First, what do organizations mean when they say they are going green? Many of them state also that they have “green teams” in place; SU is among them, with several green teams in different areas of the University. So what exactly are these people doing? I used Google to look up “going green.” The first site to pop up was Wikipedia. It offered no definition and several links for topics such as “environmentalism,” which was not what I was looking for. Continuing the search, I soon found a site that captured what I consider to be the essence of going green. The Middletown Thrall Library of Middletown, New York defines it as “[pursuing] knowledge and practices that can lead to more environmentally friendly and ecologically responsible decisions and lifestyles, which can help protect the environment and sustain its natural resources for current and future generations.” I know this definition fits the philosophy of the Syracuse University Library Green Team. Does it fit with yours?

So what about “eco-friendly”? Another Google search yielded many similar definitions. For example, MSN Encarta states that eco-friendly means “not harmful to the environment: intended or perceived to have no harmful effect on the natural environment and its inhabitants.” This definition certainly explains why the University uses green cleaning supplies. Since such products will not harm the environment or the person using them, they make a great example of an eco-friendly item. When you make purchases, do you consider whether or not the product is eco-friendly?

Finally, we come to that popular buzzword, “sustainability.” It has numerous definitions, but I found in my search that it is often used to mean essentially the same thing as “going green.” The most commonly-used definition was created in 1987 by The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development and is typically quoted as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

But there is another excellent definition of sustainability that dates back a lot more than twenty years: try about 750 years back in our own local Native American history. The Haudenosaunee have been practicing their Seventh Generation philosophy since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Haudenosaunee confederacy consists of Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and the Tuscarora people. Their Seventh Generation philosophy states that:

The Chiefs are instructed so that when they deliberate on the serious matters of the Council, they are to consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation into the future. This way, they are to proceed cautiously, thinking of what effect their decisions will have on the welfare of their descendants. It requires a special attention to the future. But it also produces a sense of stability. (Degiya'gö̃h Resources)

**“In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”**

- Haudenosaunee Confederacy, 1142

Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation, tells us that: “I’m sitting here as the seventh generation because seven generations ago, those people were looking out for me.” The Seventh Generation philosophy truly encompasses “sustainability,” “going green,” and “eco-friendly” all together.

Therefore, no matter what you call the course you are charting toward sustainability, proceed cautiously and take a moment to consider the impact on our environment that your actions will create. Ask yourself if your decision is the best one for the environment seven generations from today.