

# sustainability

/səsteɪnəˈbɪlɪti/

*noun*

1. the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level.  
"the sustainability of economic growth"

## defining sustainability

Words: Casey Vassallo

Sustainability is a buzzword, like ‘luxury’ and ‘wellness’ and ‘organic’. It’s the call to action theme of the decade; in every second headline. Attach it to a product, brand, or idea and it’s meant to evoke a feeling of resilience-cum-longevity.

But the weight of its meaning is lost in overuse. It is jargon turned lingo turned gobbledegook. We’ve watched *Minimalism* on Netflix, switched to beeswax food wraps, carry reusable coffee cups, op-shop and thrift and veto fast fashion. We know it’s important to seek, practice, and petition for. And we’re equally aware – or at least vaguely – that these are somewhat superficial attempts at sustainability. Humankind is clinging to this noun to climb out of the current, dire crisis—but what does sustainability even mean?

Professor Bruce Clarkson is the University of Waikato’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research, which makes him an ecological restoration guru. He defines sustainability as “self-sustaining, persistent and resilient to change, that remains for long stretches of time.” The word itself is an umbrella term, like ‘capital’ or ‘cancer’. “There are many types of sustainability ranging from environmental to social and cultural, the whole gambit,” Clarkson says. “It’s a holistic concept, which has been progressively and widely applied to a range of different subject areas.”

And therein lies the puzzle, “I think that’s

one of the issues with understanding the word, it covers such a breadth of activity, that’s often why people aren’t quite sure what you’re talking about.” Blurred parameters and win-win slogans are, in part, to blame. “A lack of in-depth knowledge leads to oxymorons. The classic one is the term ‘sustainable development’. The word can at times obfuscate the magnitude of problems we have in the world.”

An alternative isn’t an option either. It’s so broad and open for interpretation that the term creates a lack of common understanding, and a new one won’t do the job better, because it too will essentially come full circle. According to Clarkson, regenerative is another word for sustainable, and we’ve all seen that one coming up the ranks.

It isn’t the first time the word sustainability has been in the spotlight either. It has had some time in the sun, and Clarkson attributes its revival to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. But he’s still sceptical of the nations signing up. “Do they really know what it would take to fix those things?” he says, “Transformational change would be required to make them happen.”

We hide behind the word and tiptoe around the problem, when the focus should be on the root cause. “We can come up with all sorts of clever ways to do things, like build green roofs and walls, and urban

design that includes green space, but the bottom line is unless we focus and direct our attention to the core problem, those other things – while they can be useful in a broader portfolio – will not solve the underlying issue.”

So what does it come down to for you and me? As cliché as it sounds, doing your bit is like a drop in the ocean with a ripple effect. Change the status quo by doing your due diligence around what you buy, wear, eat, do and use, because what you practice in your own home and backyard is shared with your neighbour (or friend, or family, or colleague). Those collective shifts can grow into a local, regional and national movement.

Reduce your ecological footprint, be a discerning consumer, and beware claims of sustainability. When you see, hear or read the ‘it’ word, question its veracity. If it’s a throwaway, bypass it like you would a corny catchphrase. If it’s backed up, take note. ■