Against the Grain

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Collecting to the Core — Our Common Future

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Collecting to the Core — Our Common Future

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

As an academic discipline, environmental studies is relatively young. Its rise largely coincides with the first Earth Day, which was observed on April 22, 1970, and originally promoted as an environmental teach-in by United States Senator **Gaylord Nelson**. However, a few academic programs, events, and publications predated that inaugural Earth Day, including the environmental studies programs at **SUNY Syracuse** and **Middlebury College**; federal legislation on water pollution and air pollution control passed in 1948 and 1955, respectively; and several influential environmental monographs, including **Aldo Leopold's** *A Sand County Almanac* and **Rachel Carson's** *Silent Spring*.¹⁻⁴ The post-World War II era ushered in an increasingly global perspective of Earth and humans' relationship to it, influenced in part by the first views of the planet from space, a number of environmental disasters (notably the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill), and a growth in international governmental cooperation through the establishment of the **United Nations (U.N.)**. Indeed, the internationalization of environmental studies can be chronicled partly through the formation of both the **United Nations Development Programme** in 1965 and the **United Nations Environment Programme** in 1972. While both of the aforementioned works, *A Sand County Almanac* and *Silent Spring*, have broad, multidisciplinary audiences (each is included in at least four **RCL** subject disciplines), this essay will focus on another influential and seminal work for the field of environmental studies: *Our Common Future*, the 1987 report of the **U.N.'s World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)**.⁵

Early international publications that examine the human-environment interplay include the *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, *World Conservation Strategy*, and *North-South: A Program for Survival*.⁶⁻⁸ In 1983, the **U.N. General Assembly** established the **WCED** with members from twenty-one different nations and tasked it with building on these preceding efforts by devising strategies for preserving the environment while promoting worldwide economic development. The

resulting report, *Our Common Future* (also known as the *Brundtland Report* after the chair of the Commission, Norwegian Prime Minister **Gro Harlem Brundtland**) was published through **Oxford University Press** in 1987 and is recognized as one of the first works to define and promote sustainable development. The report is presented in three parts — Common Concerns; Common Challenges; Common Endeavours — and outlines a pathway for supporting global economic interests while sustaining shared environmental resources, insisting that "the time has come to take the decisions needed to secure the resources to sustain this and coming generations."⁹

Our Common Future (OCF) has had a strong and lasting impact on environmental thought, including the popularization and definitional standardization of the terms "sustainability" and "sustainable development." It has greatly influenced the subdiscipline of environmental economics, along with environmental policy studies and the multidisciplinary field of sustainability science.¹⁰⁻¹² The *OCF* report is the mortar that made the foundation of both sustainable development and sustainability strong and permanent. The enduring value of *OCF* can be quantified by looking at citation counts in the literature over time, with a breakdown of its citation history illustrating that its influence has not yet peaked. The data referenced here is based on a **Web of Science (WOS)** Cited Reference Search using matches for over 900 citation variations for the *Our Common Future* report. These results show a steady citation growth over the thirty years since the report's publication. Note that 2016-2018 is measured only through June 2018; by extrapolation, the total Cited Reference Search numbers should again exceed the previous five years within a three-year span.

Years	Number of citations
1987-1990	217
1991-1995	648
1996-2000	1,007
2001-2005	1,260
2006-2010	2,505
2011-2015	3,294
2016-2018	3,016

Fig. 1 WOS Cited Reference Search for *Our Common Future*

Our Common Future defined and advocated for then-nascent concepts of sustainability and "sustainable development," describing the latter as an approach that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹³ Prior to the publication of *OCF* there is little usage of the terms found in the academic literature; these terms now permeate the environmental studies literature and can be found in thousands of publications across multiple disciplines. Usage of the term "sustainable development" increased substantially following the publication of *OCF*. The **Web of Science** database was used to track the growth of the term from 1981 to June 2018. Here "sustainable development" was searched as a bound term. Again, note that 2016-2018 is only through June 2018 so by extrapolation the total citations for 2016-2020 should exceed the previous five years.

Years	Number of articles with term
1981-1987	30
1988-1990	90
1991-1999	3,294
2000-2005	4,735
2006-2010	10,989
2011-2015	18,776
2016-2018	14,858

Fig. 2 "Sustainable development" keyword search in WOS records

Looking at other impact measures, within the **Scopus** database, the term "sustainable development" is found in over 155,000 publications. "Sustainable development" became a **Library of Congress Subject Heading** in 1992 and as of June 2018, over 78,000 non-fiction book records contain the subject heading. A keyword search in the **Resources for College Libraries** database results in 146 titles with "sustainable development" in the item record (only 15 of these from the Environmental Studies subject list) and 498 titles using the search term "sustainability" (only 38 from the Environmental Studies subject list). The breadth of subject coverage in these search results belies the impact of *Our Common Future* and its interdependent influence, with monographs from agriculture, business, education, engineering, health sciences, hospitality, politics, urban studies, and

continued on page 38

Collecting to the Core from page 36

more, including: *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*; *The Age of Sustainable Development*; *NAFTA and Sustainable Development: The History, Experience, and Prospects for Reform*; *Sustaining Abundance: Environmental Performance in Industrial Democracies*; and *Towards Sustainable Aviation*.¹⁴⁻¹⁸

Together, the above numbers illustrate the broad reach of the concepts introduced in *Our Common Future* and its assertion of an interlocked relationship between the global economy and ecology. The report has been used in many

environmental studies curricula throughout the years as a course text, with the most recent critical analysis for classroom use by **Ksenia**

Gerasimova for **Routledge's** Macat Library series.¹⁹ In the thirty-plus years since its release, *Our Common Future* has become the common past for a broad array of scholarly publications, across many disciplines and sectors. As such, it retains a central place in a core environmental studies collection. 🌱

Endnotes

1. *Federal Water Pollution Control Act*. P.L. 80-845 Chap. 758, 62 Stat. 1155), June 30, 1948.
2. *Air Pollution Control Act*. P.L. 84-159, Chap. 360, 69 Stat. 322), July 14, 1955.
3. **Leopold, Aldo**. *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches from Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1949.*
4. **Carson, Rachel**. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.*
5. World Commission on Environment and Development. *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.* Also found at the U.N. website as *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. 4 August 1987. Accessed May 2, 2018. <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>
6. *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*. From *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, Stockholm, June 1972. Accessed June 28, 2018. <http://www.un-documents.net/unchedec.htm>
7. International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, 1980.
8. **Brandt, Willy**, and the Independent Commission on International Development Issues. *North-South: A Program for Survival. Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983.
9. *Our Common Future*, Overview.
10. **Du Pisani, Jacobus A.** "Sustainable Development – Historical Roots of the Concept." *Environmental Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2006): 83-96. DOI: 10.1080/15693430600688831
11. National Research Council. *Our Common Journey: A Transition Toward Sustainability*. Washington D.C.: The National Academies Press, 1999.
12. **Bennett, Drew E.** "Geography and the Emergence of Sustainability Science: Missed Opportunities and Enduring Possibilities." *The Geographical Bulletin* 54, no. 2 (2013): 99-112.
13. *Our Common Future*, Overview section I. 3.
14. **Daly, Herman E.** *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.*
15. **Sachs, Jeffrey D.** *The Age of Sustainable Development*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.*
16. **Kong, Hoi L.** and **L. Kinvin Wroth** (eds). *NAFTA and Sustainable Development: History, Experience, and Prospects for Reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.*
17. **Scruggs, Lyle**. *Sustaining Abundance: Environmental Performance in Industrial Democracies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.*
18. **Upham, Paul, Janet Maughan, David Raper, and Callum Thomas**. *Towards Sustainable Aviation*. London: Routledge, 2003.*
19. **Gerasimova, Ksenia**. *Our Common Future: A Macat Analysis of the Brundtland Report*. London: Routledge, 2017.

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Booklover from page 34

Thibault was awarded the 1921 Nobel Prize in Literature "in recognition of his brilliant literary achievements, characterized as they are by a nobility of style, a profound human sympathy, grace, and a true Gallic temperament."

I leave you with a few tempting lines from the timeline of the story of Penguinia:

The Ancient Times — "I see them," said Bulloch. They are creating law; they are founding property; they are establishing the principles of civilization, the basis of society, and the foundations of the State.' 'How is that?' asked old Maël. 'By setting bounds to their fields. That is the origin of all government. Your penguins, O Master, are performing the most august of functions. Throughout the ages their work will be consecrated by lawyers, and magistrates will confirm it.'"

The Middle Ages and Renaissance — "The Penguin critics vie with one another in affirming that Penguin art has from its origin been distinguished by a powerful and pleasing originality, and that we may look elsewhere in vain for the qualities of grace and reason that characterise its earliest works."

Modern Times: Trinco — "Ægidius Aucupis, the Erasmus of the Penguins, was not mistaken; his age was an age of free inquiry. But that great man mistook the elegances of the humanists for softness of manners, and he did not foresee the effects that the awakening of intelligence would have amongst the Penguins. It brought about the religious Reformation; Catholics massacred Protestants and Protestants massacred Catholics."

Modern Times: Chatillon — "Every system of government produces people who are dissatisfied. The Republic or Public Thing produced them at first from amongst the nobles who have been despoiled of their ancient privileges."

Modern Times — "No one doubted because the general ignorance in which everybody was concerning the affair did not allow of doubt, for doubt is a thing that demands motives. People do not doubt without reasons in the same way that people believe without reasons. The thing was not doubted because it was repeated everywhere and, with the public, to repeat is to prove."

Sound familiar? 🌱