

## **Cross-Cultural Dialogue**

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Gregory Bateson suggests that sustainability can be usefully understood as;

***“the pattern that connects , which if it is broken, all quality of life is destroyed”.***

Pitjantjatjara people might translate the word ‘ **sustain**’ as ‘**kanyini**’.

**Kanyini** means to care for, to support, to nurture, to protect.

### **Sustain**

1. *to support, bear the weight*
2. *to give strength to encourage, support*
3. *to give nourishment to*
4. *to endure, stand*
5. *to undergo, suffer*

Sustain is an Anglo Saxon word from Old French *so(u)stein* “*stressed stem*”  
and Latin *so(u)stenir* “*to hold*”.

Sustainability is not an objective static state it is an active continuing subjective ‘ ability to sustain’. The desire inherent in sentient beings to ‘sustain’ life, strength, species, food, water, shelter and air to breath, to walk, to love, to laugh and to cry with others in a viable eco-cultural environment.

Nganyinytja says, “Many people today have lost their country, lost their spirit.”

Indigenous people understand that Land and spirit are essential for life.

*The stressed stem will not hold, if its roots are not secure in the earth  
and tapping into the deep underground waters of spirit.*

As clean water and nutrient rich soil are becoming increasingly rare resources the question for world today is:

“What we want to sustain and what is our ability to do so?”

Since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janerio, in 1992, ‘**sustainable development**’ has been the buzz-word applied to ‘balancing the equation between human development and environmental protection.’ Primarily defined as an economic equation, balancing;

***current use of natural resources < > future needs for natural resources.***

The bottom line of the human/ environment equation has been expanded to ***the triple bottom line*** –

***Economic***  
***Social***  
***Ecological***

The attempts to measure sustainable resource use in these terms is a conceptual move forward in theory and has made some small differences to practice. The continued non-sustainable use of natural resources by large scale industry can be so called 'balanced' by small scale efforts to recycle and reduce pollution in processing.

It is good for business to win environmental awards that focus on reduced harm rather than 'balancing' the whole ecological footprint of the industry.

The triple bottom line accounting has not halted the alarming rate of worldwide decline in the environment nor addressed the seriously unbalanced use of natural resources by rich and poor nations. The lack of clean potable water for many of the world's poor is at crisis level. Many peoples of the world are concerned with the sustainability of 'needs' while the industrialised nations worry about maintaining their affluent 'wants'. These equations are not being balanced and multinational industries and powerful nations are defiantly not accountable for their use of natural resources.

### **An Indigenous perspective on the human/environment sustainable balance.**

Indigenous knowing is that ***ecosystems ARE as result of coevolution with human societies.***

The Pitjantjatjara people, my teachers, relate to their country as family.

***Ngura Walytja***, can be translated as 'place my relative' or homeland. The term refers to country that was formed by a person's Creative Ancestor, the animal/human generative being who travelled through that country making hills, waterholes, salt pans, and foods that have sustained their family through many generations. The entire ecosystem depends on human participation through ceremony, song and dance as well as patch burning, clearing waterholes and hunting and gathering rotation cycles.

Culture and nature are mutually interdependent and co-sustaining.

***“Nyuntu palya nyinanyi? Are you being/ sitting well on the earth?”***

***The five dimensions of ‘being’;***

3 dimensions of space, 1 dimension of time and 1 dimension of spirit .

SPACE	1. Place – Ngura - Ecological:	linked to other people and places by song-lines.
	2. Family – Walytja – Economic:	our position as members of family, community, society.
	3. Songlines – Inma – Social :	performance of social and cultural relationship networks, active embodied knowledge of country and people.
TIME	4. Dreaming/Law -Tjukurpa –Past/ Present/Future	Active continuous creation.
SPIRIT	5. Life-force - Kurunpa – Energy:	that which activates , sustains all life on earth.

**STRESSED STEM STORY**

A version of an Arrernte story from Desert Oaks country:

In the sand dunes of Central Australia are stands of majestic desert oaks. their trunks of hardwood reach up to the sky , their bark is thick and blackened by the many fires they have withstood. The broad canopies of fine needle like leaves spread welcome shade and lull the traveller to sleep with wind music.

Amongst the tall giants are groups of straggly brush shaped little fellows, the gangly groups of boys amongst the men. Not all will survive to reach the sky and branch out providing a broad sheltering canopy for the next generation of seedlings. . Some will be burnt in fires and loose spirit and die.

The young boys must send down strong tap-roots to the underground water table before they can grow up and be initiated into manhood. The stressed stem will not hold, if its roots are not secure in the earth and tapping into the deep underground waters of spirit.

*We must sustain our saplings and our youths, make sure their roots reach the water and they grow to provide shelter and sustenance for the next generation.*

