

The Stain in Sustainability

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By

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I am pleased that my long-time friend and your president Donna Utter asked me to come to Kansas City for your conference. She is one of the best professionals in the nation and represents MORA very well. This conference agenda is one of the most comprehensive I have attended in my years traveling attending state recycling conferences. You also had a nice reception last night. I made sure I didn't drink too much alcohol, something easy to do when you are out of town. Instead of "Sleepless in Seattle" I am kind of afraid of being "Blurry in Missouri".

I am also pleased to speak at the same conference as Bob Mann and David Refkin. Bob was one of the people who taught me the business and community quality of life parts of recycling. It was Bob and the early pioneers of "Bridging the Gap" who gave us the knowledge, the passion, and the confidence to start recycling in my hometown of Tulsa. Bob Mann deserves recognition as one of the true visionaries and mentors to us all.

I also now serve on the National Recycling Coalition board and was honored to nominate David Refkin for President of the NRC board of directors. His leadership has been stellar and his sustainable direction invaluable to the board of directors. Missouri recyclers are important to the national movement and I am so pleased that David is coming to speak to you tomorrow.

I am glad that this year's MORA conference has a theme of sustainability. It is the perfect popular phrase...I call it the "where's the beef" of the new millennium. Sustainability is a very complex idea and encompasses so much of what we in this room and in the environmental field have tried to say for so many years. I wanted to share with you how I learned about what sustainable means through an accidental encounter.

My understanding of sustainability all started for me when someone spilled coffee on one of my good white dress shirts. I was mad for a number of reasons, first of all because I don't even drink coffee. I think coffee is a cult. I always have these wide-eyed people wanting me to join them in this ritual of holding a cup of hot liquid. I can't go anywhere without someone trying to recruit me in to this cult, even the serving staff at this luncheon have offered me coffee. Some of you even drink your coffee extra strong, using espresso as a caffeine delivery system.

To begin my investigation I did what anyone should do, go to the fountain of truth, the internet. I learned quite a bit about sustainability when I started my research on this I believe is a "yet to be regulated substance".

The first thing I learned was that the best coffee is grown on a sustainable farm. A sustainable farm gives back as much to the land and people as it receives. It seeks independence from non-renewable resources, using renewable ones whenever possible. Sustainable farming also minimizes pollution, takes steps to care for the environment, and cares for its employees. Sustainable coffee would never unduly apply harmful chemicals to the land. It respects that thin layer of earth that gives us not only coffee, but most of the air we breathe and the food we eat. People think I care about the whole earth, in reality, I only care about the topsoil...it is because I am shallow.

A sustainable farm will replace the natural nutrients of the land by spreading fertilizers and organic matter (composted coffee pulp) under the coffee trees. This use of organic materials back into the very land that created it is done very well by the people of Missouri. Your ban on land filling of yard debris inspires me in Oklahoma to lobby our legislature again to follow your lead. Composting and mulching these materials is as important as any single thing for the environment in most of our lives.

The earth is a rock, full of water, and this layer of topsoil is as thin as a peel of an apple in comparison. We must divert these grass, leaves and yard materials from disposal facilities; they are more valuable than trash.

I love to compost. Face it...I am a dirt farmer. The earth wants me to...or in the words of Kansas City's own "Eco Elvis"...it says...thank you, thank you very mulch.

I also know how important sustainable practices should be for our respect for the land. I come from Oklahoma, a relatively new state that is less than a hundred years old. Oklahoma was also known as the "Dust Bowl" when my father was born. That was caused by the plowing of the grass lands right before a drought cycle. A desert appeared in the fertile soil of the plains. It was a combination of bad luck and an unsustainable business plan.

The want to grow crops is understandable, but without thinking of how it would affect future generations, now unfathomable. The topsoil spread in thick black clouds to the northeast (first to Missouri...you can thank me later) adding to your already fertile river bottom state. This desert where there was once rich, green land is what I most fear about global warming. I know I should also lament the icebergs melting and the like, but having the deserts grow scares me more.

We know recycling reduces our impact on the environment. The energy saved by Missouri's own Anheuser Busch (the world's largest aluminum can recycler) could probably completely power a state like mine. Recyclers help lead in the very principles of sustainability, wise use of resources, minimizing extraction of new minerals, lessening the loss of forest land and lengthening the life and need for disposal facilities. This Missouri recycling conference is filled with many of the people who keep your state sustainable. You have the resources and the knowledge to make recycling one of the easiest ways to teach the concepts of sustainability.

Besides learning about sustainability from coffee I also needed to learn more about my shirt if I was going to get this coffee stain out. My shirt was more than half cotton, with the rest made from polyester. It turns out that cotton shares many of the sustainability issues of coffee from a use of land perspective but has its own challenges and polyester was made from petroleum.

I know I am not the right spokesman for the fashion industry. I could never be a Chippendale dancer, I am more of a Chips-a-Hoy dancer and the clothes I wear don't inspire others to look like me.

I will also admit that being from Oklahoma means that my son is only the third generation in my family to regularly wear shoes. But thanks to the internet, a trip to the mall with some teenagers, and some hasty generalizations, I now am a self-proclaimed expert on fashion. Life is simpler when you plow around the stumps.

One of the first things I learned was that shirts are made in many different countries in the world, many of whom do not pay a sustainable wage. The makers of many of the shirts that Americans wear are made with labor that doesn't allow that garment maker to have even a modicum of the quality of life that should be available to such a craftsman.

I know I could never make a good quality dress shirt...in fact I am worthless in most things that require tools. I don't even own many tools, instead having a tool box filled with different size sticks that I can poke things with before announcing they are broke.

But back to fashion...William Shakespeare said "fashion wears out more apparel than the man". George Bernard Shaw said that "fashion is an induced epidemic". What is sustainable about not wearing perfectly good clothing because it has too wide or narrow a lapel or collar? What is with these "fashionistas" who have to buy new accessories because this year the popular color is a slightly different shade? Shouldn't our clothes be judged for how well they fit and how comfortable they are? If you want a hint of an industry

that is in opposition to sustainability, it parades on a runway. Fashion is something that goes in one year and out the other.

I remembered the shirt with the coffee stain was a new white dress shirt that I had just purchased. It wasn't the most fashionable thing, but was a needed part of my business wardrobe. There must be some way to get out a coffee stain. It was time to learn about soap, laundry and sustainability.

I knew something about soap. A number of us wrote letters in the 1980s to soap companies asking them to sell concentrated soap. I don't know if many of you bought laundry soap back then, but the boxes of soap were the size of furniture. You put two cups of soap in every wash load. Our letters and our threats to vote with our pocketbooks helped convince soap companies to now sell containers that do the same number of loads, but in a smaller box or even better, a recyclable and recycled jug.

I also knew that soapy water was a wonderful natural way to keep bugs off my garden vegetables and plants. There was no need to actually kill the bugs; I just needed them to go somewhere else. I don't know if you all knew this or not, but my many travels have convinced me that every bug in the world comes to Missouri on their summer vacation...and they all fly windshield high.

Maybe the sustainable way to remove this stain was to just wash the shirt. We had a nice washing machine, the front-loading type that saves water. We also had a dryer and state of the art solar powered clothes dryer in the backyard, something called a "clothesline". I found out that heating the water, running the two machines to wet, spin and then dry my shirt was one of the most energy intensive things that we do in our homes. Almost 20% of the energy usage in the average residence goes toward laundry. It made me appreciate all the college students in the world who have perfected the art of wearing clothes multiple times between trips home so mom could wash their clothes. I mean just how clean this thing called soap can be if it leaves a soap scum?

This was all a great lesson for me in the basic tenets of sustainability. Living a sustainable life meant only buying coffee that is organic, shade grown and fair trade. It meant thinking of durability when buying shirts and trying to lessen my use of non-renewable fuels by using the sun to dry my clothes. It meant buying detergents that are friendly for the environment. And equally important, it also taught me to think outside the box, or for us recyclers, outside the dumpster.

My mother-in-law told me that she had the perfect solution. Her generation came through the depression and saw resources and solutions a little different than mine. I thought was the best course for someone who is trying to live a sustainable existence. I could not remove the stain without sacrificing, so we did the next best thing, she dyed the whole shirt in a pot of coffee overnight. It turned out to be a very pretty shade of light brown; in fact, it is the shirt I am wearing today.

While struggling with a challenge caused by a coffee cult, I improved my world and upgraded my wardrobe to some color other than my other white shirts.

Once again, Missouri faces the challenges that my state and the other Middle America leaders struggle with. Your conference steps forward with solutions that improve our world and upgrade our movement to a wonderful shade, this time a beautiful green that can only be achieved through sustainability.

Missourians can also show me that you can lead this movement in America. This 2007 Missouri Recycling Association conference and sustainability theme is excellent and my hat is off to the organizers and to both Executive Director Angie Gehlert and to President Donna Utter. I was very impressed by your morning presentations and I am sure that the rest of the conference will just get better and better.

In Oklahoma, I have the stain, in Missouri; you show me the ability in sustainability. Thank you.