

What sustainability really means to rural decision-makers

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Scenes from rural areas of the Pacific Northwest, where Kansas State University geographer Lisa Harrington interviewed civic and business leaders about what sustainability means to them. Credit: Photos by Lisa Harrington, Kansas State University department of geography.

From book titles to real estate developments, it's easier to find things claiming to be sustainable than it is to define it.

That's why a Kansas State University geographer is trying to pin down exactly what sustainability means to those who might be trying to work toward it. Her goal is to better understand what is important to people

who have to make decisions about what to sustain with the hope that this will later help civic and business leaders in [rural communities](#) make more informed decisions about sustainability.

Lisa Harrington is a K-State professor of geography whose interest is in rural geography. She is teaching a K-State class in sustainability science and said one of the big issues in teaching such a course is developing a good sense of what sustainability means and communicating that to students.

"I want to develop a better sense of how people view the term sustainability and develop a better sense of issues and problems that people in [rural areas](#) are having related to ideas of sustainability," Harrington said. "Sustainability is broadly applied without always being meaningful. Generally, people try to use it appropriately. It's just that it is a term that's broad enough it can be misused."

For her research, Harrington interviewed civic leaders and resource users in rural Washington and Oregon to get a sense of what sustainability means to them and how they feel about it. Harrington found that some rural leaders have an understanding of sustainability that fits how scholars and professionals define it -- as something that can last into the future. But other rural leaders she interviewed don't like how the term is used or don't understand it.

"Some of the people I interviewed are planners, so they want a really clear definition that they can apply to their work," Harrington said. "I wanted to get a sense of what sorts of problems rural leaders and decision-makers were focusing on and some of the changes and stresses they're experiencing that relate to sustainability."

In the rural Pacific Northwest, Harrington said, the primary industries are fishing, logging and tourism. All of these industries require a balance

of sustaining the local economy and sustaining the very environment that makes fishing, logging and tourism viable in the first place. Moreover, Harrington said that the tourism industry raises social sustainability issues like whether service industry workers can afford housing in the communities where they work.

"When people are thinking about sustainability, they can't really sustain everything -- ecologically, socially or economically -- at the same time," she said. "Choices have to be made."

Harrington presented the research in July at the 17th annual Colloquium of the International Geographical Union's Commission on the [Sustainability](#) of Rural Systems.

Harrington plans to continue this research elsewhere in the country, including in Kansas. She expects that the specific issues will be different -- for instance, sustaining family farms rather than ocean ecology. But Harrington expects that some of the underlying problems will be the same, including the availability of suitable housing and jobs that pay enough to sustain families.

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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