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Sustainability Integration Project  
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I planned and implemented my Sustainability Integration project for my Spring 2015 course American Colonial History (History 310). This is an upper-level course that enrolls mostly junior and senior History majors and minors. Although I included aspects of environmental history in previous versions of this course, these topics were limited to 1-2 class sessions. For this semester, I integrated environmental history topics at several points during the semester and paid more attention to these topics in class discussion. Additionally, for my project, I focused a complete class session and a mid-term essay assignment specifically on sustainability.

In class, I introduced the Sustainability Pyramid model described by William McDonough and Michael Braungart in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 150-154. I shared a visual depiction of this way of modeling sustainability (attached), which includes ecological, economic, and social (equity) aspects. In an eighty-minute class session, my students talked in small groups to prepare for a whole-class discussion of several questions about the 17th-century English society founded in the Chesapeake Bay region. More specifically, I asked students to evaluate the sustainability of mid-17th century Chesapeake society, taking into account ecology, equity, and economy, as described in the Sustainability Pyramid. In introducing the pyramid, I made it clear that this was just one way of defining sustainability. Additionally, I explained that 17th-century English people did not have a concept of sustainability. What we were doing was applying a contemporary model to a historical situation in order to better understand both the model and the past.

The class discussion of the Chesapeake colonies was quite illuminating from a historical perspective. We were able to carry out a detailed analysis of the social, economic, and environmental aspects of the Virginia and Maryland colonies. In discussing social equity, we noted immediately that the whole society was based upon the dispossession of First Nations people, and this fact led to warfare that threatened human wellbeing. We also discussed how the main labor system of the mid-17th century Chesapeake (indentured servitude) did offer some opportunities for social and economic advancement, but it was generally a harsh system. We recognized that the social system was a patriarchy, dramatically tilted in favor of male power. The labor system that was used for economic development through cultivation of tobacco had important economic and environmental repercussions. Tobacco planters typically girdled trees to kill them in order to make space to plant tobacco. Deforestation thus went hand-in-hand with the tobacco economy. Tobacco cultivation also took a major toll on soil fertility, which meant that planters needed to continually open new lands to cultivation, a fact that had social and environmental impacts. Ultimately, we concluded that the 17th-century Chesapeake society was not a very sustainable society, and we discussed historical evidence from late in the century that supported this conclusion: in 1676, there was a major uprising by discontented small farmers against the government and against First Nations people in the region, who suffered from indiscriminate attacks. This tumultuous event known as Bacon's Rebellion led to major changes within the society that were economic and social, including a dramatic increase in the use of enslaved Africans for labor. While the elites and small farmers found a way to make amends, First Nations continued to lose lands, and environmental degradation continued. This society remained unsustainable, and after a period of several decades experienced additional transformations, including a partial shift away from tobacco cultivation.

In addition to helping us understand the history of colonization, our discussion allowed us to see the sometimes uneasy relationship between these three components of sustainability. Applying a sustainability model to an actual historical situation can help us see how environmental sustainability cannot be effectively separated from social and economic issues. To recognize this complexity is not to say that sustainability cannot be considered outside of the paradigm of industrial and post-industrial capitalism. In fact, historical examples can raise our

awareness of pre-modern modes of human social and economic organization that may be relevant to confronting our contemporary problems.

During later class sessions, I found it very useful to return to these concepts and to the sustainability model. We discussed how this model might be applied to the New England colonies of roughly the same time period, as well as to the West Indian and Carolina colonies that developed in distinctive ways. Through these discussions, I became convinced that this particular model of sustainability provided a very useful tool of historical analysis.

Following upon these class discussions, I gave my students the option of writing a mid-term essay that conducted a comparative analysis of two colonial regions using the sustainability model that we discussed in class. This assignment (attached) gave students an opportunity to further apply what they had learned in that discussion. About one-third of students chose this option, which was admittedly more challenging than the alternative. Overall, these papers showed that my students were capable of thinking in complex ways about the inter-relationships between environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainability. Many of these essays commented such issues as the effects of tobacco cultivation on the land, overhunting for the fur and skin markets, deforestation, and the impact of European livestock on wild animal habitats. Additionally, some students were able to incorporate useful comparisons of First Nations and Euro-American cultures from the sustainability perspective.

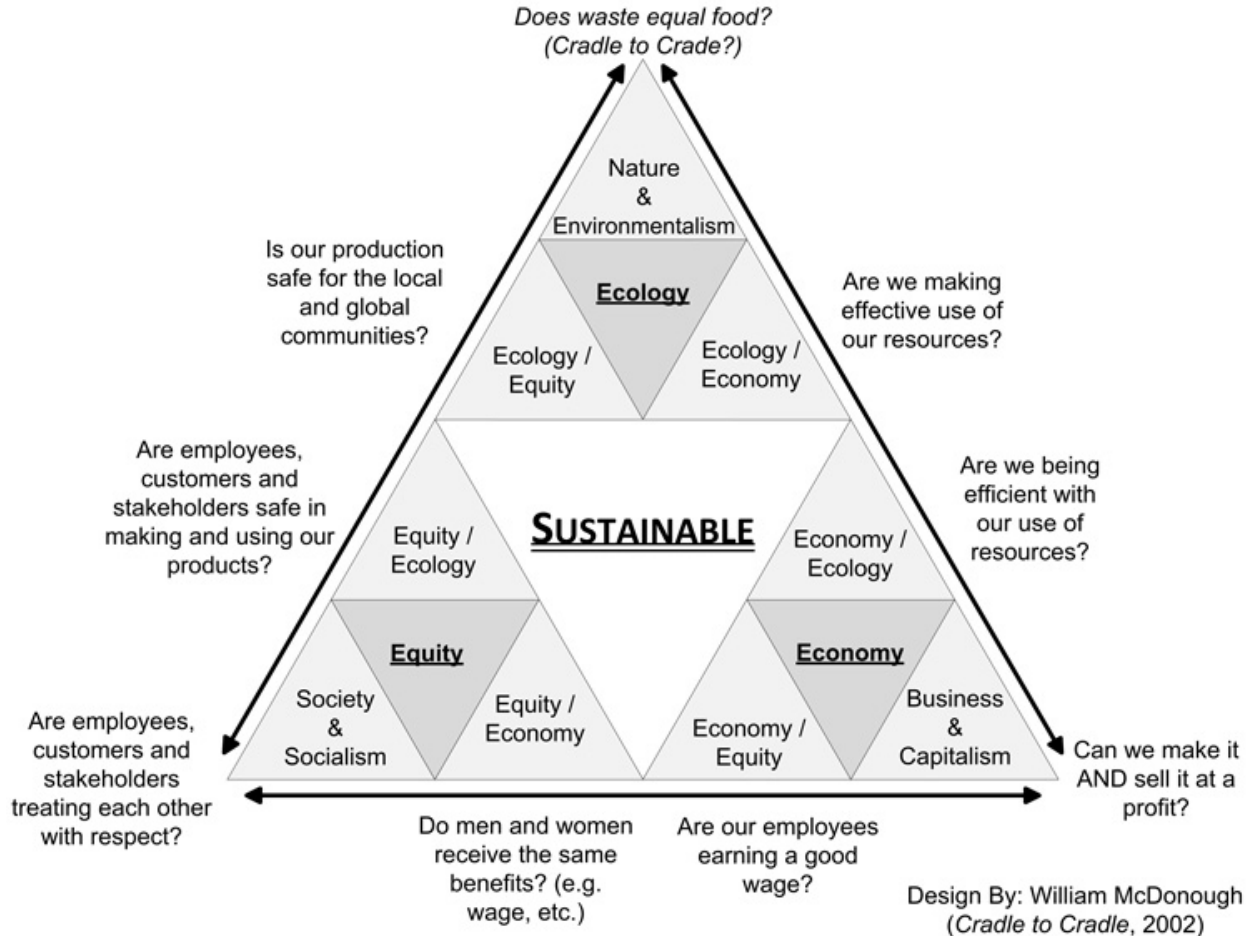
I consider my initial experience using the sustainability pyramid in a history class to be very successful. I plan to continue integrating these kinds of discussions and assignments in the future. Going forward, I would like to be even more intentional about some of the different ways of defining sustainability. I would also like to help my students reflect further on the significance and value of this kind of historical analysis in the face of our current environmental crises.

Attachments:

- \* Sustainability Pyramid handout
- \* Midterm essay assignment

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sustainability Pyramid



How sustainable was mid-17th century Chesapeake society, taking into account Ecology, Equity, and Economy, as described above? (Mid-17<sup>th</sup> century means between the tobacco boom of the 1630s and 1640s and Bacon's Rebellion of 1676.)

Ecology:

Equity:

Economy:

How did these aspects of Chesapeake society change after 1676? Did the society become more or less sustainable?

This pyramid is based on a model and description offered by William McDonough and Michael Braungart in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 150-154.

### Mid-Term Essay (Due March 27)

The purpose of this assignment is for you to develop and demonstrate your understanding of seventeenth-century American history, as well as your skills at writing an argumentative essay that makes proper use of a variety of sources. Your goal is to interpret and analyze—not simply to describe.

Your essay should be approximately 6 pages long (double-spaced, 12-point font, 1" margins). You should draw thoroughly on the assigned readings and make use of at least one additional (unassigned) scholarly source. (The *JSTOR* and *America: History & Life* databases are good places to search for scholarly articles.) Be sure to review the guidelines in the *Handbook for Writing Historical Essays*. Use Chicago-style footnotes to cite your sources.

Option 1: The arrival of European colonizers to Turtle Island in large numbers in the 1600s transformed the land and the lives of First Nations peoples—especially in the regions along the Atlantic coastline and surrounding the Great Lakes—as Europeans attempted to create new societies that served their interests. Choose two regions from this list: Chesapeake Bay, New England, and Great Lakes. Using the sustainability pyramid provided in class, compare and contrast these two regions in the areas of ecological, economic, and social (equity) sustainability. All societies experience change over time. The question, for each of the regions, is: to what extent were their land use practices, economies, and social structures sustainable over long periods of time? What factors undermined stability and led to major periods of crisis? Note that all three regions experienced warfare, including the Iroquois Wars (Great Lakes), Bacon's Rebellion (Chesapeake), and King Philip's War (New England), which qualify as major crises. How did the societies establish a new equilibrium in the wake of these crises? Be sure to consider not only the place of Europeans in these colonial societies but also their relationships with First Nations and Africans.

Option 2: The arrival of European colonizers to Turtle Island in large numbers in the 1600s transformed the land and the lives of First Nations peoples—especially in the regions along the Atlantic coastline and surrounding the Great Lakes—as Europeans attempted to create new societies that served their interests. Choose two regions from this list: Chesapeake Bay, New England, and Great Lakes. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast these two regions with regard to the strategies that First Nations used to attempt to deal with European colonizers. What were the goals and strategies of the colonizers? How did First Nations try to force Europeans to accommodate to Native ways? How did First Nations try to use Europeans to their own advantage? To what extent were they successful in doing so? In your comparison, consider both the early years of contact and the situations that developed by the late 1600s, in the wake of major conflicts such as the Iroquois Wars, Bacon's Rebellion, and King Philip's War.

\*\* Bring a 1-page outline, with a tentative thesis, to class on Thursday, March 12.

\*\* Upload your essay to D2L by 5 PM on Friday, March 27.