

2-22-2011

## Interview with Robert Costanza, Institute for Sustainable Solutions, 2011 (audio)

Robert Costanza

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### Recommended Citation

Sharpsteen, Noah, "Interview with Robert Costanza, 2011 (audio)" (2011). Sustainability History Project. <http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/10728>

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**PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**SUSTAINABILITY HISTORY PROJECT**  
**INTERVIEW INDEX**

INTERVIEWEE: Dr. Robert Costanza\_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: Noah Sharpsteen\_\_\_\_\_

Date: February 22, 2011\_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview: His Office\_\_\_\_\_

Research Assistant: John Stephenson\_\_\_\_\_

Interview Series: Documenting Sustainable Practices in the Pacific Northwest

Recording Equipment: DIGITAL RECORDER (WINDOWS MEDIA AUDIO FILE) WITH AN  
EXTERNAL, OMNIDIRECTIONAL MICROPHONE

Time	Notes
0:30	<b>How long have you lived in Portland?</b> Has lived in Portland for 5 months, started in Sept of 2010
0:40	<b>What brought you to Portland?</b> This job and the possibilities and initiatives of the university. Was supported by a 25 million dollar gift from the Miller Foundation. Wants to achieve sustainable solutions.
1:18	<b>Where were you educated after high school, and in what fields?</b> Education after High school - Started at Purdue University in Aerospace Engineering, then University of Florida to get degrees in Architecture and Urban Planning, also got a PHD in Systems Ecology with a minor in Economics. Jobs – Louisiana State University in Bataan Ruche, then University of Maryland, then University of Vermont, and now here at PSU.
1:55	<b>How did you get involved in your work?</b> In Grad school and architecture school, he noticed how the Florida Landscape had changed. In his PHD studies he worked with Howard Odem at the University of Florida who was a Systems Ecologist. There he was made aware of the link between natural systems and economic systems. This issue was high on the agenda

	<p>at the time because of the impact the two systems had on each other.</p> <p>First job at Louisiana State, he was a colleague of Herman Daily; there they started working together and developing the idea of ecological economics. They saw it as a way to revise ecological and economical thinking into a more integrated picture.</p>
3:30	<p><b>What are ‘ecosystem services’ and ‘natural capital’?</b></p> <p>‘Natural Capital’ and ‘ecosystem services’ defined: Ecosystem services are the benefits that we derive from natural ecosystems. Humans are not separate from natural systems, but are imbedded in them. We need to recognize that we depend on the functioning ecosystems for our well being. That understanding was never articulated or quantified, (how much do we depend on the ecosystems?). Common thinking was that we do not depend on natural systems very much, but we are now starting to realize that that is not true. We are having an effect on the environment. We are starting to see a scarcity of natural capital.</p>
5:47	<p>“The Value of the World’s Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital” tried to estimate for the first time, the magnitude of the contributions of natural capital and ecosystem services to overall human well being. Made the estimate by synthesizes other studies that had already been done for particular services and ecosystems. Estimated total value of these systems to be much larger than conventional GDP. It does not make sense to think of economics as just products in the market, but also in terms of ecosystems and natural capital.</p>
7:16	<p><b>Since that paper, how has the discussion of sustainability altered?</b></p> <p>The idea of ecosystem services has really taken off. It is a way of reframing the issue; it is not the environment verses the economy anymore. Our natural capital assets are just as important as our build capital assets. There has been a huge interest in that area. Thousands of papers have been written on ecosystem services. The EPA has a new office of ecosystem services research. Other agencies are participating in the study.</p>
8:33	<p>Ecosystems Services Partnership: recently established the ecosystem services partnership; it is an attempt to coordinate all of the activity that is going on in these systems to try and work towards a common goal.</p>
8:55	<p><b>Do you see the terms ‘natural capital’ and ecosystem services’ being internal to your discipline; how do you get those terms to be used on a more general</b></p>

	<p><b>basis?</b></p> <p>A new journal called <i>Solutions</i>. It is about a whole range of solutions to the issues we are facing. Changing the media and getting the information out on the web. Hoping to bridge the gap between academia and the general population.</p>
11:08	<p><b><i>Our Common Future</i> introduced the three pillars of sustainability: economy, ecology, and equity; natural capital and ecosystem services cover the ecological and economic pillars. How have you seen the focus on natural capital and ecosystem services improve equity?</b></p> <p>In ecological economics, there are four types of capital that sustain human well being: natural capital, built capital, human (individual) capital, and social capital (networks between people and systems). It is critical to find a balance between the four in order to provide the maximum amount of well being.</p>
12:55	<p><b>Discussion between GDP and the measurement of human well being. What do you think ‘human well being’ is?</b></p> <p>There is a set of basic human needs that are cross-cultural. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, but not hierarchical: participation, leisure, and other things that are as important as subsistence and the ability to procreate. The way to meet all of these needs depends on our ability to arrange the four types of capital mentioned above to provide a subjective overall sense of well being.</p>
14:58	<p><b>Portland State University has been described as the most improved university in its sustainable practices... How would you characterize the general attitude towards sustainability?</b></p> <p>The attitude is very good. There seems to be a real commitment in a number of different areas. Portland State told the Miller Foundation that they would invest in sustainability. Making universities leaders toward sustainable practices is what PSU embodies. PSU is on track to transcend disciplinary boundaries and is engaging with the community at all scales. The capstones are a great way to get students involved in solving real problems. PSU uses their campus as a learning experience and a model for sustainable practices.</p>
19:00	<p><b>Do you see any challenges as using PSU as a model for sustainability?</b></p> <p>Of course there are challenges. Most universities have gotten into a disciplinary mode of organization. One of the challenges is to move beyond that and utilize our</p>



