



A Natural Step Case Study

The Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative



BUILDING A REGIONAL MOVEMENT FOR SUSTAINABILITY

In 2007, thirteen organizations across Atlantic Canada came together to mobilize the region to take action on environmental, social and economic sustainability. The Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative (ACSI) was formed with participation and support from local businesses, municipal governments, and non-governmental organizations. It became the first regional, multi-sector sustainability project in North America.

Using The Natural Step (TNS) Framework as a guide, ACSI partners were encouraged to think strategically about sustainability and identify new initiatives that could help them move in the right direction. With ongoing coaching from TNS Canada, representatives attended training workshops, created a sustainability plan, and took concrete steps to embed sustainability in their organizations. ACSI was coordinated at the local level by the Centre for Rural Sustainability (CRS), a Nova Scotia-based organization that facilitates learning, planning, and strategic decision making around sustainability.

Over their year-long participation in ACSI, the sustainability partners implemented a wide variety of sustainability projects and strategies, from the development of high-level sustainability plans to specific waste reduction actions such as switching to recycled paper. As a network, ACSI helped to shift the corporate culture of partner organizations and build a critical mass of organizations and people working collaboratively on sustainability issues in the region.

ATLANTIC CANADA

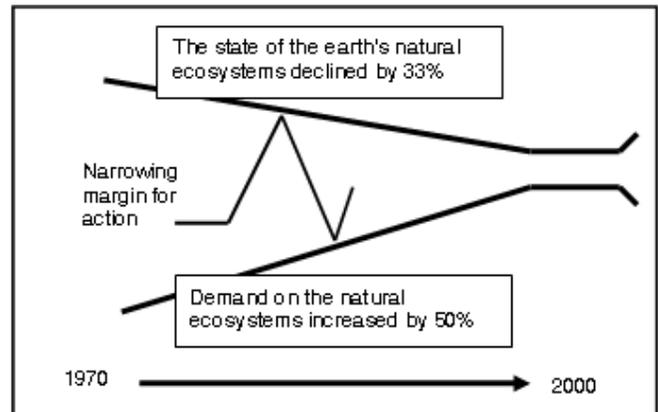
Atlantic Canada is home to over 2,300,000 people in four provinces: Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island.¹ There are over 500 incorporated municipalities in these provinces, ranging vastly in population and geographic size.

Although there are 15 major cities in the region, more than 40% of Atlantic Canadians live in rural areas. The uniquely rural population of the region is related to the fact that natural resources have traditionally been the backbone of local economies. Resource-based activities such as fishing, aquaculture, agriculture, forestry, mining, and oil and gas extraction continue to be very important to the economies of all four provinces.



¹ Statistics Canada. Canada's Population Estimates. Accessed July 30, 2008 from <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/071219/d071219b.htm>

The depletion and degradation of natural resources is a global concern. The United Nations Environment Programme, (UNEP)'s Living Planet Index is a measure of the state of global resources including forests, freshwater ecosystems, and oceans and coasts. According to a 2000 UNEP report, the state of the earth's natural resources declined by 33% between 1979 and 2000. Over the same period, the ecological pressure of humanity on the earth increased by about 50 percent.² This combination of declining natural resources with increasing human demand on those resources narrows the margins of possible actions for communities and organizations. For many, the 1992 collapse of the fishing industry in Atlantic Canada was a devastating illustration of the consequences of inaction. Thousands lost their jobs when a moratorium on cod fishing was declared, and fish stocks have not yet recovered. With a higher proportion of people living below the low-income cutoff than the national average, social concerns such as unemployment and rising pressure on affordable housing and health care services contribute to the challenge of building sustainable communities in Atlantic Canada.



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BUILDING REGIONAL MOMENTUM FOR SUSTAINABILITY

In the early 1990s, the Nova Scotia Round Table on the Environment and the Economy pioneered a Sustainable Development Strategy for the province, and Newfoundland and Labrador created a similar round table in 2007. Both Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island have developed cutting-edge solid waste management strategies, and have some of the highest waste diversion rates in the country. In addition, the government of Prince Edward Island has committed to generating 100% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2015.

When the United Nations declared 2005 to be the first year of its decade for education on sustainable development, Halifax-based Nova Scotia Environmental Network (NSEN) formed a group of organizations dedicated to sustainability in the province. Sustainability Education in Nova Scotia for Everyone (SENSE) was formed with the goal of advancing sustainability in Nova Scotia through education addressing environmental, social and economic themes.

Meanwhile, a number of Atlantic communities, including Wolfville, Halifax, Saint John and Antigonish, had already begun to implement their own sustainability initiatives. Local businesses in the region were beginning to take their own steps, with projects to reduce waste and purchase more ethical products. NGOs like NSEN and the Genuine Progress Index (GPI) Atlantic, which promotes full-cost accounting of economic, environmental, and social assets, were already mobilizing others in the region to take action on sustainability.

The long term well-being of Atlantic Canada is dependent on effectively integrating responses to the complex and diverse challenges of economic, social and environmental wellbeing. With the development of so many different responses throughout the region, it became increasingly important to integrate social, economic and environmental interventions so that each would support and enhance the others.

² World Wildlife Fund International, (2000) United Nations Environment Programme's World Conservation Monitoring Centre, *Living Planet Report*. London, Banson Production.

THE NATURAL STEP AND THE ATLANTIC CANADA SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE

In June 2005, GPI Atlantic worked with NSEN and other partners to host a major international conference in Antigonish, Nova Scotia called *Rethinking Development: Local Pathways to Global Wellbeing*. The conference was attended by 450 delegates from 33 countries who examined initiatives which had successfully integrated sustainable economic development with environmental conservation, social and cultural cohesion, and good governance. Clare Levin, then-Managing Director at GPI Atlantic, explained, “The conference was really about showcasing exemplary models of sustainable development happening all around the world. At the end, people wanted to see the great ideas we heard about at the conference translated into action.”

To build on the enthusiasm generated during the first conference, GPI Atlantic hosted a follow-up workshop several months later called *Building Sustainable Development*. This time, the focus was on how to position Atlantic Canada as a model and global leader for sustainable development. Based on interest in The Natural Step generated during this workshop, GPI published a primer on The Natural Step Framework, and the founding organizations elected to use the Framework to guide them through the creation of a regional sustainability network.

GPI Atlantic, The Natural Step Canada, NSEN and SENSE worked together to develop the network of organizations that would eventually become ACSI. They hosted an introductory TNS lecture, a TNS study circle, and several strategy sessions throughout early 2006. In September 2006, TNS founder Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert gave several lectures to both the public and high level government and business representatives in Atlantic Canada.

The Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative was launched on May 14, 2007, with 14 sustainability partners who signed the project charter committing them to take action on one of the sustainability objectives. The primary goal of the sustainability partners program was to support respected local businesses, NGOs and communities to introduce and use The Natural Step Framework in their respective organizations. The program is based on the theory of innovation diffusion: when progressive organizations demonstrate the viability and benefits of strategic sustainability planning, those organizations become leaders for others and help to build a critical mass of organizations taking action on sustainability.

The partners agreed to use The Natural Step Framework to accomplish one of the following objectives:

- Develop a Sustainability Action Plan for their organization;
- Develop an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan;
- Integrate sustainability into their community’s Municipal Development Plan or;
- Develop a program to incorporate sustainability into the culture of their organization.

“The reason [ACSI partners] gravitated towards The Natural Step – including myself – is that it’s the best framework out there. It takes a really hard, complex issue such as sustainable development, and provides some real common language about how to define it and how to move towards a sustainable future.”

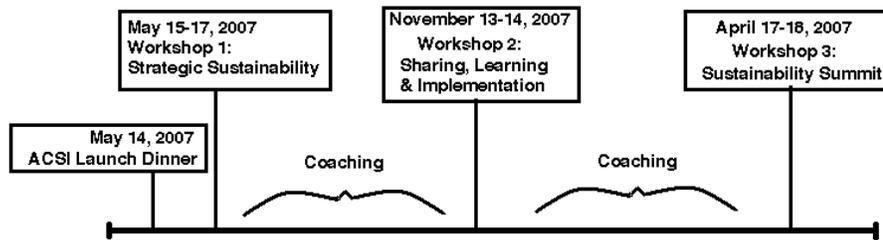
JOHN COLTON
CHAIR, CENTRE FOR RURAL
SUSTAINABILITY



ACSI partners signing the sustainability charter

Over the course of the initiative, one new Partner joined the project and two others withdrew due to resource constraints. The project included three workshops and a total of 16 hours of TNS coaching time for each sustainability partner in helping them develop and implement their sustainability initiative. In addition to the 13 Sustainability Partners, 32 other regionally-based organizations contributed funding, support and participated as Network Partners. Collectively, the Sustainability and Network Partners represent 4 municipalities, 7 businesses, 3 universities, 7 government departments and more than 20 NGOs and networks from Atlantic Canada.

ACSI Timeline : Year 1



The first workshop focused on building partners' understanding and competence in sustainability using the Natural Step Framework. Each Sustainability Partner was represented by several staff members, who attended the workshop and learned about our current un-sustainability challenge (using the funnel as a metaphor), the sustainability principles that define sustainability, and practiced using them to back-cast from success. Participants had the opportunity to get to know each other better and to become more comfortable using a common language to talk about sustainability.

Each Partner was assigned a coach to support and guide them through their sustainability initiative. A number of the Partners, including the Halifax Shambhala Centre created sustainability teams to develop and implement their ACSI projects. Early education strategies ranged from the movie nights held by iNova Credit Union to get staff talking about climate change to the widespread use of The Natural Step's eLearning programs for internal education.

Many began by pursuing 'low hanging fruit' – measures that are low-risk and provide comparatively quick return on investments – such as using more recycled paper and doing energy efficiency audits. As the Partners became more familiar with sustainability concepts, many worked to engage and educate their suppliers, clients, and the wider community. P'Lovers, a Halifax store specializing in environmental and alternative products, worked with the mall management to identify ways to make the entire building more sustainable and urged some of their suppliers to consider alternative packaging and shipping methods. In addition, some of the partners conducted baseline analyses and began to develop long-term strategic sustainability plans for their organizations, including iNova, Shambhala Centre, and Stratford, a newly amalgamated town in Prince Edward Island.

In November 2007, participants re-convened for a second workshop, where they had the opportunity to check in and learn from each others' processes and progress. The final workshop was the ACSI Regional Sustainability Summit, which took place in April of 2008. Partners and coaches came together to celebrate each others' successes and provide additional learning on topics such as organizational change and strategic planning for sustainability.



ACSI partners learn how declining natural resources and increasing demand make society un-sustainable.

DOWN TO ACTION

Since the Sustainability Partners had a wide range of capacity and experiences in sustainability before joining the initiative, ACSI decided from the beginning that they would not press participants for too specific a commitment in the early stages. By the end of the year, however, it was clear that all of the ACSI partners had succeeded in moving forward on sustainability. Some developed comprehensive sustainability plans for their entire organizations, while others concentrated on more specific actions like energy and water conservation, waste reduction, or emissions reduction strategies.

Upon joining ACSI, the **Town of Stratford** created a steering committee of community residents to initiate the training of town staff, town council, and sub committee members in The Natural Step Framework using the *Sustainability 101* eLearning program. The steering committee helped the town to create a sustainability plan which was approved by Town Council in September 2008. The town's vision for 2028 is a town that "will reflect the shared aspirations of Stratford residents and their responsibility for the wellbeing of each other, of future generations and of the earth."

Among the biggest accomplishments of Stratford's sustainability efforts was the approval of a decision-making framework to ensure that prospective projects, policies and proposals will be viewed through a lens of sustainability. The Town expects to complete a sustainable procurement policy in 2009, and has committed to publishing a "Sustainability Report Card" as part of its Annual Report to track its progress toward sustainability.

The **Halifax Shambhala Centre** also emerged from the first year of ACSI with a comprehensive sustainability action plan. Shambhala is an international community dedicated to meditation practice and the establishment of enlightened society. As the Halifax Shambhala Centre's Sustainability Initiative group learned more about sustainability, they concluded that sustainable practices are essential in contributing to an enlightened society.

Some of the specific outcomes of Shambhala's sustainability work include the development of a Green Purchasing Guide to help Shambhala members choose more sustainable products and services. As a result, the centre has committed to using 100% recycled and Forest Stewardship Council Certified paper products, reusable dishware, and is now purchasing 20% bio-diesel heating fuel from a local manufacturer.

Although the centre had taken a number of actions to become more sustainable prior to their participation in ACSI, the Sustainability Initiative group found that their participation in ACSI helped to build sustainability into the culture of the centre. "Our primary focus has been to touch the intelligence and commitment of each person individually, in all the ways we live our lives – our families, organizations, and livelihoods," explained Richard Peisinger. "Sustainability is starting to be part of the way we see ourselves." After conducting a baseline assessment of their operations and developing a vision statement, the Shambhala Sustainability Initiative group created a five-year strategic sustainability plan.

"The innovative piece around [ACSI] is that we had all three sectors talking and moving together: private businesses, not-for-profits and governments. ACSI was able to provide a loose approach based on sharing the TNS and ACSI resources with organizations. After that, it was up to [the partners] to do what they wanted at their own pace."

KULI MALHOTRA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ANTIGONISH
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The **Regional Municipality of Halifax**, Nova Scotia, also chose to focus on the creation of an internal culture of sustainability. In 2004, The Natural Step (TNS) completed a high-level sustainability analysis of HRM operations in various departments using the TNS Framework to help the municipality understand what it was doing well and where it could improve. Among the recommendations that emerged was the development of a greener corporate culture. The municipality saw its participation in ACSI as an opportunity to further roll out some of the recommendations from the 2004 analysis. They created a sustainability transition team made up of members from across multiple departments and participated in online and in-person training in The Natural Step Framework. HRM is currently developing a sustainability decision-making filter that will help incorporate sustainability principles into all major decisions. As a result of years of internal work and their participation in ACSI, sustainability is becoming mainstreamed in HRM's corporate culture.

Bathurst Sustainable Development (BSD), a small NGO working with the Bathurst, New Brunswick community, developed a 2020 vision for the City of Bathurst, outlining the characteristics and objectives of a sustainable Bathurst. The city approved the vision statement in March 2008 and followed BSD's recommendation that it join ACSI as an informal partner. As a part of its ACSI commitment, BSD educated city staff on sustainability topics, including The Natural Step Framework and the practice of sustainable procurement. The organization worked directly with city staff on the drafting of a green procurement policy, which was adopted by City Council in March 2008. BSD prepared a number of transportation-related recommendations as part of its Sustainable Transportation Action Plan (STAP). The goal of the plan is to ensure that community members have access to active and sustainable transportation options such as walking, biking and public transportation, and the city has already adopted a number of the STAP recommendations.

iNova is a progressive credit union that was already interested in corporate social responsibility when it joined ACSI. As a result of their participation in ACSI, 100% of their board and staff have undergone training in sustainability and they have conducted a baseline analysis of their current operations. They are currently developing a comprehensive sustainability action plan and green procurement guidelines, both of which will be implemented in the fall of 2008.

“Staff members are engaged. They're proud of the fact that we're influencing way beyond our size.”

WILLY ROBINSON
GENERAL MANAGER
iNOVA CREDIT UNION

One of iNova's most exciting new projects is their development of a pilot program to embed sustainability into their lending services. The Energuide Loan is a ten-year, prime rate loan to help Nova Scotians make home improvements that will improve the energy efficiency of their houses. Credit union staff will be trained to provide clients with a blueprint explaining which renovations will offer the best return on investment in energy savings, and help them access government rebates for sustainable home improvements.

Last year, Robinson brought the idea forward to the province's Conserve Nova Scotia, a government agency dedicated to energy efficiency and greenhouse gas reduction, which recommended that she pilot the loan at iNova. Convinced that an effective pilot would require broader participation, Robinson lobbied other credit unions to join the project. By the summer of 2008, every branch of the province's 33 different credit union organizations had agreed to train staff in the initiative and offer the Energuide Loans.

Antigonish Sustainable Development, a Nova Scotia NGO, is in the final stages of developing an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP) for the Town of Antigonish. Since the federal government requires all municipalities to complete an ICSP by 2010 in order to receive gas tax funding, Antigonish hopes to serve as an example for other communities. ASD also initiated an early adopters' program of its own. With 20 participants in its first year, and 15 adopters already signed on for the second round, the program is already having a big impact on the community. “One outcome of this process was the creation of a network where older organizations (the first round of early adopters) are going to be talking to other organizations through regular meetings. We'll be trying to bring them all together to discuss more ideas,” explained Kuli Malhotra, executive director of ASD and chair of the ACSI steering committee.

The Antigonish early adopters all came up with sustainability plans, conducted a baseline analysis of their greenhouse gas emissions, and implemented ten 'quick hits' for sustainability within the first year of participation. ASD has now compiled all of the 'quick hits' to create a 75-hit toolkit to inspire other local organizations to take similar actions.

LAST WORDS

At the end of the year-long initiative, the Partners expressed an interest in a continuation of the ACSI network. As, "We all signed the charter for a one year commitment," Richard Peisinger of Shambhala explained. "But, from the beginning, I think all of us had the sense that this would be longer term." Although each partner said they would continue to work towards sustainability in their own organizations regardless, there was considerable interest in remaining a part of a supportive learning network.

"We are organizations that typically don't work together, but we all felt sustainability was something that all sectors of society needed to be working on. By forming a network together, we could support each other in what each of us was doing in our own organizations, while also building momentum within the region using our Natural Step experience."

RICHARD PEISINGER
HALIFAX SHAMBHALA CENTRE

The ACSI partners are excited to continue to work together on building momentum for sustainability in Atlantic Canada. The ACSI steering committee has prioritized the expansion of the ACSI network to include more representation from Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick and PEI, and a stronger diversity in sectoral representation. ACSI will focus on building partner capacity and competence through ongoing training, education and sharing of best practices. Other priorities include building regional momentum and evaluating and sharing the TNS Framework and ACSI model with others.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For more information on the Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative, please visit www.atlanticsustainability.ca

For more partner summaries from The Natural Step, visit <http://naturalstep.ca/en/3-collaborating-towards-sustainability-atlantic-canada-acsi>

This case study was written and researched by Kim Mackrael for The Natural Step Canada. Thanks to Kuli Malhotra, John Colton, Edith Callaghan, Richard Peisinger, Willy Robinson, and Clare Levin for granting The Natural Step interviews. Creative Commons Copyright 2008. Some rights reserved.