



BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required Commons Sense: A New Sustainable and Digital Culture?

Breakout Session Summary

Wednesday, November 5, 2008 | 10-11:30 a.m.

Speakers

- **Charlotte Hess**, Associate University Librarian for Collections and Scholarly Communication, Syracuse University Library
- **Brian Glazebrook**, Senior Manager of Supply Chain Social Responsibility, Cisco
- **Guillermo Wechsler**, Service Development Specialist, Szene
- **Kathi Vian**, Research Director, Institute for the Future (moderator)

Highlights

- The commons—a set of shared resources—provides a useful framework through which to view sustainability challenges, as the problems humans will face over the next few decades are all of large-scale, global commons.
- It is important to establish and uphold a clear set of rules around management and governance of shared commons—and upholding these rules through participatory management where people have a voice to monitor the use of commons.
- Participation in modern-day commons asks individuals to be more open than they're accustomed to and to surrender a sense of ownership.

Memorable Quotes

- “Local design really, really matters in a commons, and rules really matter.”
—Charlotte Hess, Syracuse University Library
- “You cannot have commons without communities, but you can have communities without commons.” —Guillermo Wechsler, Szene
- “[The commons] is really in the in-between spaces. It’s not entirely public, it’s not entirely private ... it lives in the space between the economic and social ... the digital and the physical.” —Kathi Vian, Institute for the Future

Overview

Hess began the session by bringing the traditional notions of the commons—a set of shared resources—into a modern-day context. With today’s innovations in technology, effects of stretching environmental boundaries, and a growing global population, the modern day commons include resources at the center of sustainability issues, such as declining fisheries and access to water—as well as new types of commons, such as the internet.





Business for Social Responsibility

Historically, the tragedy of the commons has taught us that when people come together to share a resource, it's destined to ruin without government regulation or private intervention. There have been, however, many stories of communities effectively sustaining their resources—and a key common characteristic among these communities is the establishment of clear rules around management. Hess emphasized that how people manage the commons ultimately affects the commons' sustainability, and that many of the problems we'll face over the next few decades have to do with large-scale global commons. New types of commons emerge when traditionally public or well-protected commons become threatened, and while we are facing challenges in protecting some of these commons, others provide space for building new communities and opportunities for understanding and addressing sustainability issues. Examples of these new types of commons are public health, information, and the internet.

Wechsler then engaged the audience to reflect on their thoughts about the commons, and audience members noted the importance of building trust and participation in a commons, how to approach commons from an individualistic culture, and complications posed by private ownership of public commons. Wechsler then offered his view of the commons as a group of people asserting their capacity to preserve and manage a resource, and in doing so, asserting their autonomy to self-regulate and create their own rules and reality.

Illustrating how the commons open opportunities for productive collective action, Glazebrook drew on his experience participating in the Electronics Industry Citizenship Coalition. The coalition's mission is to drive sustainable supply chain practices throughout company supply chains, and Glazer spoke to both the benefits of coordinated action and the challenges of gaining agreement among a large diverse group, ensuring adherence to the rules, and preserving the integrity of the rules.

Continuing the discussion of communities, collective action, and harnessing creativity in a productive manner, Hess turned the discussion to open source communities. These are communities of people that interact with people they don't know for the sake of innovation. All panelists agreed that participation in commons requires the willingness of individuals and organizations to be open and ready to trade ownership and protection—of information and resources—for the sake of collaboration and the common good.

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