



**Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative
Launch Dinner Opening Remarks
May 14, 2007
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Executive Director, The Natural Step**

Thank you Clare. And thank you to GPI Atlantic for all the hard work they have done to get us here for the next few days.

Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the launch of the Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative. On behalf of The Natural Step I want to say how honoured we are to be a part of this exciting, innovative and unique program to better understand the challenges and opportunities of sustainability and to move the region toward sustainable solutions.

Sustainability -- it's a word we hear more and more, and it often leads to confusion. Sustainability is not only about the environment. It's about human needs, social justice and a viable economy too. Sustainability means living within the earth's capacity to sustain us.

The Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative is a collaborative project designed to build capacity and momentum around sustainability in Atlantic Canada. With us here we have representatives from 14 organizations who have already committed to be Sustainability Partners. You have agreed to participate in this year-long capacity building program, to develop your own action plan around sustainability, and to work with other partners to help move sustainability forward at the regional level. This is unique. It has never been done before. Thank you for your commitment.

We also have over 20 other organizations here with us who are supporting the program or considering becoming partners. Welcome to all of you and thank you for being here. All together, you represent about seven municipalities, five businesses, four universities, six government departments and about 11 NGOs and networks. That's quite a powerful cross-sectoral group.

I can't think of a more important thing that we could possibly be doing than making this commitment to take action toward more sustainable practices – in

our own organizations --and collaboratively together. Because, ladies and gentlemen, as we all know, the planet is in trouble.

We've been hearing that for over 40 years since Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. So what's different this time? Well, for starters, it's no longer a few thoughtful people telling us we have a problem. It's the scientific majority. The evidence is overwhelming and impossible to ignore.

And, ladies and gentlemen we are no longer talking about what **might** happen if we don't start to reduce our ecological footprint. We're talking about what **is** happening right now. It's in our papers every day. It's the top priority for Canadians. And we all feel a sense of urgency.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, representing the findings of 1300 experts, has given us a warning: **human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of the earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted.**

For the first time in the history of earth, **all living systems on earth are in decline.**

Humans have made unprecedented changes to ecosystems in recent decades to meet growing demands for food, fresh water, fiber, and energy.

These changes have helped to improve the lives of billions of people, but at the same time they weakened nature's ability to deliver other key services. That means the Earth's capacity to provide life supporting resources such as clean air, clean water and top soil, is **systematically decreasing.**

We know that we have lost hundreds of thousands of species in five decades. At least 1,000 species go extinct every year.

Almost half the forests that once covered the earth are gone. Deforestation is expanding and accelerating. We have also destroyed more than half the world's wetlands.

All fisheries around the world are in decline. All 15 major fishing areas are close to reaching or have already exceeded their natural limits.

And thanks to Al Gore, I don't even have to give you any of the statistics on climate change. It is, beyond a doubt, the most serious crisis we have faced as a planet, with profound social and economic implications. Scientists tell us we have 15 years -- 15 years to turn things around.

The statistics that I've just given you don't represent a bunch of impacts. They represent a systemic problem. A design challenge. The problem isn't that we're losing trees. It's that we're losing more and more. It's not that we're losing fish, it's that we're losing more and more. The problem is at the systems level. Our

societies and economies are so designed that pollutants are bound to continue to systematically increase, and we can't help but to continue to systematically remove and erode nature. It's inherent in the way we've designed our economies. We take stuff out of the ground, we make stuff with it –essential products and services – and then we throw it away. That is inherently unsustainable.

There is no question that the challenge of becoming sustainable – of living within nature's limits -- is enormously complex and there are no easy answers. It has never been done before.

Nevertheless, ladies and gentlemen, we have to try. What we need to succeed is nothing less than **transformational change**.

We're not talking about doing a little bit better than what we did yesterday. Using a little less energy, a little less paper, creating a little less waste. That's incremental change – but it just mean we slow down our progress in the wrong direction. It's like a car speeding down the highway toward a cliff. If we slow down, we'll still eventually go off the cliff. What we need to do is change directions and turn the car around.

We need to fundamentally redesigning the way we do things. We need to move from linear systems – where we take, make, and waste -- to circular systems, where we close the loop, where we eliminate waste and dramatically reduce our footprint.

To do this we need to be smart. We need to understand the interconnections. We need to be systems thinkers. We need to know that what we do in one part of the system affects other parts, sometimes in unforeseen ways. We need to work upstream at the design level not downstream where we deal with impacts one at a time.

We need to be **bold** enough to look to the future and say “this is what it means to be sustainable and even though we have no idea how to do it all yet, we're going to get started. We're going to be smart and we're going to DARE to move step by step in the right direction. We're going to TRANSFORM our municipalities, our businesses, and our communities.”

And if we are going to succeed, we must work together. This will take unprecedented collaboration. Sustainability cannot be achieved by any one organization alone. It is going to take a collaborative effort of war-time proportions. Sustainability is the challenge of our generation.

And it is going to take unprecedented leadership.

What the world needs now, more than ever is leadership. Role models. Good examples. People who are willing to stand up and make a difference.

And leaders aren't only CEOs and politicians. Leaders can be champions at any level of an organization. Leaders can be individuals. Leaders can be summer interns, departmental managers, janitors, teachers, technicians, engineers, stay-at-home moms, students. Leaders have a special combination of passion and competence. They care deeply enough to make change happen, even if the obstacles seem great. And they are competent enough and committed enough to identify those obstacles and remove them one by one.

Leaders don't wait for someone else to solve the problem. This is not something we can let our kids figure it out. We've got to do it . Now. Not tomorrow. Not a year from now. Not after someone else figures it out for us. Not when we're legislated to do it. Now. Today.

It's time for each of us to look in the mirror and ask ourselves "do we want to be part of the problem or part of the solution?"

You are all here because you want to be part of the solution. What's so exciting about this initiative being launched today is that we're not starting from scratch. We're starting with what you're already doing and helping you take the next steps. So listen to what you are already doing collectively. It's really inspiring.

Some of you have already implemented paperless policies, anti-idling policies, pesticide-free practices, and green procurement.

You are engaged in community education, professional education, K-12 education, capacity building programs, and leadership programs.

You have created urban agricultural programs, you are buying local and organic products.

Some of you have state of the art waste management systems.

You have implemented energy reduction programs, carbon neutral programs, zero waste programs, and composting programs.

You are using solar heat. You are changing your lightbulbs.

You are practicing fair trade, you are recycling materials, you are walking, riding your bikes and leaving your cars behind.

You are hiring sustainability managers and coordinators.

You are listening to and engaging your citizens. You are reducing poverty.

You are landscaping with native plants, you are protecting forests, wetlands, waterways and wildlife.

You are developing new policies.

You are learning. You are leading. You are making a difference.

Over the next year you are going to do even more, you are going to share your best practices and create new successes stories to tell. A year from now we'll have a Sustainability Summit where you'll tell your stories to the whole region and bring more partners on board. And from there, we hope there will be no turning back. Atlantic Canada will become a showcase of how a region can make real change.

So.....I really just want to thank you for your leadership. For your passion, your commitment and your competence. You're not just talking about change. You're actually doing it. The world needs more role models like you. You give us all hope.

Thank you.