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Owley's book rethinks the idea of sustainability

By Charles Anzalone

Sustainability may be one of those “squishy/mushy” buzz words too vague to be of much use. But the principle behind it demands that citizens come to grips with the grave problems it was created to solve.

That's one conclusion Associate Professor **Jessica Owley** reaches in *Rethinking Sustainability to Meet the Climate Change Challenge*, a new book featuring a collection of essays by leading environmental scholars. The book addresses the ways sustainability needs to be “re-examined, refined or articulated in greater detail to address” the crucial, but daunting, issue of climate change.

“The book explores what we mean by sustainability and whether the concept of sustainability can help us in our efforts to battle climate change,” says Owley, an expert in environmental law. “With the variety of voices involved, however, we don't reach one set answer.”

The series of essays by members of the Environmental Law Collaborative, a group of scholars she helped start, is much more than an academic discussion. At stake is probably the most comprehensive issue facing society – anything but an abstract issue to be debated at leisure.

Instead of giving one quick, reductive message, Owley and co-editor Keith Hirokawa of Albany Law School ask whether the concept of sustainability has reached the end of its useful life.

It means many things to many people, the authors concede. And they recognize it has been a positive driving force across society – “either through laws and treaties or voluntary action – to keep our planet and our people healthy.”

But even this concerted, broad-based movement has not been enough to prevent the ravages of climate change.



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Jessica Owley

“Climate change is a reality that's here to stay,” Owley writes, “and it's bigger than we would have imagined even 20 years ago. We need to think about what we are actually working toward and setting clear goals, not just adopting a catch phrase that sounds cool but can be shaped into whatever the listener wants it to be.”

The book seeks to highlight the importance of tackling the problems of climate change without losing sight of the fact that it is a “wicked multi-faceted problem with people at its core,” Owley says. “Addressing climate change isn't just about science and chemicals, but about public health, livelihoods and well-being.”

Although the book presents diverse thinking about sustainability and how to approach the problems associated with it, some principles guide its conclusions:

- Sustainability often has been about local issues, such as food, resources and customs.
- Conceptualizing climate change and our responsibility for that often is more global.
- Identifying relevant lessons, strategies and goals to address these issues means bridging the gap between this local and global scale.
- Uncertainty over this definition of sustainability should not obstruct progress

and understanding of the problem. The allocation of scarce resources requires a framework that will set priorities. Climate change will test today's concepts of justice and community in previously unseen ways.

“To most folks on the street, sustainability just means ‘environmentally friendly,’” Owley says.

“When we embrace that definition, sustainability doesn't give us much to hang our hat on. Just suggesting folks be ‘greener’ isn't concrete or useful in tackling climate change. For these reasons, the book authors present a few different approaches.”

Owley's book has been described as a collection of papers from experts in the field articulating a wide range of thoughtful ways to re-examine, refine or articulate sustainability in greater detail to address these challenges.

“The work is provocative and timely,” according to Nicholas A. Robinson, an emeritus professor of environmental law at Pace University School of Law.

