

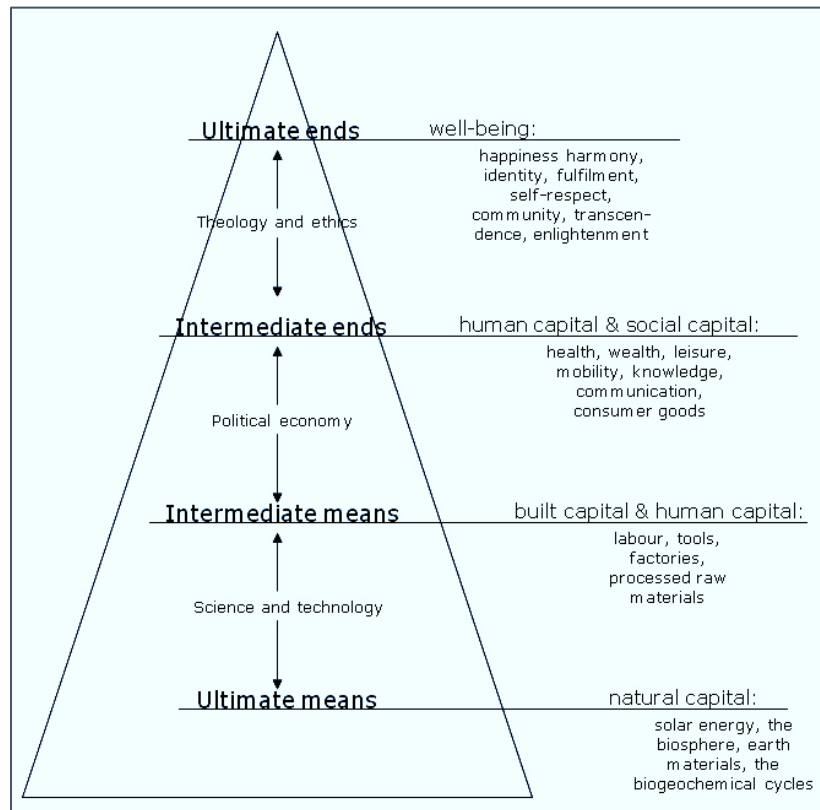
INTRODUCTION TO SUSTAINABILITY

An online course built from materials that are freely available on the web.

The underlying premise of *Introduction to Sustainability* is that Spaceship Earth is dangerously off-course and headed for disaster. In the absence of a dramatic change, the 21st century will be marked by a series of ever-widening and deepening national, regional and global crises - the first signs of which we may have already experienced.

This course provides an extensive overview of some of the critical dimensions of a new direction for the human enterprise, one that is summarized by the concept of *sustainability*. The thrust of the sustainability project is not simply the goal of "saving the planet"; for one thing, life on Planet Earth should ultimately recover from virtually any damage which humankind can inflict upon it. Rather, its concern is with the long-term viability of the work-in-progress that is human civilization. Moreover, while sustainability necessarily encompasses some potentially dire ecological threats, it recognizes that these are inextricably intertwined with some equally foreboding societal conditions and trends.

Sustainability may be conceptualized in many ways, but one of the more compelling of these is the visual representation that is Daly's Triangle:



Daly's Triangle is an ambitious effort to portray nothing less than the true dynamics of human existence, the true human economy. According to this model, our existence is rooted ultimately in the natural world - in the natural resources and ecosystem services that enable us to endure as biological beings. Such factors represent our 'ultimate means'. It also recognizes, however, that human purposes necessarily extend far beyond mere survival; we aim for the good life, as signified by such catchwords as 'well-being', 'fulfillment', 'self-actualization' and 'transcendence'. These encompass our 'ultimate ends'.

Between these ultimate means and ultimate ends lie the ways in which the planet's natural capital provides for human wants and needs and the ways in which societies are organized to enable individuals to flourish as social, moral, intellectual and creative beings. Sustainability implies that at every stage from the ultimate means that is our natural heritage to the ultimate ends that is our highest calling; structures and processes make sure that the conditions that sustain humankind will be maintained over the long term.

Following an introduction that attempts to put the subject into context, *Introduction to Sustainability* is a series of modules, each corresponding to one of the layers of Daly's Triangle. Such a structure should be helpful in enabling students to make interesting connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena and conditions. Units that deal with issues that are paramount to sustainability supplement several of the modules: urbanization, globalization the consumer society and population health. The concluding module offers a survey of some of the mainstream - and some of the more esoteric directions that the sustainability enterprise has taken.

Each module features begins with a YouTube video and a series of short essays, and includes articles that are footnoted, with full references and links provided at the bottom. While several articles are indicated as **required reading**, most are 'optional', and are intended to be suggestive as to what is available online. Modules also include a set of carefully selected additional resources, which students may find useful; included in these are links to book excerpts in Google Books. There are weekly discussions, in which students are required to participate.

There are no tests or quizzes. Beyond the weekly discussions, the only assignments are a series of three short reflection papers (3-5 pages), and a final term paper (10-20 pages). In these essays, students will relate the subject matter of the course to topics which they wish to investigate at some length. Students may propose alternatives to traditional academic papers.