

# Eco-Mentoring Program

Driftwood, Nov 5, 2008

Environmentally speaking, the situation is improving in the business world. Energy is being conserved; sustainability reports with measurable goals are now published; corporate social responsibility is a commonly used term; and some companies are even looking at fundamental changes to their product lines. However, as an environmental IT consultant at the nexus of sustainability management and software development, I have to admit, things are still not happening fast enough to stop the negative effects of climate change. From my perspective, there are two key challenges we must overcome.

First, going to the heart of the matter, a fundamental barrier to sustainability is the corporate mandate to increase shareholder value. Today, of the top 100 global economies, over 50 are corporations, the rest are countries. For a real shift in business practices to occur, there will need to be huge investment in alternative business practices, and since this will probably decrease shareholder value. I honestly do not see this happening voluntarily, or soon enough.

What I think we truly need is 1) a massive injection of investment from government to help corporations make the change (like the economic bail-out in the US and UK), 2) creation of integrated regulatory frameworks that weave together existing environmental regulations with newer regulations geared toward sustainability so the barrier to compliance is not so costly, and 3) the best green technologies made freely available to the public and companies for their immediate use. We can not wait for the market to decide when we are ready to buy or invest in green products, en masse. But, for this particular challenge, besides verbally encouraging my colleagues to be aware of the shallow commoditization of sustainability, I am not sure what I can do in my every day life and at work that I am not doing already.

For the second challenge, I see more hope. There is a dearth of trained young professionals to be the internal catalysts of change we need. The numbers of environmental engineering students and professionals graduating is decreasing, and the number of corporate environmental managers retiring is increasing. The hot topics around the boardroom table these days are, how do companies transition to sustainability, what type of skills are needed for the job, and where do you find qualified people? We have to start training tomorrow's leaders now to fill this coming void. I-SEA has been working with high school students, university students and professionals for over 5 years on Salt Spring Island with the help of dozens of local organizations who have provided great projects. In all of our programs we have helped get students obtain real-world, hands-on experience in the field of sustainability; as a result, demand is growing. All over the globe a vanguard of sustainability practitioners is being trained right in their own communities, by community groups like I-SEA. But help is needed.

I-SEA is launching an **Eco-Mentoring Program for 2009** this November. The goal of this program is to build on what I-SEA has been doing successfully for over 6 years and create a more permanent program with funds dedicated to supporting senior GISS High School students and university students on Salt Spring who want hands-on sustainability project experience. This program can help them with scholarships, applying for college or university, and the future green job market. For example, this past summer I-SEA worked with students and ran a very successful recycling pilot project, conducted a transportation survey for the SSI Transit Commission and improved the already successful Green B&B program with the Chamber of Commerce.

At I-SEA we think it is critical to give young people direct experience with sustainability management and community action. They have an uncertain future and it is our responsibility to train them the best we can.

To learn more please check out our website at <http://www.i-sea.org> and consider attending **I-SEA's November 29th 100 km, slow food buffet and eco-extravaganza at GISS.**

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