

EcoDensity for Dummies

Your friendly guide to EcoDensity

Now let's see. EcoDensity is a term coined (and registered) by Vancouver's City Mayor Sam Sullivan. It means giving an over-arching priority to a "green" land use pattern, adopting a range of housing types, needs, and costs, greener and livable design and a sense of place supported by green and livable systems. We know this is true because it says so in the Vancouver Density Charter. In fact, "EcoDensity" is "green development that reduces our environmental impact on land, energy, waste, and natural resources." We may not be quite sure we know what "green" means in this context, but it does have a nice ring to it, so we should be all for it.

"EcoDensity" also means "high quality densification that can make Vancouver more ecologically sustainable while maintaining livability and improving affordability." We know that both statements are true because it says so on the City of Vancouver's web site. Well, if our City planners can achieve that, they are doing well. However, we could be much troubled by the "ecologically sustainable" bit. This seems to refer to "sustainability" that, in environmental terms means "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹ We know that because the United Nations said so in 1987. And that in turn means talking about "footprints".

Of these, there appear to be two. There is the City's (or even Metro's) footprint and there is the personal footprint of each and every one of us. The former is the land area occupied by the City or, more relevantly, by Metro Vancouver that extends and continues to extend up the arable lands of the Fraser Valley. Obviously that is not a good thing and needs to be restrained. We should all be for that. The latter, however, is our own ecological footprint which is a different matter altogether.

It is estimated that collectively we in Canada occupy approximately 7.6 hectares for every man, woman and child. We know that because The Vancouver Sun said as much in its February 23rd Special Report on "Going Green". What this means is that each of us needs, on average – and if you are reading this you are probably well above average – a total of 7.6 hectares of the earth's productive land. This is to provide for our consumption of goods, services and living space. It also means including the space on earth required to absorb the consequences of our personal and industrial use of transportation, energy and waste disposal, all done in a "sustainable" manner.

It is clear from this description that we are talking here about our standard of living and convenience. It is not unreasonable to call this our "livable conditions" or "livability". So this is directly related to our individual ecological footprint. We know this because The Vancouver Sun's "Personal Eco-Footprint Calculator" calculates it in terms of shelter, clothing, food, transportation, energy and water use, and fun stuff – all the things that go to make up our standard of living.

So, with a Metro Vancouver population of around 2.2 million today, we collectively occupy a footprint of around 17 million hectares. That means Vancouver extends well down into Washington State. Of course it also means that the residents of Bellevue, Washington, at around one million hectares also extend well up towards Vancouver, but that's OK because they are nice people.

¹ **Footnote:** "Sustainability" as defined is itself somewhat misleading. All sources of energy degrade, i.e. energy is "consumed" as we turn it into "work" leaving only waste. Example: We burn gasoline to move our cars leaving water and obnoxious gases. We tend to look upon energy received directly from the sun, or its secondary weather effects, as "renewable" energy and therefore "sustainable". But even the sun is degrading. However, the sun is very big and is degrading very slowly over light years of time, so we don't worry about it – at least, not yet.

In fact, this footprint thing is not all that simple. That's because a lot of the stuff that we like to have, like food in various forms, electronic toys, clothing and other paraphernalia, comes from far afield. However, we also ship a lot of stuff to other places, so on balance it all evens out to about the same thing.

Obviously, we would be doing the earth a favor if each of us reduced our footprint. That means reducing our levels of consumption. It is possible that we could still be just as happy, even if a part of that happiness is made up of the virtuosity of knowing we are doing something for the environment. But for most people it means reducing their standard of living. That is not a very popular idea because most people feel that if they have earned it and can afford it, then why should they not have it? In fact, why should they not have it even if they cannot afford it?

Besides, there is another problem. If you listen to economists, and politicians too, they get seriously worried if economic growth is not "in positive territory". In fact, the more positive the territory, the more they like it. And woe betide our economy if it ever goes into "negative territory". That implies a reduced flow of money, business and plant closures, loss of jobs and serious disruption everywhere. So, the watchword is: "grow the economy".

Unfortunately, growing the economy means either everyone spending more, or more people spending, or both. Either way, that increases our collective footprint. And that is in direct contradiction of "sustainability". That is because the world's population as a whole is already consuming more footprint space than is available. In fact, by some calculations we need several more earths like ours and so where we are headed is already not sustainable.

Of the two, that is, individuals spending more, or more people spending, the former is more benign. That's because most people's capacity to spend more is typically a small percentage of what they already spend and brings more satisfaction. In contrast, more people spending adds orders of magnitude more to the economy, which sounds good but is disastrous for the environmental footprint. It also means less happiness, livability if you like, because of the increased pressure on (read competition for) our limited space, services and other resources like electricity, water, health services, garbage and sewage disposal, and other government services generally.

So, gathering existing people into a smaller space can be a good thing for the environment. But just packing more people into the same space is the antithesis of sustainability, and therefore a bad thing. Worse, it tends towards the proverbial "concrete jungle" where people become divorced from their literal roots in the soil on which we depend and, for that matter, the natural environment and all its living things. People tend to turn inward and become self-centered and defensive of their individual territory. This is hardly surprising, because "concrete jungles" are notorious for increased crime, drugs and law-breaking generally. No, the "pack 'em in" mentality is definitely not a good thing.

Whatever their circumstances, most people would welcome more space, not less. That's why many people came and settled where they are in Vancouver in the first place. From this you may conclude that while "EcoDensity" looks good on paper, and "green" is all the rage, EcoDensity as practiced is EcoEnemy #1.

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