

Why Sustainability Keeps Expanding

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"The important thing is not to stop questioning."

— Albert Einstein

Every year, sustainability seems to grow.

More companies publish sustainability reports. More governments introduce new regulations. More universities offer sustainability programs. More consultants specialize in ESG. More software platforms promise better measurement. More conferences, certifications, standards, rankings, and reporting frameworks appear each year.

Sustainability has become one of the defining conversations of our time.

Yet something about this picture feels strangely incomplete.

During the very same decades that sustainability has expanded into a global movement, many of the challenges that gave rise to it have continued to intensify. Atmospheric carbon concentrations continue to rise. Biodiversity continues to decline. Natural resource extraction continues to accelerate. Many social inequalities remain deeply entrenched.

This is not to deny the remarkable progress achieved in countless organizations and communities. Many initiatives have reduced emissions, improved working conditions, protected forests, developed cleaner technologies, and helped reshape corporate thinking. These achievements deserve recognition.

But they also raise an uncomfortable question.

How can a movement become larger while the problems it was created to address continue to grow?

Perhaps the first question we should ask is not whether sustainability is expanding. It clearly is.

Perhaps the better question is whether we have begun to confuse the growth of sustainability with the reduction of unsustainability.

The two are not necessarily the same.

We naturally associate growth with success. If more people work on a problem, we assume the problem is gradually being solved.

Sometimes that is true. But not always.

Imagine a city that doubles the number of firefighters every twenty years.

At first glance, this might seem like a sign of progress. The city is investing more resources, hiring more experts, purchasing more equipment.

Yet another interpretation is equally possible. Perhaps the city simply has more fires.

The same observation could be made about hospitals, prisons, cybersecurity firms, or insurance companies. Growth in an activity does not necessarily indicate that the underlying problem is shrinking. Sometimes it reflects the opposite.

Could sustainability be inviting us to consider the same possibility?

Over the past three decades, sustainability has evolved far beyond an environmental concern. It has become a profession, an academic discipline, a corporate function, a field of expertise, a growing technology sector, and an expanding regulatory landscape.

Entire ecosystems now exist around sustainability:

- Consulting firms.
- Certification bodies.
- Reporting standards.
- ESG rating agencies.
- Carbon accounting platforms.
- Auditing firms.
- Specialized legal practices.
- University programs.
- Professional associations.

This expansion is neither surprising nor inherently problematic. Every major societal challenge creates institutions dedicated to understanding and addressing it.

The more interesting question lies elsewhere. Does sustainability expand under all conditions?

Recent years suggest otherwise.

Several large corporations have recently reduced or eliminated dedicated sustainability leadership positions. Others have merged sustainability into broader business functions. Climate commitments have sometimes been postponed. Reporting requirements have been reconsidered. Investment priorities have shifted as political and economic conditions changed.

The work itself has not disappeared. But its place within organizations has changed.

This observation may reveal something important.

Sustainability appears to flourish when it helps organizations reduce costs, manage risks, attract investment, strengthen brands, improve resilience, or comply with new regulations.

But when sustainability begins to compete with short-term profitability, established business models, or expectations of continuous growth, its momentum often slows, changes direction, or quietly retreats.

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Perhaps this should not surprise us.

Every system operates according to its own priorities.

The more difficult question is whether sustainability has become subject to those priorities as well.

If so, then its expansion may not be unconditional.

It may depend on something deeper than public awareness, scientific evidence, or political will.

It may depend on whether sustainability remains compatible with the dominant objectives of the system in which it operates.

If that is true, then a new question emerges.

What happens when sustainability no longer reinforces those objectives, but begins to challenge them?

That is the question we will explore in the next essay.

*Part of the ongoing inquiry behind **The Sustainability Mirage**.*

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