



Vision

Plans

Funding

Solutions

Action

THE FUTURE CANADIANS WANT

Rating Sustainability Leadership in Canada

September 25, 2015



[Abstract](#)

Canadians believe Canada is a great place to live, and we want to keep it that way. But how well organized are we when it comes to having a vision for our future and translating that vision into action on the ground?

Overview

Canadians believe Canada is a great place to live, and we want to keep it that way. But how well organized are we when it comes to having a vision for our future and translating that vision into action on the ground?

Canada Conserves is an initiative to promote a conserver culture in Canada as a pathway to a sustainable, prosperous, and enjoyable future.

Sustainable development is the attempt to match a universal goal with a universal truth. The universal goal is that we all seek a high quality of life. The universal truth is that we need to reduce our consumption of natural resources and the pollution of our environment. The challenge of sustainability is to help people live better with less.

This assessment of sustainability leadership in Canada follows the flow from vision and values through organization and planning, to funding and solutions for a better future.

The main sections and categories used in the assessment are:

Vision and Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A national vision
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A federal plan • Provincial plans • Municipal plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary sector • Business sector • Collaboration
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donations
Ten Green Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban design • Safe cycling • Public transit • Save energy • Conserve resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great food • Green jobs • Redefine wealth • Reduce waste • Enjoy nature

The key findings are that Canada does not have a strong sense of direction for our future, and that we lack the funds to invest in a sustainable future. These two gaps make for an uphill battle in promoting solutions, investing in green infrastructure, and providing incentives and support programs for solutions that can enhance our lives while reducing our energy consumption.

The opportunities include:

1. A renewed national discussion on the future we want
2. Refocus government strategies and environment ministries to focus on sustainable development – living better with less
3. Build “future funds” to invest in infrastructure and incentives for sustainability
4. Stronger collaboration, from nationwide down to communities

The assessment is based in part on research conducted in 2014 by Canada Conserves into the next wave of sustainability leadership in Canada. The full report, [The Next Wave](#), is available on the Canada Conserves website. Background information on individual categories can also be found on www.canadaconserves.ca

The Assessment

Category	2015 Score (/10)	2020 Potential (/10)	Notes
Vision / Values			
Global goals	7	8	New UN goals for Sustainability
National vision	5	7	The values debate is gaining momentum
Planning			
National plans	5	8	Need to strengthen leadership
Provincial plans	6	8	Focus on climate over sustainability
Municipal plans	8	9	Official Plans + climate plans a good mix
Voluntary sector	6	8	Poor support for sector role
Business sector	6	7	Both good and bad
Collaboration	6	8	Could be strengthened considerably
Funding			
Future Funds	4	6	Few mechanisms to raise funds
Donations	6	8	Could be helped by a national vision
Ten Green Solutions			
1. Urban Villages	6	8	A strong trend back to villages
2. Safe Cycling	5	7	Trending up, more support needed
3. Public Transit	6	7	Painfully slow and mired in politics
4. Save Energy	5	8	Fluctuates with prices
5. Conserve Resources	6	7	Needs a stronger conserver ethic
6. Great Food	7	8	On the upswing
7. Green Jobs	7	8	Needs more support
8. Redefine Wealth	6	8	Shift focus to quality of life
9. Reduce Waste	5	7	Deep-rooted value, but room to improve
10. Enjoy Nature	8	9	It's what makes us Canadian
Total (/200)	120	154	
(percent)	60	77	
(letter grade)	C	B+	

Visual Representation



Rating System

The ratings are subjective, based on the author's research and experience in the field of conservation and sustainability. The purpose is to foster debate over ways to improve sustainability leadership in Canada.

This report card rates twenty categories related to a healthy and sustainable future: ten items related to the vision and leadership for sustainability, and ten green solutions that are indicators of a better future.

The focus is on the ability to empower voluntary organic change. We should be able to see global and Canadian values for a better future translated into government plans and supported by voluntary sector and business leadership.

Rating	Description
1 – 3	Very little action or support
4 - 6	Moderate to strong interest with some level of coordination and support
7 - 8	Moderate to high interest with significant coordination and/or support
9 - 10	Excellent public interest and strong coordination and support

Observations

Vision and Values

Values matter. They are what define us as a society. They shape our vision of what our world should look like, and our actions as individuals and as a society.

Global Goals (7 ⇌ 8)

The United Nations is set to approve a new list of 17 goals for sustainable development which provide the framework for all national sustainable development strategies. We all know that the implementation of international voluntary agreements is nigh impossible – which is why we need a clear process to flow from vision and values through to action on the ground.

Canada used to be a leader in sustainable development. We have the opportunity to be leaders once again, both at home and on the international stage. Quebec uses the UN Goals as a foundation for its [Sustainable Development Strategy](#). The rest of the country should do the same.



The United Nations Sustainable Development goals:

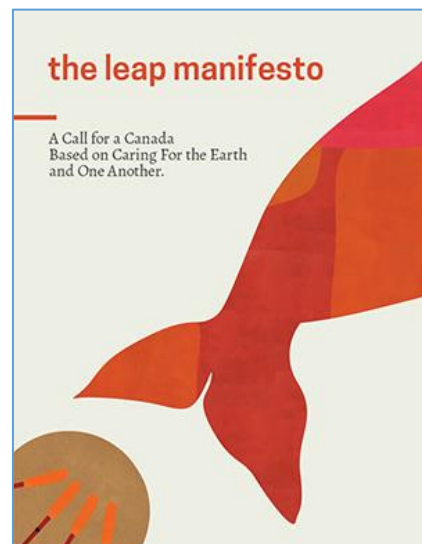
<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

National Vision (5 ⇌ 7)

As Canadians, we all believe our country is great place to live, and we want to keep it that way. It's been fascinating to see how Canadian values have become an issue in the current federal election. In particular, the Syrian refugee crisis has prompted a national discussion around whether Canada's international image as a compassionate country is tarnished.

Values are crucial to policy, and in the absence of clearly defined positive Canadian values as a caring, compassionate country it is all too easy for the messages of greed and fear to take root.

It's in this context that the Leap Manifesto is so timely. It sets a social agenda for change, and in so doing elevates Canadian values above politics. This is a dialogue that will likely continue on many fronts, and as a result there is a strong potential for Canada to emerge with a clear set of values and a strong social vision based on the principles of sustainable development. We need to continue and expand this dialogue, refine it, expand the consensus, and emerge with a strong social vision of the future we want.



One to Watch: [The Leap Manifesto](#)

Planning

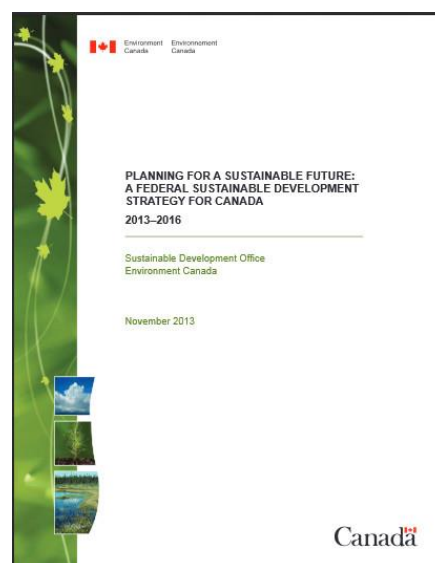
Planning translates a vision into action. A good plan will use the right mix of tools to achieve its goals. It will address priority issues as needed, and will empower others to act in support

National Plans (5 ⇌ 7)

Canada has a [national sustainable development strategy](#). Problem is, few people know about it and it has no teeth. The scope of the plan centres around four themes: addressing climate change, maintaining water quality and availability, protecting nature and Canadians, and greening government.

This is a junior strategy, one which follows rather than leads.

This weakness is not likely to change any time soon, given the erosion of political support for science and leadership within government departments. It will probably require a strong public outcry for leadership before a more realistic and progressive strategy is produced.



Provincial Plans (6 ⇌ 8)

Most provinces have a climate plan, which is the closest we get to an effort to balance economic growth with environmental protection. [Quebec](#) leads the pack in sustainability, with a [sustainable development strategy](#) (French only) that is mandated by [legislation](#) and starts with sixteen [principles](#) of sustainable development. The Quebec strategy covers all ministries and agencies and sets out the provinces priorities for sustainable development.

For details on Provincial and Federal strategies see <http://canadaconserves.ca/leadership/government/> and for a comparative review of high level environmental and sustainability strategies, see the 2014 Canada Conserves report on [Canada's High Level Strategies](#).

Moving forward, the provinces and governments should collaborate on a common framework for sustainable development planning which should be reflected in all high level strategies, be it climate, sustainable development, or any other name.

Municipal Plans (8 ⇌ 9)

While there is still much scope for improvement, especially in curbing urban sprawl, Canada's municipalities lead the way in sustainability.

Municipalities are governed by provincial legislation, which require them to have an official plan to set out a vision and address key issues, such as land use planning, transportation and the environment. It's a shame we don't have similar documents at the provincial and federal level.

In addition, many municipalities have climate action plans developed through the [Partnership for Climate Protection](#), a joint project of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability.

Despite the emphasis on municipal leadership in sustainability, there is surprisingly little effort being done to encourage and support community-based action – people helping people. There are a few shining examples, such as [Green Communities Canada](#) and [Transition Towns](#), but there is a strong need and potential to improve on-the-ground outreach and support through a national program for [community action](#).



SEVEN STEPS TO ORGANIZING COMMUNITY ACTION

Voluntary Sector (6 ⇌ 8)

Canada's voluntary sector is the backbone of the sustainability movement in Canada. Public organizations are our nation's conscience in opposition to the exploitation of people and resources. They are also a major force in delivering solutions – from local food to energy conservation and green power.

Not-for-profit organizations could potentially play a huge role in helping Canadians transition to a more sustainable and healthier lifestyle, but only if they receive stronger recognition and support from our governments.

Business Sector (6 ⇌ 7)

It's the sheer volume of activity that brings the score up, and it's the sheer weight of conventional approaches that keeps it down.

Almost every major corporation prepares an annual sustainability report, and this year twelve Canadian companies made the Corporate Knights listing of the [Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations](#) for 2015. Sustainability is a booming business. Sustainability has made some serious inroads into corporate culture in the three decades since the World Commission on Environment and Development.

At the same time, there is a long way to go and the wheels of change turn slowly. Beyond the efforts to green from within, there is strong pressure to change the very unsustainable nature of our economy. The United Church of Canada is one of the latest organizations to join the call to divest fossil fuel investments, [announcing plans](#) to sell its \$5.9 million worth of investments. There is certainly scope for more companies and business leaders to step up to the plate, especially with respect to the twin challenges of climate change and resource sustainability.

Collaboration (6 ⇌ 8)

With so much activity happening around the country, networking and collaboration is vital.

There is a fair degree of collaboration across Canada, whether it be groups banding together for common cause or to deliver solutions. The traditional environmental networking groups have ceded way to issue-oriented policy groups and solutions-oriented networks. At the municipal and regional level, there are excellent examples of collaboration, such as [CivicAction](#) in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area and the wildly successful [Centre for Social Innovation](#) (collaborative workspace). These are models that can be replicated across the country.

With the demise of the National Round Table on Environment and Economy, there is a need for a new national level collaboration on sustainability – and if we are smart, the focus will be on implementation as well as policy research and advice.

Funding

Funding is key, whether it is for large scale investments in infrastructure or the small incentives that tip the balance in favour of new ideas. We have to be prepared to invest in the future we want.

Future Funds (4 ⇌ 6)

It's a Canadian tradition to beg and borrow for public transit and other green infrastructure projects. Unlike other oil rich countries, like Norway or Malaysia, Canada has failed to translate its resource base into a strong revenue stream for investing in infrastructure.

If we were really serious about investing in our future, we would link a carbon tax to investments and incentives for public transit, renewable power, and home energy conservation. The tax would still be revenue neutral, but the money would flow back to the public via incentives to adopt a low-carbon lifestyle. The [Federal Gas Tax Fund](#) has earmarked \$2 billion for municipal infrastructure projects, so there is a precedent for using consumption and pollution taxes as a means to support the transition to a cleaner and more efficient future.

Donations (6 ⇌ 8)

On the whole, Canadians are pretty generous. According to [Statistics Canada](#), 82% of Canadians donate to charity and the national average is \$531 per person. Between 2010 and 2013, the total amount donated by Canadians to charitable or non-profit organizations increased by 14% to \$12.8 billion.

Of this, the amount given to environmental issues remains at around 2%, which is extremely low. Foundations are shifting to look at integrated approaches, such as [urban sustainability](#), and to promote elegant solutions, such as local food, that address multiple goals within a single project.

By embracing the social, economic and environmental goals of sustainability, the charitable sector will be better able to collaborate, raise funds, and show results in supporting a better future for Canada.

Ten Green Solutions

The best solutions are ones that help us live better with less – elegant solutions that combine quality of life with resource conservation and a healthy environment.

Urban Villages (6 ⇌ 7)

Canada is slowly shifting from sprawl to villages. It's got nothing to do with that fabled "war on cars", it's just that more and more people enjoy getting around by bike, on foot, or by transit. Canadians want to live in vibrant, affordable communities with easy access to all kinds of amenities and culture.

Urban areas are constantly evolving, and there is a strong potential to improve the quality of urban life and reduce the carbon footprint at the same time.



Safe Cycling (5 ⇌ 7)

We are nowhere near European levels of commuter and recreational cycling, but interest in cycling is definitely on the rise.

Quebec has led the way on Provincial support for safe cycling, but other provinces are catching up. A serious push on cycling infrastructure and driver awareness would be a tremendous catalyst for a healthier and happier way to get around town.



Public Transit (6 ⇌ 7)

There's not going to be a quick fix for Canada's transit woes, not while three levels of government are involved in political decisions over funding. What we can hope for is better funding for both operating costs and new transit through carbon pricing, and continued innovation in transit services.



Save Energy (5 ⇌ 8)

Canada's energy consumption continues to [creep upwards](#). We could do so much more in energy conservation and green power simply by increasing incentives to homeowners and communities to conserve or produce their own power. This is another example where a carbon tax could be revenue neutral by flowing funds back to consumers via conservation and green power incentives.



Conserve Resources (6 ⇌ 7)

From fisheries to forests and farmland, Canada needs to improve the way it manages, protects, and conserves its natural resources. We could start by recognizing the importance of protecting our natural resources as the foundation for a healthy and sustainable economy.



Great Food (7 ⇌ 8)

Across Canada, we all value fresh food from local farms. There are many local groups and organizations working on food as a social priority and in support of a sustainable food system. Most Provinces have programs in place to promote local food. To top it off, the rise in farmer's markets, artisanal foods, and great restaurants means that good food is an important part of our culture and our economy. Keep it up!



Green Jobs (7 ⇌ 8)

Sure, installing solar panels is a green job but the definition of a green job is actually quite broad. Green jobs are ones that provide a decent income without having a significant environmental impact. This covers everything from the sustainable use of resources and adding value and quality to products, to education, culture, and entertainment.

Canada has a fairly resilient local economy, but we need to support green innovation, entrepreneurship and social ventures that will help maintain a diverse and sustainable economy in uncertain times.



Redefine Wealth (6 ⇌ 8)

Canadians want Canada to be a great place to live. Let's make it the focus of our efforts.

A key step is to transform the way we measure prosperity. It's not the money we have to buy things that truly matters, nor the material wealth that money can buy, it is the quality of the lives we lead.



We need to elevate the quality of life over the gross national product. Sound crazy? Actually, if the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) can develop an international [Better Life Index](#), then it's not that far-fetched a concept. Canada rates fairly well, [6 out of 36](#), but there's still room for improvement.

Reduce Waste (5 ⇌ 7)

Ever since the introduction of the Blue Box in the 1980's, Canadians have taken to recycling. It's part of our culture. That said, we have a national recycling rate of [26.8%](#). We could do a lot better.

The disposal rate for household hazardous waste is harder to track. Most provinces and municipalities have depots or occasional collection days which are used by a relatively small percentage of consumers.



On the pollution side, we still have a long way to go, both with respect to [major spills](#) and [greenhouse gas emissions](#). The relatively good news lies in the ongoing and deep-rooted efforts to reduce priority contaminants, as reported in the [National Pollutant Release Inventory](#).

Enjoy Nature (8 ⇌ 9)

Canadians love nature, whether it is an urban park or the great outdoors. We do not bad when it comes to [protecting natural areas](#), but just ask any of the Canada's nature organizations, there are still many development and pollution threats to deal with and our track record on [species at risk](#) is not all that great. We still have a long way to go to balance development and protection.



As long as Canadians continue to identify with and enjoy nature, we have a strong foundation for the challenge of a sustainable future in Canada.

Opportunities

So what does this report card show us?

1. Canadians are committed to a sustainable future. There is a wealth of activity on the ground as Canadians try to live and work according to their values. The depth of this activity is what is keeping our score relatively high.
2. The political commitment to a sustainable future has waned over the past decade, replaced by a tighter focus on climate change and the pre-eminent environmental issue. The lack of leadership on sustainability, combined with the growing politics and culture of negativity, is a major factor in driving our score down.
3. The flow from vision to action is crucial. Strong leadership will empower positive change and support a wealth of economic and social initiatives across Canada.
4. There are some terrific opportunities to reignite our commitment to a great future.

Here are five things we could use in Canada – key signs of leadership based on implementing the United Nations goals for sustainable development:

1. **A public vision of the future we want** – a coalition of senior organizations across Canada to translate the UN sustainability goals into a Canadian set of values and a vision for a healthy and sustainable future.
2. **Better government leadership** – refocus government strategies to focus on sustainable development as an ongoing, government-wide objective. Broaden the mandates of environment ministries to “Environment and Sustainability”. Recognize the value of sustainable development as a means to addressing climate change and adaptation.
3. **Future Funds** – develop major funds for investing in sustainability through dedicated carbon taxes and/or resource royalties.
4. **Empower change** – invest in the infrastructure, provide incentives and support initiatives that will help Canadians live better with less.
5. **Engage Canadians** – set up a national community action program to engage Canadians as part of the solution.

Leadership on these recommendations, and other initiatives, will need to come from all sectors. The overall vision of Canada as a great place to live and as a world leader in sustainable development is one that needs to be shared by social, business, and political leaders alike.

About the Author

Chris Winter is a 30 year veteran of the environmental and sustainability movement in Canada. The former Executive Director of the Conservation Council of Ontario, he is currently working on a national initiative, Canada Conserves, to reinvigorate Canada's commitment to conserve values and sustainability.

Over the years, Chris has worked on provincial strategies, community action plans, solutions-oriented campaigns, policy research, and NGO and multi-sector collaborations. His overall approach is to focus on promoting long-lasting organic and voluntary change. In 2012, he was awarded the Live Green Toronto Award for leadership.