



Measuring Success

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Water quality of the West Branch will be an important Sustainability Indicator for Spruce Peak at Stowe, VT, to ensure that its new base village operations don't negatively impact the health of the stream and its watershed. Spruce Peak is a member of Audubon International's Sustainable Communities Program.

Am I doing a good job? It's a question we all ask ourselves as we strive to become better environmental stewards. At the end of the day, managing your property in an environmentally-sensitive way, teaching youth to care for the environment, or fostering sustainability in your community are about affecting positive change. But are we generating the on-the-ground results that matter? Are we being successful? And how can we show it?

These are important questions to ask. And answering them requires a way to measure success. In the context of working with communities, we use what are known as *sustainability indicators* to measure success. In other settings, *environmental performance indicators* measure the outcomes of best management practices.

Regardless of what you call them, environmental performance or sustainability indicators are specific measures that can be evaluated or calculated. There are two primary types:

- **Quantitative** – Can be discretely measured, such as gallons of water conserved, acres of open space protected, or tons of waste recycled.
- **Qualitative** – Cannot be measured discretely, but that still provide valuable insight, such as public opinion surveys, informal feedback, or anecdotes.

When choosing a sampling of indicators to measure your success, you must first decide what is important to you. The indicators you select should be both appropriate for your community or property and representative of the areas in which you are focusing your attention.

For example, a community may focus on natural area protection or stormwater management, a golf course might place a high priority on water quality protection or conservation, while a school may be more concerned with environmental education, energy efficiency, or school ground improvement.

What makes a good Environmental Performance or Sustainability Indicator?

Good indicators meet several criteria:

- They are **relevant** – They tell you something you need to know (*i.e.*, they relate directly to the elements of your environmental or strategic plan).
- They are **easy to understand** – They are clear in what they measure, and are straightforward to understand, not just to experts, but to laypersons.
- They are **reliable** – They provide information that can be trusted and consistently collected over time.
- They are **accessible** – They provide information that is relatively easy and inexpensive to collect, and that can be obtained in a timely manner that allows the opportunity to respond to results.

Setting Targets and Timelines

Just as important as deciding *what* to measure, is deciding the desired outcome (setting a target) and determining *when* you hope to achieve that outcome (setting a timeline). There are three general types of targets:

- **Absolute** – These have a specific value for which to aim (*i.e.*, reduce residential water consumption by 4 million gallons per day).
- **Relative** – These targets have a specific value, but are measured in comparison to a known baseline (*i.e.*, reduce residential water consumption to 75% of year 2000 rates).
- **Trends** – These are based on the indicator's performance over time...increasing, decreasing, or stable (*i.e.*, residential water consumption decreases over time).

Keep several factors in mind when setting timelines for reaching your targets. First, choose a combination of short and long-term targets. By setting up intermediate “measuring points” between *day one* and your designated timeline, you can assess progress and make adjustments if necessary. It is important to measure and celebrate short term wins along the way.

In addition, keep your targets and timeframes realistic. Don't be afraid to be aggressive in setting goals, but don't set yourself up for failure by shooting for too much too soon. Slow, steady progress wins the race. Use the worksheet on page four as a frame of reference to help you get started.

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Putting Sustainability Indicators to work for you

Environmental performance and sustainability indicators help to ensure that you stay on track to achieve your goals. They help you celebrate your progress, measure your success, and tell your story. And lastly, they provide a new perspective from which to think about your environmental stewardship.

In the end, measuring success is a valuable way to bring environmental stewardship and sustainability full circle. They close the feedback loop between action and result, and, in so doing, make your efforts that much more effective.

Selected Sustainability Indicators for Communities

- Agriculture- Percentage of farmers implementing sustainable agriculture practices; total annual sales at local farmers' markets
- Economy- Median household income; percentage of population living in poverty
- Education- High school graduation rates; Literacy rates in community
- Environment- Number of days local beaches closed to swimming for water quality/human health concerns; number of days smog/ozone levels exceed safe range
- Governance- Public satisfaction with government responsiveness and services offered
- Health- Deaths due to cancer, heart disease, lung disease per thousand; percentage of population with access to adequate healthcare services
- Housing- Median single family home price; availability of affordable/workforce housing as a fraction of total need
- Open Space & Land Use- Acres of open space protected
- Planning, Zoning, Building & Development- Percentage of new buildings meeting green building standards; percentage of municipal code consistent with Smart Growth principles
- Recreation- Number of community parks and recreation centers; miles of recreational paths and trails constructed and maintained
- Resource Use- Per capita residential water consumption; per capita residential energy consumption; recycling rate; tons of waste sent to landfill per year
- Transportation- Average commute time; average ridership on public transportation; miles of designated alternative transportation routes (pedestrian, bicycle)

Environmental Performance Indicators Worksheet

Use this worksheet to consider goals and targets for improving your environmental performance. While not all of the measures listed will apply to you, try to come up with at least one measure of success in each broad area that you focus on, such as wildlife, water, energy efficiency, and outreach and education.

POTENTIAL TARGETS	CURRENT STATUS	GOAL	TIMELINE
Wildlife and Habitat Management			
Decrease the number of acres that are intensively maintained, such as lawns or highly manicured landscaping or natural areas	acres	acres	
Increase the amount or percentage of wildlife habitat	acres (%)	acres (%)	
Increase the percentage of native plants used in new landscaping	%	%	
Increase the number of birds (or other wildlife) species on site	#	#	
Reduce maintenance costs (e.g., gasoline, fertilizers, pesticides, equipment, labor, seed, mulch, compost, plant materials)	\$	\$	
Water Conservation			
Reduce water use	gal/yr	gal/yr	
Reduce irrigated acreage	acres	acres	
Improve efficiency by increasing the percentage of water saving devices or equipment installed (e.g., low flow fixtures, irrigation system)	%	%	
Reduce annual water costs	\$ /yr	\$ /yr	
Increase the percentage of reclaimed water used	%	%	
Energy Efficiency			
Reduce energy use	KWH/Yr	KWH/Yr	
Reduce energy costs	%	%	
Increase the percentage of fuel efficient vehicles in the vehicle fleet	\$	\$	
Waste Management			
Reduce waste output (e.g., pounds, tons, dumpsters per year)	lbs/yr	lbs/yr	
Reduce waste disposal costs	\$	\$	
Increase or improve recycling	lbs/yr	lbs/yr	
Increase the percentage of employees that participate in recycling	%	%	
Outreach and Education			
Increase the number of community organizations involved			
Increase the number of people that participate in environmental awareness or conservation activities (e.g., schools, scouts, community)			
Improve environmentally-related training, as evidenced by the number of sessions conducted per year.			
Increase positive publicity, as evidenced by the number of articles published about your organization's environmental efforts per year.			
Increase recognition, as evidenced by the number of environmental/ community-themed awards received per year.			