

# Habitats for a Sustainable Society

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## ABSTRACT

*Human habitats have been constructed by all sedentary societies for several millennia in order to maintain secure living conditions. This article presents some key principles of ecological, economic and social sustainability of human habitats derived from a human ecology perspective. Then the article shows how these principles can be applied in ten core themes about sustainable land use planning and human settlements. These themes are accounting for natural ecosystem functions, a healthy and safe habitat, meeting basic human needs, accommodating economic and social diversity, functional mix, building density and layout, equity, lessons from history, building and planning for change, and public awareness and participation. These themes should be considered by professionals and representatives of communities before major decisions are made about the current conditions and future options of their habitat.*

**Keywords:** Human habitats, ecological principles, economic and social sustainability

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In each continent of the World, human habitats have been constructed by all sedentary societies for several millennia, in order to provide and sustain secure living conditions. Human habitats impact on and are influenced by the natural cycles of ecosystems. They depend on the availability of natural resources and the exportation of waste products in order to sustain living conditions. Human groups import energy, fuels, materials and water which are transformed into goods and services. The high concentrations of activities, objects and people in urban areas today, and the flows between rural and urban areas, mean that human settlements are major contributors to national economies and to environmental change at local, regional and global scales.

The ecological limits of ecosystems prescribe constraints on human populations (Boyden, 1992). Whether and how these limits are interpreted in relation to

energy supply and transformations, food production, distribution and consumption, the generation of wastes and recycling, or uses of renewable and non-renewable resources, are related to the culture of these populations. In principle, the relationship between available means and human societies is mediated by information, knowledge and values that are used implicitly or explicitly to invent and use resources, create tools, harness energy and develop skills. One should acknowledge that decisions are made based on choices, customs, conflicts and compromises.

Human settlements, and all their ecological processes and products, do not conform to administrative, geographical or political boundaries. However it is still not widely recognized that policies and projects that encourage sustained land uses need to extend beyond traditional administrative and political boundaries as well as sector based divisions of labour. The interrelations between human groups, their habitat and the global environment are complex and difficult to understand.

In contrast to those scientists, professionals and policy makers who consider that humans can control, manipulate and modify components of the environment because they are detached from them, this author does not make such claims. Human ecology recognizes that people live in a continually changing world because ecological, economic and other human subsystems are not static, nor delimited by impermeable boundaries. Even in the absence of human activities some changes to ecosystems can be abrupt and unpredictable. In this respect, human ecology reminds us that there are no simple answers to complex questions about ecological, economic and social sustainability (Lawrence, 2001).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This article is a brief synthesis of 20 years of research by the author who has an interdisciplinary training in the broad field of people-environment relations.

