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**STANFORD** SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

## What Works

### **Working All Fronts: How Sustainable Conservation unites all sectors for the environment**

By Catherine Potter

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Fall 2007

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## Working All Fronts

How Sustainable Conservation unites all sectors for the environment *by Catherine Potter*

WHEN DINO GIACOMAZZI, a dairy farmer from Hanford, Calif., first met Kristen Hughes, a project manager at Sustainable Conservation, she introduced herself by saying, “I am an environmentalist from San Francisco, and I like farmers,” he recalls. He was intrigued. Before meeting Hughes, Giacomazzi took a dim view of environmental groups, which did not acknowledge that “farmers are stewards of the land and have tools and knowledge to protect our resources,” he says.

But Sustainable Conservation (SusCon) was different. When the San Francisco-based organization formed in 1992, environmental groups were “mostly reactive, focusing on regulations and litigation,” says Ashley Boren, the organization’s executive director. “We wanted to be more proactive.”

And so the nonprofit environmental group partners with business, nonprofit, and government leaders to promote environmentally sound, yet cost-effective business practices. Its dairy project, for example, draws together commercial dairies, environmentalists, and government agencies to confront one of the greatest threats to California’s drinking water: cow manure. Dairy cows create more than 65 billion pounds of manure per year in California alone. Much of this waste winds up in waterways, where it poisons habitats and water sources. To reduce this pollution, SusCon helps dozens of dairies compost and use methane digesters, which purify manure and convert its byproducts into electricity. The nonprofit also developed an environmental stewardship course, which more than 1,000 dairy farmers have completed.

In another of its initiatives, SusCon is reducing the amount of runoff produced by dismantling automobiles. Although auto recyclers keep their cars’ leavings out of landfills, they often inadvertently allow hazardous metals, oils, and coolants to ooze into waterways. Working with the State of California Auto Dismantlers Association (SCADA) – a trade association for auto dismantlers – Santa Monica Bay-



**Cow manure pollutes drinking water in many states. The nonprofit Sustainable Conservation works with dairy farmers in California to develop business-friendly environmental practices.**

keeper, and the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, SusCon now distributes user-friendly videos and fact sheets to auto recyclers, and informs regulators about how poor management practices harm the environment.

Fifteen years and several dozen projects later, SusCon has received multiple awards for its environmental work, including the 2004 Outstanding Achievement Award for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 9 (which covers California and other Western states). Moreover, “Sustainable Conservation has built credibility and reputation over time, so that lots of people are now willing to work with them,” says Claire Thorp, director of the southwest region of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, a SusCon funder.

### Find Facts First

Before forming a new coalition, SusCon does a lot of research. At the beginning of the auto recycling project, for example, the organization spent three months visiting automobile dismantlers to learn their business. “The first time I heard of them, I was very cautious,” admits Martha Cowell, executive director of SCADA. “This is an industry that is historically frowned upon by environmental groups. But we spent a lot of time with them. They were very willing to recognize that the industry had information that they didn’t.” SusCon’s attempts to understand the business helped build trust with SCADA and other industry partners.

During its fact finding, SusCon also looks for resources. While considering the dairy project, for instance, SusCon

### STEERING CROSS-SECTOR COALITIONS

- Carefully choose projects
- Get a reputation for being cooperative
- Adapt tactics to each partnership



discovered that the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation had funds appropriate for the initiative. “Sustainable Conservation has been instrumental in getting grant money,” says Giacomazzi. The organization’s reputation as a rainmaker makes potential partners more willing to work with it.

Finally, SusCon improves its chances for success by identifying issues and industries that are on the cusp of regulation or litigation. “Collaboration works particularly well when a real threat to industry exists,” explains Boren. Auto dismantlers were starting to face litigation, and SCADA “had already started looking into the problem,” says Sarah Connick, associate director of Sustainable Conservation. But SusCon felt that “together, we could do much more,” says Connick. And so SusCon pursued the partnership.

## Build a Distinctive Brand

SusCon has also built a unique image over time. Its reputation as an open-minded, problem-solving, collaborative organization allows it to diffuse long-standing animosities and build partnerships across diverse constituencies.

The organization’s brand building began with its name. Its founders chose the moniker “Sustainable Conservation” in a deliberate attempt to turn the phrase “sustainable development” on its head. Instead of promoting business practices that are environmentally sustainable, Sustainable Conservation promotes conservation practices that are economically sustainable. Its 2004 annual report emphasizes its business-oriented approach: finding practical ways for businesses to “operate profitably AND protect the environment.”

SusCon also distinguishes itself among environmental groups by focusing on solutions. “We’re very used to dealing with litigious environmental groups,” says Lynn Kuo, an environmental engineer at the EPA. “But Sustainable Conservation is really looking to solve problems.” Businesspeople such as dairy farmers and auto dismantlers view SusCon’s on-the-ground, practical actions as much more reasonable than the litigious activity of many environmental groups.

Another facet of SusCon’s distinctive brand is the people that it hires. SusCon screens for people with a “respect for business,” says Boren. “You can’t work with businesspeople if you distrust them from the start.” Cowell notes the respect she feels from the SusCon staff: “They recognize not just the necessity of involving industry, but also the value.”

SusCon also “looks for people who have had to work with different interests,” says Boren. For example, Ladi Asgill, SusCon’s latest hire, previously worked for Harris Moran, an international seed company, as well as for the Great Valley

Center, a Modesto, Calif.-based nonprofit. The organization’s board likewise reflects and supports its identity: Approximately one-third of the board comes from business, another third hails from government, and the final third comes from environmental nonprofits.

## Adjust to Each Partnership

SusCon can build coalitions among unlikely bedfellows because it adapts to different partnerships. “They aren’t guilty of being a one-trick pony,” says Alexis Strauss, director of water at EPA Region 9. “They are good at interacting with very different groups of people.”

Depending on the context, SusCon can play very different roles. In the case of the dairy project, for example, the California Dairy Quality Assurance Program had already developed a highly evolved network of dairy farmers. As a result, SusCon is less at the center of dairy project activity and more of a coequal partner. But in the auto recycling coalition, SusCon plays a more central role because it convened the partners in the first place.

SusCon also adjusts its solutions to each project, without letting its preference for market-based answers cloud creativity. The auto recycling coalition, for example, is pursuing a legislative solution: crack down on auto dismantlers that are not licensed by the state. Licensed auto recyclers who abide by SCADA’s recommendations favor the proposed legislation because it will eliminate cheaper, unlicensed dismantlers. Environmentalists like the proposal because it will increase compliance with established guidelines.

Finally, SusCon stays involved only as long as it can be effective. “Each coalition is formed for a very specific purpose,” says Boren. “For example, for the auto recycling project it was to identify and define the best management practices for the industry.” Once the coalition achieved its goals, SusCon handed off the next steps of the project to coalition partners that could be more effective at the follow-on phases of work. “Every project has a start and an end,” says Boren. “For us to remain involved, we have to be adding some strong, tangible value.”

When asked how he measures the success of his partnership with Sustainable Conservation, Giacomazzi replies, “how many people see what we’re doing.” He knows that it can be “a pretty slow process sometimes,” but he’s pleased with the results so far. “Sustainable Conservation is doing a good job of generating interest,” he says. Coming from a man who used to think that environmental groups add “nothing in a positive fashion” to his life, that is music to Sustainable Conservation’s ears. □