



Clare M. Feeney

## Sustainability: Turning Threat Into Opportunity

Preparing for  
an environmentally  
conscious future

**P**rofitability is the goal of all businesses, though many are struggling to survive in the current economic climate. To be profitable, it is not enough just to get better at what we always have done. There is a bigger risk to the heavy-construction sector lurking out there, and it is the accelerating trend toward sustainability.

Governments worldwide are funding infrastructure work to keep the economically important construction sector going. But what will we do when we have built all the roads and railways our shrinking economies can afford? What will development look like as we adapt to ongoing economic uncertainty and resource scarcity? In developed nations, population growth slows in response to better health, wealth and education. How do we position ourselves to be part of the sustainable development that emerging nations are now demanding and to ensure ongoing work in our slow-growth domestic economies?

It is already more cost-effective in many urban areas to redevelop within city limits than to build new developments on the edge. Even on greenfield sites, sustainability poses a threat to traditional “big construction” because of the requirement for low-impact designs that preserve natural landforms and protect and restore vegetation and water bodies. This reduces the need for the major earthworks and big machines that are at the core of most contracting companies’ business.

In my watershed management work, I am seeing increased use of engineered services that supplement natural services and utilize and mimic natural processes. Infrastructure managers gradually are replacing and supplementing old built infrastructure with naturalized infrastructure, restoring water bodies, soils and assemblages of plants and animals. This work will be accelerated by the demands of Western cities’ inhabitants for more environmental amenity, and the need to provide new infrastructure

in the developing world that protects human and environmental health.

For decades we have been in the business of shifting dirt, building roads and laying drains. Ever-higher environmental standards also have made us build enormous collateral expertise in wider aspects of sustainability, such as soil health, terrestrial and aquatic ecology, biodiversity, human health and urban design. Emerging evidence about the harmful effects of our growing separation from nature is intensifying this trend.

Now we need to consciously build on these sustainability skills as the focus of our businesses. Restoration of the built and natural environments could very well comprise the majority of future development. If they do not see the writing on the wall, good construction companies will be squeezed out of business by rapidly growing specialist sustainable development firms.

We cannot 100% future-proof ourselves, but we can explore different futures, what we know now and how we can adapt to these changing futures. Construction companies that consciously build their environmental capacity become learning organizations that are reflective, self-aware and nimble. Their staffs are fully engaged in creating a meaningful future for the organization and are creative, innovative and responsive to new ideas, emerging as leaders in the already significant restoration economy. These are the companies that will make it into an increasingly sustainable future. **[SWS]**

**Clare M. Feeney is a professional speaker and author on business productivity. Her technical work includes erosion and sediment control, watershed management and business sustainability. Feeney can be reached at [clare.feeney@ebg.co.nz](mailto:clare.feeney@ebg.co.nz).**

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