

University of New Hampshire



## Sustainability

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› [Blog](#)

› UNH Sustainability Awards: Reflections & Gratitude

# UNH Sustainability Awards: Reflections & Gratitude

THURSDAY, MAY 13, 2021

*John Aber, Professor, Natural Resources and the Environment*

UNH has just presented its first round of Sustainability Awards. Recognition like this from the UNH Sustainability Institute has real meaning. Standards are high here, as evidenced by the top-5 rating UNH achieves in every published analysis, ranking or poll of universities in this sphere. Commitment runs deep on this campus, as evidenced by the 90 nominations that were submitted for the awards and is woven throughout the fabric of this institution.

And that is not a new thing. When Tom Kelly, Bruce Mallory and I edited *The*

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*Community*, it was partly to demonstrate the depth and longevity of that commitment. It was easy to identify 64 stories that wove together Climate, Food, Biodiversity and Culture across the CORE – Curriculum, Operations, Research and Engagement. Something about that 4 by 4 structure, with 4 stories per “box” has always appealed to me.



I think the stories in that volume established that proclaiming a “sustainable” campus was more than just buying energy credits (I also still like applying the term “indulgences” to that approach, in contrast to the hard work that UNH folks have done in all 4 domains). A key aspect of that 4 by 4 structure is that an institution has to succeed in all four domains at the same time.

That structure, and so much of what I have learned and practiced about Sustainability, I owe to Tom Kelly. He was pivotal in setting up the Venn diagram that became the outline for the book, and has for decades been an advocate for sustainability at UNH, often working behind the scenes and sharing credit widely for programs that have resulted from his initiatives.

Tom was solely responsible for my re-entry into research after leaving the VP for Research position, instigating a successful application to USDA (with Bill McDowell, Matt Davis and others) that resulted in 10 years of research at the UNH Organic Dairy Research Farm (ODRF). That research could not have happened without that Farm, and that Farm almost certainly would not have happened without Tom Kelly.

It was a pleasure, during my time as Provost, to help move the sustainability office to University Institute status, reporting to that office. After that move, there were only two campus-wide initiatives with reporting status on a par with Deans and Senior Vice-Provosts. One was Sustainability, and the other was Inclusive Excellence, as it was then called.

The Sustainability Institute (SI), with Tom's leadership, has provided support and a home for many across the campus. Cameron Wake has been a stalwart proponent of climate science building on his expertise in glaciology. El Farrell and Jenn Andrews have driven so many high-impact programs across all four domains as to defy enumeration. Several faculty colleagues that have preceded me into retirement were given the time and space to apply their disciplines to sustainability goals. Support for Ph.D. students like Allison Leach and Jennifer Wilhelm has fostered scholarship that is causing change.

And speaking of change, the recent merging of SI with the Changemaker Collaborative, bringing the excellence and energy of Professor Fiona Wilson and Faina Bukher into closer association with the rest of the excellent staff at SI, is, well, causing change!

There are many others associated with SI that I have not yet had the opportunity to work with directly. The team is fluid and dynamic, with new energy, new people, and new objectives reflecting what is best about any dynamic and effective organization.

To be among those presented with an award in this first round is truly an honor, as there are so many who deserve recognition. Retirement looms for me this Spring, but as they say, retirement for faculty only means being able to concentrate on the things you want to do on campus, and not having to do the rest. The work of SI and all those affiliated with it will continue to keep UNH at the head of the class, and in a position of leadership in changing the world for the better.

I hope to stay connected. Keep up the good work. The world needs you.

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*John Aber's research is in the area of sustainable ecosystem management, applying concepts learned over 30 years in the study of native forest ecosystems to managed woodlots and pastures. One active project focuses on the nutrient and energy balances of the UNH's first-in-the-nation Organic Dairy Research Farm. The goal of the project is to reduce dependence on external sources of energy and bedding, reduce the farm's environmental footprint, and using static pile, aerobic composting techniques to generate heat energy for use on the farm. With USDA and AES support, the project is focused on providing research opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students, and also maintains close ties with external stakeholders. This work is part of an overall approach to measuring and monitoring the Nitrogen footprint of the University and assessing the value of Life Cycle Analysis in determining environmental impacts.*

*John was the recipient of a 2021 Platinum Sustainability Award; John has played a key role as both faculty member and administrator in advancing UNH leadership in sustainability over the past two-plus decades, including supporting the establishment of the UNH Energy Task Force, which developed a comprehensive approach to energy and carbon accounting that led to WildCAP, the UNH Climate Action Plan. John embraced efforts to advance an agroecological approach to building our capacity in sustainable food systems and led a long-term study at the Organic Dairy Research Farm. He was lead editor of a book about the first 10 years of our sustainability effort: *The Sustainable Learning Community: One University's Journey to the Future*, with more than 60 UNH faculty and staff contributing. As Provost from 2009-2013, John supported the development of a dual major in Sustainability and many other advances, leaving a lasting legacy of impact and benefit to the UNH community.*

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[Sustainability](#)

[Problems](#)

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