

The Principles of Stewardship

By Ron Dodson, American Steward

Introduction: From Sustainability to Stewardship

I write this not as an academic or policymaker, but as a fellow citizen who believes that caring for the places we live—and for one another—is both our shared responsibility and our greatest opportunity. The word sustainability has been used so often that it has lost much of its meaning. What truly matters is stewardship—the active, ongoing care of the people, places, and resources that sustain life.

The original Principles of Sustainability, created through the International Sustainability Council and Audubon Lifestyles (ISC-Audubon), provided a strong foundation for understanding how communities, economies, and ecosystems are interconnected. This updated version, The Principles of Stewardship, simplifies those ideas into plain language and modern relevance. It is written for everyone—citizens, public servants, business owners, educators, and neighbors. Together, we are the caretakers of our shared home.

Principle 1: Stewardship Begins with Understanding and Connection

We are all connected. The choices each of us makes affect others and the natural systems that sustain us. Stewardship begins with awareness—understanding how our actions influence our community, environment, and economy.

Practice:

- • Learn about your local ecosystems, history, and culture.
- • Share information openly and listen to diverse perspectives.
- • Support scientific learning and community participation in local decisions.
- • Make decisions that balance today's needs with tomorrow's consequences.

Principle 2: Care for the Future as You Live Today

Good stewardship means leaving things better than we found them. Our communities must be resilient, able to recover from storms, economic challenges, and social change.

Practice:

- • Protect natural areas and farmland for future generations.
- • Plan growth and development that minimize harm to the environment.
- • Design communities that can withstand natural and economic disruptions.
- • Think ahead: your choices today shape what tomorrow's citizens inherit.

Principle 3: Lead with Integrity and Shared Responsibility

Governance is not just about government—it's about how we make decisions together. Transparency, honesty, and participation build trust and lasting progress.

Practice:

- • Encourage public involvement in decision-making.
- • Hold leaders and institutions accountable for long-term outcomes.
- • Support open access to information for all community members.
- • Work collaboratively across sectors and political lines.

Principle 4: Build Caring, Resilient Communities

Strong communities are built on trust, inclusion, and shared purpose. Stewardship thrives where people care for one another and for the places they call home.

Practice:

- • Support local identity and celebrate cultural diversity.
- • Provide safe, accessible public spaces.
- • Encourage education and lifelong learning opportunities.
- • Promote walkable neighborhoods, local food systems, and active transportation.

Principle 5: Honor the Dignity and Well-Being of All

Every person deserves the essentials of a healthy and meaningful life—safety, health, belonging, and purpose. A thriving community ensures that no one is left behind.

Practice:

- • Work to eliminate poverty and inequity.
- • Provide access to health care, housing, and education.
- • Create opportunities for meaningful work and civic engagement.
- • Foster respect, empathy, and connection among all citizens.

Principle 6: Work Toward a Prosperous, Regenerative Economy

A truly prosperous economy is one that regenerates rather than depletes. Stewardship recognizes that business, community, and nature succeed together.

Practice:

- • Support local businesses and entrepreneurs.
- • Invest in circular, waste-reducing, and energy-efficient practices.
- • Prioritize local hiring and fair wages.
- • Design economic growth that strengthens both people and the planet.

Principle 7: Protect and Restore the Living Earth

Nature is not separate from us—it is the foundation of our survival and joy. Stewardship means protecting the land, air, water, and living beings that sustain life.

Practice:

- • Conserve and restore local habitats.
- • Reduce pollution and waste.
- • Use water, energy, and materials wisely.
- • Design with nature, not against it.

Closing Reflection: The Stewardship Pledge

We are stewards of the places we call home. Stewardship is not a program or policy—it is a way of living that connects purpose with responsibility. When we act as caretakers of our communities, we strengthen democracy, restore nature, and secure a better future for all.

The Stewardship Pledge:

I will care for the people, places, and planet that sustain me.

I will act with integrity and compassion.

I will leave my community stronger, fairer, and more beautiful than I found it.

Adapted and expanded from the original 2009 Principles of Sustainability developed through the International Sustainability Council and Audubon Lifestyles (ISC-Audubon) and re-envisioned for the 21st century.