



**The G. Raymond Chang School of
Continuing Education**

Ryerson University

**Sustainability Case Study[©]:
*Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC)***

Developed for use by the
Certificate in Sustainable Management and related programs

**Researchers and Authors:
Sadick Sam, Thomas C. Esakin and Francis Pappin**

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1.0 Introduction

Sustainability/sustainable development issues tend to be complex and yet encompassing. Achieving sustainable development outcomes therefore requires an understanding of the complexities of relationships of issues and interests at stake. It involves establishing mutually beneficial tradeoffs and reinforcing social, economic and environmental linkages.

The case study series represents an effort by the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University to contribute to the teaching and learning of sustainability. It is intended to deepen understanding in sustainable development concepts, principles and practices, highlighting experiences of organizations and communities as they integrate sustainability considerations into planning and decision-making.

In this case study on Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC), an outdoor equipment entity, the retailer's sustainability performance is reviewed. It provides students with an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in critical, responsible, creative and "Systems" thinking and problem-solving to analyze issues of sustainability from a broader perspective.

Following a brief description of the scope and methodology, the case study provides a conceptual and analytical framework for integrating sustainability into planning and decision-making across disciplines, sectors and at different levels and scales of operations. Then an overview of sustainability trends in the retail sector is provided, outlining key challenges in the sector and the shift towards more sustainable practices with examples from the outdoor equipment industry. Next MEC's vision, philosophy and objective are addressed, followed by discussions of its governance structure, a review of its sustainability policies and programs. Key challenges and outcomes are then highlighted. Finally, a summary of the analysis and conclusions, followed by case study-related questions, are provided.

2.0 Scope and Methodology

The study focuses on MEC's operations and processes considered by the researchers to have significant sustainability implications. The methodology adopted/utilised for the case study was a desk review. It relied mainly on data from MEC corporate website which limits the depth of issues analyzed. Specifically, the case study uses available information from the year 2005 to 2011. MEC formalized reporting of its sustainability performance in 2005, publishing the first Accountability Report. No in-person interviews of MEC personnel were conducted for this case study nor did the researchers conduct any independent or acquire independent third party evaluations of MEC's reports- Considering their historical good reputation, MEC has been taken at their word on statements they make as a company on the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of their operational practices.

While there may be similarities between the operations and processes of MEC and other organisations, the conclusions drawn in this case study may not be applicable to those or other entities. The limitation regarding the depth of analysis notwithstanding, this case study provides sufficient details regarding the application of sustainable development concepts and principles in the MEC corporate setting.

3.0 Sustainable Development - Conceptual and Analytical Framework

Sustainable development or sustainability is the state achieved when development meets the needs of both current and future generations¹. An all-embracing and integrating concept, sustainability encompasses three equal, interdependent and mutually reinforcing dimensions: environmental, social and economic. "This definition embraces all those activities which are ecologically sound, socially just and economically viable, and is embedded within an [intra- and] intergenerational underpinning"². Alternatively referred to as the "Triple Bottom Line" -- the "3BL"³, the dimensions are also expressed as "planet, people and prosperity/profits" -- the "Three Ps" or "3Ps"⁴.

Through the lens of sustainable development/sustainability, Earth is an extremely complex ecosystem subdivided into many sub-ecosystems – dynamic entities which comprise great diversity of living organisms -- plants, animals and microorganisms -- interacting amongst themselves and with their non-living environments, of which we are all parts. Within this multitude of ecosystems are many human societies or social systems, in which in turn reside economies or economic systems. Therefore, the environment is the basis or foundation of our socio-economic development⁵. On the economic front, such development includes the use of scarce resources for the production and distribution of goods and services to satisfy human needs and wants, giving rise to the creation of decent jobs, wealth, and so on, to culminate in improved quality of life. On the social side, it includes us humans living in harmony with each other; improved health, education and housing; greater individual freedoms; empowering traditionally disempowered social groups; etc.

Integral to sustainable development is its imperative integration "across fields, sectors and scales"⁶ of the various dimensions of our lives in order to find solutions to development challenges confronting us. Sustainability emphasises the fact that the environment, society and economy interact, interrelate and interconnect constantly. As such, "economic [and social] viability is enhanced by a non-degraded environment, while an economically [and socially] robust [entity is] one which will be able to afford a high level of environmental management and protection"⁷.

In addition, sustainable development is an ongoing process and a theoretical and practical imperative. An action-oriented discipline, sustainability requires understanding and practice of "Systems Thinking" whereby direct and indirect linkages among all things are recognised and acted upon; responsible, critical and creative thinking and action; democratic engagement, participatory (bottom-up) decision-

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p.1).

² Chengappa et al. (2012, p.2).

³ Norman and McDonald (2003, pp.1-19).

⁴ Rodden (2011, p.1).

⁵ Duraiappah (2004, p.10); McMichael et al. (2005, p.45).

⁶ Robinson (2004, p.378).

⁷ Buultjens et al. (1996, p.7).

making processes, transparency and inclusivity; as well as cooperation at and among the individual, local, national, regional and international levels.

Inherent in sustainable development is its emphasis on the recognition of the importance of intergenerational and intra-generational equity and the planet's limits. It stresses the right of and vital importance for both future and current generations to fulfill their essential needs, particularly those of the poor, as well as their legitimate aspirations to improve their quality of life. In addition, sustainable development alerts us to the limits of the planet: that its non-renewable resources such as oil are finite⁸, renewable resources such as plant and animal species can and have become threatened, endangered or extinct⁹; in some cases ecosystems have collapsed¹⁰ including human societies¹¹; and Earth has a limited capacity to absorb and break down all the anthropogenic wastes generated¹².

Being sustainable requires us to be: prudent in the use of resources; mindful of the quality and quantity of wastes we generate; more engaging and accommodative with others; proactive in recognising the dynamism of the changing patterns in our lives, environment and productive systems; and responding with responsible, creative, innovative and practical solutions to restore hope and promise to present and future generations.

Based on this paradigm, the "ultimate success or health" of a society or an organisational entity is determined by the "traditional financial bottom line" as well as "its social/ethical and environmental performance"¹³. By incorporating sustainable development/sustainability systems thinking in their practices and operations, societies and organisations enhance their value environmentally, socially and economically. Sustainable development concepts, principles and thinking can literally be applied to any area of work or study, whether it is located in business/industry, governmental/political/public service, or third/social economy/voluntary/community/non-profit/civic sectors of activity, engagement, and practice. Utilised in conjunction with other methods and analytical tools, sustainability approaches contribute to undertaking better evaluation and attaining improved overall outcomes.

⁸ Richards (2008, p. 1).

⁹ US Fish and Wildlife Service (2012, p.1).

¹⁰ Jackson et al. (2001, pp. 629-637).

¹¹ Diamond (2005); Scheffer (2009); Taylor (2009).

¹² Beder (2006, p.12).

¹³ Norman and MacDonald (2003, p.1).

4.0 Sustainability Trends in the Retail Sector

The retail sector is largely a "model of increasing product proliferation and consumption"¹⁴ and driven mainly by competition and profitability. The global retail industry's sales (weighted currency adjusted) for the world's top 250 retailers was reported to have increased by 5.3% in 2010 from 1.2% in 2009 and composite profit margin also increased to 3.8% compared with 3.1% and 2.4% in 2008 and 2009 respectively.¹⁵ In Canada, the retail sector directly contributed \$74.2 billion, representing 6.2% of Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 to the economy¹⁶. GDP growth rate for the retail sector was 34%, faster than that of the United States (U.S) between 2004 and 2008.¹⁷ It is worth noting that consumption of sporting goods in the global market in 2006 was estimated to be over US\$250B.¹⁸

Like any other business sector, the retail sector relies heavily on a vibrant, secure and thriving environment for its continued existence and profitability. Changes in the climate causing extreme

weather conditions have had significant impacts on the activities of retailers. MEC says that extreme weather, unstable snowpack, inconsistent river flow impact the nature of recreation.¹⁹ Also, floods and droughts in major cotton-growing regions caused prices on the New York Cotton Exchange to surge from 86 to 230 cents per pound between March 2010 and March 2011.²⁰ Interestingly, however, retailers have for a long time been achieving profitability through increased production and sales promotion that engenders increased consumption of materials without much regard to the environmental implications of their activities.

Box 1: Environmental Impact of Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC)

"During the manufacturing of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) also known as vinyl which is found in thousands of outdoor products, carcinogens and toxins including dioxins, chlorine residue, and heavy metal pollutants are produced. Over their lifespan, PVC products can leak dangerous additives, are difficult to recycle and mostly end up in landfills. When burned, PVC releases more dioxins and gases, such as hydrogen chloride, into the environment".

MEC 2005 Accountability Report

The majority of products produced by retailers in the sports and outdoor sector are Polyvinyl chloride (PVC)-based materials and petroleum-based solvents which has potential environmental risks. Fibre-polymers composite for example, are used to make a wide variety of sports equipment including cricket helmet, hockey stick, snowboards, ski poles, windsurf, bicycles and tennis rackets.²¹ MEC reports that most of its products consist of derivatives from the petrochemical industry, complex polymers, chemical finishes and treatments and the production processes require raw materials (natural and human-made) and the use of resources (water, energy, chemicals), creating waste²² from its operations, which if not

¹⁴ Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) and Retail Council of Canada (RCC), (2012, p.3).

¹⁵ Deloitte LLP, (2012, p.G10).

¹⁶ RCC, (2010, p.4).

¹⁷ RCC, (2010, p.4).

¹⁸ Subic, A., et al., (2010, cited Global Industry Analysts 2008, p.67).

¹⁹ MEC, (2005, p.10).

²⁰ RCC and RBC, (2012, p.20).

²¹ Subic, A., et al., (2010 cited Subic A. 2007, Easterling KE. 1993 and Jenkins M. 2003, p.67,72).

²² MEC, (2007, p.13)

disposed of properly, can have serious negative health and ecological implications. Waste disposal requires large tracks of land for landfill and can potentially contaminate waterways and pollute the air significantly.²³ The use of fibers (i.e. cotton and polyester are major sources of raw materials for apparel production) tends to have significant implications for the environment and people. Cotton is said to use more insecticides than any other single crop and is responsible for the release of more than US\$2 billion of chemical pesticides each year.²⁴

Apart from the use of large quantities of land, water and pesticides in the cultivation of cotton, the conversion of cotton to cloth involving bleaching, dyeing and finishing also requires the use of significant amounts of energy, water and chemicals with immense health, safety and environmental impacts. Cotton spinning, weaving and industrial manufacturing processes undermine air quality while dyeing and printing consume vast amounts of water and chemicals, releasing numerous volatile agents that are particularly harmful to human health into the atmosphere.²⁵ Chemical pollution of water resources can be caused by poorly treated or untreated municipal and industrial wastewater; pesticide and fertilizer run-offs from agriculture constitute a major threat to the achievement of sustainable water resources development and management.²⁶ On the social-economic front, labour exploitation and human rights violations, including child labour, appear to be prominent in the cotton industry. In Central Asia, children and teachers are traditionally removed from the schools for up to three months of the year and forced to participate in state-orchestrated labour.²⁷

Increasingly, sustainability is assuming centre stage in planning and decision making processes in many retail organisations. In the sports and outdoor sector the quest to develop, produce and use products that are robust, cost effective and environmentally benign continue to grow due to increased demand for variety and complex products.²⁸ To address growing concerns over the environmental impacts of the sports apparel sector, including carbon emissions and overflowing landfill sites, there has been efforts "to move away from oil-based synthetic fibers, such as polyester and nylon, which are non-renewable and non-biodegradable, to a range of alternative natural fibers, such as organic cotton and bamboo as well as new breeds of biodegradable synthetics made from plants, such as poly lactic acids".²⁹ Retailers are recognizing the "Triple Bottom Line" as a competitive differentiator and are therefore investing resources to find innovative ways to reduce their waste footprint through techniques such as rightsizing or packaging optimization.³⁰ Sustainability practices involving life cycle analysis; maintaining agile supply chains; using more energy efficient and effective waste management systems; constantly engaging employees, customers and communities; and collaborating with government, research institutions and industry partners are becoming the industrial norm.

²³ RCC and RBC, (2012, p.14).

²⁴ EJF, (2007 cited EJF in collaboration with Pesticide Action Network, UK 2007, p.10)

²⁵ Challa, Lakshmi., (2012 , p.1).

²⁶ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2009, p.22).

²⁷ EJF, (2007 cited EJF 2005, p.16)

²⁸ Subic, A., et al., (2010, p.68).

²⁹ Subic, A., et al., (2010, p.75).

³⁰ RCC and RBC, (2012, p.15).

Getting the buy-in of key stakeholders when implementing sustainable development strategies helps achieve incrementally positive results. Inputs from stakeholders help reflect different perspectives on issues that are useful in shaping policies. Stakeholder participation has proven to foster commitment to decisions and promotes ownership of outcomes. Recognizing the critical role stakeholders can play in the drive towards sustainability, retailers are making it easier and more convenient for consumers to participate in the protection of the environment through programs such as waste "take back".³¹ Retailers have also begun working closely with vendors to establish procurement policies to reduce packaging waste, conducting surveys and developing framework for assessing vendor performance to help identify impacts and opportunities.³²

The trend towards sustainability in the retail sector involves exploration of opportunities to reduce ecological footprints, and investing in process improvement and technology development to address operational and management challenges. The dynamics of the challenges of the "3Ps" in the retail sector and the inherent overall benefits to retailers appear to have heightened interest in sustainable options and galvanized support for commitment to collaboration among industry players to improve efficiencies in their supply chain processes, develop and promote the use of environmentally benign materials, re-engineer product design and establish performance standards to ensure minimum negative environmental impacts from retail operations.

5.0 MEC's Vision, Philosophy and Objectives

Ranked first (2010) and sixth (2012) among the "Best 50 Corporate Citizens" by Corporate Knights³³, MEC reveals it seeks to provide leadership in sustainability, setting benchmarks in the outdoor retail industry. Its vision is to become "an innovative, thriving co-operative that inspires excellence in products and services, passion for wilderness experiences, leadership for a just world, and action for a healthy planet".³⁴

A member-owned co-operative, MEC has grown from 6 members at the time of its incorporation in 1971 to 3.6 million members in 2011, becoming Canada's largest outdoor equipment retailer. In 2011, MEC had 15 stores in 7 cities across Canada, recorded annual sales of over \$270 million and employed 1,544 people of diverse backgrounds.³⁵ In 2010, MEC represented 0.06% of total retail sales and 2.3% of the sports and leisure sector in Canada,³⁶ growing its net profit (surplus) from \$15,965 in 2007 to \$815,000 in 2010.³⁷ MEC's core principles and values are anchored in its operations, conducting business ethically and with integrity, respecting and protecting the natural environment while

³¹ RCC and RBC, (2012, p.15).

³² Ibid.

³³ Corporate Knight, (2010 and 2012).

³⁴ MEC, (2005, p.7).

³⁵ MEC, (2011).

³⁶ MEC, (2010, p.91).

³⁷ MEC, (2007, p.59) and (2010, p.90).

promoting personal growth.³⁸ This suggests that MEC recognizes the direct correlation between its operations and the environment and aspires to foster a stronger connection between society and nature. In its sustainability principles, MEC recognizes the limits to the carrying capacity of the planet, noting that an economy and society require a healthy, functional and vibrant planet to thrive.³⁹ It seeks to achieve the following strategic goals:⁴⁰

- Reduce material waste
- Improve energy, water and carbon footprint
- Improve human conditions in its factory communities
- Increase the culture of outdoor recreation
- Increase conservation of ecologically and recreationally important places
- Accelerate systemic change towards environmental, social and economic sustainability in the marketplace.

Box 2: Aligning Vision to Strategy
"Our core business strategy enables us to achieve our mission through product, services, people, processes, and communications/engagement. Sustainability is integrated in our strategy and culture, and our efforts are guided by a five-year agenda, which is informed by issues that are material to our core business and stakeholders"
MEC 2011 Accountability Report (Update)

As a business entity, MEC's objective is to provide highly durable and quality outdoor products and services and promote activities that enhance access to parks and other recreational facilities within the context of a thriving environment. It sees itself as an active player in sustainability and defines its role⁴¹ to include the following:

- Encouraging members to lead healthy and active lives and to become stewards of the natural environment.
- Promoting wilderness conservation and responsible use of outdoor and recreational resources.
- Reducing the social and environmental impacts of products, services and operations.
- Providing leadership in the communities it operates, working with others to pursue collective social and environmental goals.

MEC affirms it leverages its resources to improve its practices, collaborating along its value chain, engaging members and staff and advocating for systemic change.⁴²

³⁸ MEC, (2005, p.7).
³⁹ MEC, (2007, p.9-11).
⁴⁰ Ibid.
⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² MEC, (2010, p.14-15).

6.0 MEC's Governance Structure

Having a governance structure that is open and engaging helps organizations set clear objectives and direction, which tend to motivate employees, engender commitment and promote shared ownership of outcomes. At the helm of MEC's governance structure is a nine-member Board of Directors, which is democratically elected by members.⁴³ The Board sets the vision for sustainability, provides strategic direction, manages risk and makes broad policy decisions regarding sustainable development. The Board is supported by a sustainability committee, one of five standing committees.⁴⁴ It hires and sets performance parameters for the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and monitors overall performance of the organization against established indicators⁴⁵.

The CEO heads a management team, comprised of senior managers who implement Board policies. The team, working through managers and staff, are said by MEC to be responsible for the development of corporate-wide sustainability strategies and programming. The Director for Sustainability and Community coordinates strategy development and works cross-functionally at the department level⁴⁶ to achieve corporate vision of becoming a leading outdoor retail co-operative in sustainable development. Each department is headed by a senior manager who is responsible for at least one sustainability-related performance goal which, is directly linked to an incentive package.

The Sustainability Department is charged with integrated policy and strategy formulation while the Community Department is responsible for community investments and accountability. The Operations Department leads MEC's green building and operating programs while the Production Departments ensures social compliance with product footprint efforts being lead by the Buying and Design Department.

Box 3: Decentralization of Operations and Accountability

"We've worked hard not to develop a large sustainability department with centralized control and accountability. Nor have we decided to put vague sustainability objectives in everyone's job description.

We believe we'll be more successful if specific accountabilities are formalized into key roles within multiple departments. In that way, the role of the sustainability team is to help everyone pursue initiatives linked to our day-to-day business practices."

MEC 2005 Accountability Report

The Managers for Ethical Sourcing and Sustainability and Community Departments have direct reporting relationship with the CEO and work cross-functionally with multiple departments to ensure MEC develops policies and implements programs that are in tandem with the Board's sustainability vision and philosophy. Reporting to the Sustainability and Community Manager, the Community Involvement Coordinator oversees MEC's community partnership programs.⁴⁷

Participation of stakeholders in planning and decision-making enhances sustainable development practices and contributes to the development of innovative and practical solutions. In fact, proactively engaging employees in sustainability initiatives have been recognized by smart retailers as a catalyst

⁴³ MEC, (2010, p.96).

⁴⁴ MEC, (2010, p.15).

⁴⁵ MEC, (2011, p.96-99).

⁴⁶ MEC, (2010, p.15).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

for accelerating the achievement of multiple organizational goals.⁴⁸ MEC attributes its success in waste diversion from landfills to its creative and persistent staff.⁴⁹ For engagement to be meaningful and productive, it needs to be carefully planned and properly executed. MEC engages employees in its operations and considers their engagement to be a useful strategy to improving its sustainability efforts. It believes it has a responsibility to listen to and consider concerns of people affected by its activities.⁵⁰

At the store level, a Sustainability Coordinator, working closely with the Store Manager and Head Office Sustainability Team, develops and delivers sustainability programs relevant to their community's needs. Store Managers are responsible for achieving their sustainable development outcomes and therefore work collaboratively with the Sustainability Coordinator to achieve set targets.

MEC members have the opportunity to influence decisions-making through their participation in the election of Board members. There are also other opportunities for members to contact Board members and other decision-makers directly to discuss issues pertaining to products and services. Members also participate in surveys, share experiences through online product reviews and are eligible to serve on grant committees.⁵¹

7.0 MEC's Policies and Practices

The drive towards sustainable development, when underpinned by a clear vision and philosophy, helps achieve targeted outcomes. Success requires strategic planning that is process-oriented and incremental in scope. MEC appears to have, since its inception, incorporated the “Triple Bottom Line” into its operations and continue to expand the scope of its sustainability activities. It adopts a long term perspective to policy development, planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of its operations, mainstreaming its strategy around its products and services and in key areas where it has a competitive advantage to make a difference.⁵²

Programming typically involves situation analysis to establish baselines, goal setting driven by in-depth analysis with inputs from stakeholders followed by clear statements of objectives and measurable targets, assignment of responsibility and metrics to help assess performance. Integrating sustainability into MEC's operations was given a major impetus in 2005, when it prepared its first Accountability Report with baseline data on its social, economic and environmental performance. In the sections that follow, key elements of MEC's sustainability policies and programs are discussed.

⁴⁸ RCC and RBC, (2012, p.6).

⁴⁹ MEC, (2010, p.42).

⁵⁰ MEC, (2007, p.10).

⁵¹ MEC, (2010, p.98-99).

⁵² MEC, (2009, p.3).

7.1 Product Design

As a policy, MEC advises it does not design or buy products or use technologies that have unacceptable impacts on the environment. It also does not buy or design products specifically for motorized activities, neither does it design, make or source products intended to kill or harm animals.⁵³ MEC uses efficient production methods and selects materials that are less harmful to the environment. Its product design involves thorough investigation of material requirements and analysis of the impacts of materials on the environment, incorporating considerations regarding end use of the products and making recycling an integral part of the product design process. Also, the Coop uses only 100% organically grown cotton in its brand clothing, and has eliminated PVC from its dry bags and personal flotation devices (PFDs).⁵⁴

In sourcing materials, MEC prioritizes and selects materials that meet performance requirements but has less adverse environmental impacts.⁵⁵ It sources yarns made from industrial polyester waste and recycled plastic bottles, resulting in as much as 75% less crude oil than virgin fibres with significant attendant reduction in waste diversion from landfills⁵⁶. Supporting good practices at the factory level helps promote human rights across the globe. Through its ethical sourcing program, MEC ensures products are selected from factories that embrace fair labour practices.⁵⁷

7.2 Carbon Footprints

MEC has been taking a measured approach to reducing its carbon footprint, adopting a strategic approach to planning. It developed an Energy Master Plan (EMP) which provides a framework for making sound energy management decisions. As part of its efforts to reduce its carbon footprint, a policy to phase out ozone-depleting substances from its heating and cooling systems was adopted, leading to the development of a green building program based on the following principles⁵⁸:

- Reduce - Avoid using unnecessary materials.
- Reuse - Incorporate existing materials.
- Recycle - Incorporate existing materials in new ways.
- Rethink - Look for new and better building solutions.

According to the Coop, it tracks energy consumption for each facility, undertakes energy audits of its buildings annually and engages employees in finding opportunities to improve energy efficiencies and reduce waste. It is in the process of centralizing building management at its Head Office to improve monitoring of energy consumption and finalizing its Green Building System and Policy, a comprehensive building development, renovation and facilities management system.⁵⁹ MEC reports of expanding its energy portfolio to include environmentally benign sources such as wind, buying wind

⁵³ MEC, (2005, p.13).

⁵⁴ MEC, (2007, p.14-15).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ MEC, (2009a).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ MEC, (2005, p.25).

⁵⁹ MEC, (2010 p.39).

and low-impact hydro energy through Bullfrog Power for use in a number of its stores.⁶⁰ Alternative energy represented 13.3% of MEC's total energy MEC in 2007.⁶¹

Transportation of products to and from different parts of the world and within Canada constitutes a major source of MEC's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It bought \$140,000,000 and \$152,000,000 in inventory from suppliers around the world in 2007 and 2010 respectively⁶² and estimated its GHG emissions from the transportation of products in 2007 to be 1,960 tonnes⁶³ and 2,070 tonnes in 2009.⁶⁴ The company admits it has achieved some success by using more rail transportation to ship products to and from its Distribution Centre (DC), minimally reducing its facility GHG emission intensity per square foot in 2009 from 2007 levels.⁶⁵

MEC claims it has a policy to site its stores close to bike routes and transit lines. Apart from the Distribution Centre (DC) and the Montreal store which is/are located on the outskirts of the city, all MEC facilities are located on public transit routes⁶⁶. The company encourages the use of less polluting means of transportation to and from work by staff. It provides no car parking for employees and encourages bike commuting by staff, providing secure bike storage facilities and showers for staff in all its locations.⁶⁷ In 2010, 81% of staff took alternative modes of transportation (including biking, walking, use of public transport and carpooling) to work with 18% driving to work in single-occupancy vehicles.⁶⁸

7.4 Waste Management

An effective waste management strategy involves a comprehensive review of the composition of waste to identify its major sources. MEC's waste management strategy started with analysis of its waste stream covering a period of five years. With the support of a third party, it conducts waste audits every year to estimate the amount of waste it generates.⁶⁹ The strategy is linked to its recycling program and buyers are required to ensure packaging materials purchased are consistent with its recycling program. It reports buyers work with suppliers of product packaging to eliminate excessive packaging and reduce product spoilage during transportation.

It compares the cost of recycling in each facility with the cost of sending waste to landfills. Apart from its Winnipeg location, where the financial cost of waste disposal is/was greater than the cost of recycling, all other locations had lower recycling than landfill disposal cost. Average cost of landfill in 2005 was reported to be \$213 compared with \$73 for recycling.⁷⁰

Based on MEC reports, it uses chemicals with the lowest negative impact on the environment, such as non-chlorine bleach, minimizes the use of dark dyes which tend to have greater impact, and ensuring

⁶⁰ MEC, (2009, p.7).

⁶¹ MEC, (2007, p.32)

⁶² MEC, (2007, p.19), (2010, p.30).

⁶³ MEC, (2007, p.27).

⁶⁴ MEC, (2009, p.7).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ MEC, (2007, p.29).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ MEC, (2010, p.46).

⁶⁹ MEC, (2007, p.32).

⁷⁰ MEC, (2005, p.26).

effluents are treated.⁷¹ It collaborates with partners and competitors of varying sizes with similar product lines and supply chains to advance responsible chemical management within the industry by conducting research, identifying best practices and establishing norms and standards to reduce the negative effects of hazardous chemical use.⁷²

To promote responsible waste management, a product "take-back" program at the store level was put in place. The program involves the collection of rechargeable and disposable batteries, printer toners and mobile phones. MEC reports taking back 1.16 tonnes and 1.3 tonnes of batteries at certified take back facilities in 2010 and 2011 respectively.⁷³ This initiative may be said to be supportive of municipalities across Canada faced with growing amounts of waste and difficulty siting new landfills, and have resorted to increasing disposal fees, resulting in increased cost to retailers.⁷⁴

7.5 Responsible Consumption

MEC promotes responsible consumption through its procurement, pricing and marketing and after sales strategy. It avoids holding excess inventory, buys in small quantities and maintains a pricing policy that promotes "responsible" consumption. The Coop does not engage in sales promotion that involves price reductions for the sole purpose of temporarily inducing consumer purchases, usually for a limited period of time, reverting to previous prices after the event. The company claims it "makes and sells product with people and the planet in mind".⁷⁵ It is worth noting that consumers have been found to respond positively to promotions, "hunting for bargains and stockpiling sale items" during such events.⁷⁶ Unlike a typical business entity with profit (the bottom line) as its main objective, MEC indicates that the primary focus of its communications and marketing strategy is to inform and educate members on the value of its products and services. Its expenditure on sales and marketing as percentage of annual sales has been lower than the industry average. It spent 1.6% and 2.2% of its annual sales on marketing in 2005 and 2009 respectively compared with the industry average of 2.5% for the sporting goods sector.⁷⁷

Another way MEC promotes responsible consumption is by promoting product re-use through a 'discard-donation' program organised at the store level where returned products with useful life are donated to local schools, clubs, and shelters. It also operates an outdoor equipment rental program, which makes it possible for newcomers to outdoor recreation to explore and learn over time to appropriately determine their interests and preferences in terms of types of activities and equipment before committing resources to buying equipment. It also holds gear swaps in communities across Canada and offers a free web-based gear swap service which helps members trade used equipment. Product warranty and repair services provided by stores are said by MEC to not only enhance the

⁷¹ MEC, (2009a).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ MEC, (2010, p.41) and (2011).

⁷⁴ RCC and RBC, (2012, p.14)

⁷⁵ MEC, (2009, p.1).

⁷⁶ LoyaltyOne and RCC, (2011, P.3).

⁷⁷ MEC, (2005, p. 37) and (2009, p.48).

productive lives of products, but that they also reduce the volume of products that eventually end up in landfills.⁷⁸

MEC is committed to reducing the impact of its operations on the environment from paper consumption. It uses paper from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified sources and has committed to buying paper with significant post consumer recycled (PCR) content.⁷⁹

7.6 Collaboration with Stakeholders

In an industry where activities are linked to global supply chains, building strategic alliances is necessary to remain competitive and relevant. Using collaboration as a strategy to achieve competitiveness, MEC invests in relationship building and works with industry partners, communities and staff to develop innovative solutions. It collaborates with partners along the value chain⁸⁰ which include suppliers, peers, non-profit organisations, research institutions and community organisations to promote sustainability agendas within the retail sector.

Internally, conscious efforts are made to engage employees at all levels, leading to staff commitment. In fact, the Coop's staff have led the development of most of the innovative and practical solutions such as the elimination of PVC.⁸¹ However, staff turnover, particularly at the store level (70% in 2008 and 45% in 2010), appears to be high even after recording improvement from 60% in 2008 to 42% in 2010. The average staff turnover labour for the outdoor equipment industry in 2010 was 46%.⁸²

A member of the "1% For The Planet" group, an alliance of businesses that believes in providing financial support to environmental initiatives, MEC contributes 1% of its sales to support initiatives that protect ecologically and recreationally important places in Canada. The support covers infrastructure projects and environmental groups.⁸³

8.0 Challenges

With sustainability being an evolving discipline, coupled with the learning approach adopted by MEC, it is obvious that certain challenges will be faced as it attempts to integrate sustainable development into its operations. Dealing with challenges, however, has the positive effect of building capacity in an organization to learn and improve overtime. Some of the key challenges that MEC identifies as having had to address include:

- **Product Design:** According to MEC, it takes a long time to research, design and produce environmentally-friendly fabrics. It takes about 18 months to produce a MEC-brand product and the Coop has to commit to fabrics up to a period of two years in advance.⁸⁴ In an environment where consumer interests, needs and priorities are dynamic and changes rapidly, it is difficult to sustain a balance across competing interests such as maintaining commitment

⁷⁸ MEC, (2009, p.48-49).

⁷⁹ MEC, (2010, p.51-52).

⁸⁰ MEC (2009, p.3) and (2005, p.13).

⁸¹ MEC, (2005, p.13).

⁸² MEC, (2010, p.61).

⁸³ MEC, (2010, p.78-80).

⁸⁴ MEC, (2005, p.14).

to sustainability, meeting demands of consumers and responding to competitive market conditions.

- **Target Setting:** Setting targets requires having baseline data to ensure progress can be monitored and assessed against the baseline. The process of collecting data and establishing baseline and benchmarks is evolving for MEC. As a strategy, it decided to focus its efforts on areas and processes it believes it had/has most control over such as energy consumption, waste and transportation, collaborating with stakeholders to deal with issues of wider implications.⁸⁵
- **Recycling:** PVC is difficult to recycle and as a result most of it ends up in landfills. The key challenge that MEC admits it had to confront with PVC was how to do away with it in its dry bags and PFDs by developing alternatives that are cost effective.
- **Developing Benign Chemical Alternatives:** MEC recognizes that it will not be feasible to eliminate chemicals from its production processes. As such, the Coop explores opportunities to minimize the negative effects of chemicals through improved technology and development of more benign alternatives in collaboration with partners.⁸⁶
- **GHG Emissions:** Transporting MEC's products accounts for over 30% of its total GHG emissions.⁸⁷ Transportation emissions, particularly from inbound air transportation, constitute a major challenge to its efforts to reduce its carbon footprint. Inbound emissions from air shipping tripled from 40 tonnes in 2008 to 140 tonnes in 2009 while outbound emissions reduced by 30%.⁸⁸ Overall, MEC's GHG emissions from transportation of products increased in 2009 even as it continued to expand the use of rail and reduced air transport.⁸⁹
- **Labour Rights Violations by Suppliers:** Labour rights violations appear to be prevalent in the outdoor product industry. A member of the Fair Labour Association, a non-profit organization working to improve factory working conditions, MEC accepts labour rights violations are endemic across countries even though it is more pronounced in developing nations. MEC has a Vendor Code of Conduct that all suppliers of MEC-brand products are required to sign, but because the suppliers are independent MEC is unable to strictly enforce all the provisions of the Code. It expresses it has zero tolerance policy for violations such as "child labour, forced labour and egregious conditions that threaten the well being of workers."⁹⁰
- **Engaging with Stakeholders:** Achieving a significant number of member participation in the election of Board members remains a challenge to the Coop. The total number of members who participated in the election of the Board in 2010 was less than 1%, missing the annual target of 5% growth rate in member participation in Board elections.⁹¹ Employee engagement measured biennially through a Hewitt Employee Opinion Survey was 72% in 2009, up from 64% in 2007.⁹²
- **Occupational Health and Safety:** Accidents per 1,000 MEC employees measures exposure of employees to hazard and risks. The ratio reduced from 27.9 in 2008 to 6.45 in 2010. However, time lost due to injuries increased from 3 to 223 days over the same period. The increase was attributed to 2 significant injuries that occurred in 2009. The fact that such incidents with

⁸⁵ MEC, (2007, p.28) and (2009a).

⁸⁶ MEC, (2009a).

⁸⁷ MEC, (2010, p.44).

⁸⁸ MEC, (2010, p.44).

⁸⁹ MEC, (2009, p.7).

⁹⁰ MEC, (2007, p.20).

⁹¹ MEC, (2010, p.94).

⁹² MEC, (2010, p.55).

prolonged impact occurred suggest there exist challenges regarding either the design and/or implementation of health and safety policies and procedures.⁹³

9.0 Results

MEC's journey towards sustainability has been filled with some remarkable results notwithstanding the challenges enumerated above. The outcomes of MEC's sustainability policies and programming include:

- **Product Design:** The goal for MEC has been to eliminate unnecessary environmental harm from materials and processes. A total of 371 styles of MEC-brand products and 273 styles of non-MEC brand-products were made with environmentally preferred materials in 2011. Thirty nine percent (39%) of all the MEC-brand apparel materials were Bluesign® approved, a 19% increase over the 2009 level.⁹⁴ Bluesign® AG, is a Swiss organization that has developed leading environmental health and safety standards for the textile industry.⁹⁵ As noted earlier, MEC uses 100% organically grown cotton in its brand clothing and requires non-MEC suppliers to use organically grown cotton in its products. It has eliminated polyvinyl chloride (PVC) from its dry bags and PFDs.⁹⁶

Carbon Footprint: The aggregate energy consumption of electricity, natural gas and biogas for heating and lighting of MEC buildings is reported to have reduced from 46,174 GJ in 2009 to 41,044 GJ in 2010 as a result of improved energy management at the DC, saving more than \$60,000.⁹⁷ In 2011, energy consumption, however, increased by 4.4% from 2010 levels due to the opening of two new stores.⁹⁸ MEC has indicated that it has since 2007 achieved 50% reduction in facilities' GHG emissions; from 1,200 tCO₂e in 2007 to 590 tCO₂e in 2010.⁹⁹ From 2007 levels, the Coop achieved a 46% reduction in facilities emissions by 2010. Over the same period, product transportation emissions also reduced by 20%¹⁰⁰ due to the use of multi-modal transportation involving trucks, rail and air transportation. Product transportation emission intensity per unit sold reduced to 0.127kg CO₂e in 2010 from 0.181kg CO₂e in 2007.¹⁰¹ Over 80% of MEC employees reported using bike and alternative transportation in 2010.¹⁰²

⁹³ MEC, (2010, p.64).

⁹⁴ MEC, (2011).

⁹⁵ BlueSign (no date)

⁹⁶ MEC, (2010, p.23)

⁹⁷ MEC, (2010, p.40).

⁹⁸ MEC, (2011).

⁹⁹ MEC, (2010, p.38-47).

¹⁰⁰ MEC, (2011).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² MEC, (2011).

- **Waste:** A diversion rate of 91% from landfill in 2010, 1% less than the target of 92%, was achieved to save the company \$200,000.¹⁰³ In 2011, however, the goal of 92% waste diversion rate from landfill was achieved. Out of 918 tonnes of materials generated, 26.1 tonnes were diverted through gear donations, 58.9 tonnes through composting and the rest through standard recycling. MEC saved approximately \$244,000 in disposal costs in 2011.¹⁰⁴ Collaboration between buyers and suppliers, according to the Coop, has resulted in the elimination of unnecessary packaging. The "sushi-roll" packaging resulted in the replacement of individual poly-bag packaging for garments with rolling and tying of garment with raffia saved an estimated 431,400 poly-bags in 2010.¹⁰⁵ Paper consumption was reported to have reduced by 15% from 404,500kg in 2007 to 314,483kg in 2010. MEC has discontinued the printing of paper catalogues, which means its carbon footprint from paper use which was 798 tCO₂e in 2010 will be nearly eliminated.¹⁰⁶ This is because catalogue production using paper constituted 96% of MEC's total paper consumption and 18% of its GHG emissions.¹⁰⁷ .
- **Factory Violations:** In 2009, 21% of audited factories (12 of 58) were in violation of MEC's Supplier Code of Conduct. MEC's audit of 51 supplier factories in 2010 identified 425 non-compliance incidents with 50% being health and safety related violations and 25% relating mainly to overtime issues.¹⁰⁸ MEC reveals its audit of suppliers for compliance with the Code revealed no instance of child labour.¹⁰⁹ It works with suppliers to address the root causes of violations observed during annual audits, terminating contract of suppliers who are unwilling to work towards addressing violations, particularly those that relate to what it refers to as "zero tolerance issues".¹¹⁰
- **Collaboration:** MEC entered into a two-year collaborative project to develop a paper catalogue that contained 35% post-consumer waste with New Leaf Paper and Domtar. This initiative lead to the development of an FSC certified EarthCote paper. The company also collaborated with the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) to establish common performance standards regarding social and environmental impacts of product manufacturing.¹¹¹ The Coop worked with Bluesign® to audit its supply chain and chemical usage, developing appropriate solutions for identified risks. The collaboration also lead to MEC encouraging its suppliers to become Bluesign® partners. MEC has set a target date of 2012 for sourcing 70% of its textiles from mills that are Bluesign® partners.¹¹² It also supports community initiatives to protect the environment. The Coop co-founded The Big Wild, an initiative that encourages Canadians and political decision-makers to

¹⁰³ MEC, (2010, p.41).

¹⁰⁴ MEC, (2011).

¹⁰⁵ MEC, (2010, p.24).

¹⁰⁶ MEC, (2010, p.52).

¹⁰⁷ MEC, (2020, p.51-52).

¹⁰⁸ MEC, (2010, p.32).

¹⁰⁹ MEC, (2010, p.32-34).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ MEC, (2005, p.14).

¹¹² MEC, (2009, p. 5) and (2005, p.6).

act to protect Canadian land and water.¹¹³ It has given over of \$17 million in donations in support of conservation projects in Canada.¹¹⁴

10.0 Summary of Analysis and Conclusions

Analysis of MEC's sustainability performance shows that sustainable development represents a win-win-win outcome for society, business and the environment. It demonstrates that responsible consumption of natural resources can be achieved by promoting the development and use of more environmentally benign materials; finding simple and pragmatic ways to reduce, re-use and recycle materials to contain consumption within the carrying capacity of the planet; generating less waste; and eventually reducing society's overall carbon footprints to levels that can be accommodated by planet Earth.

The review of MEC's operations also shows that with clear vision, commitment and collaboration, society's capacity to develop creative and innovative solutions can be unleashed and that more can always be achieved with less. It has brought to the fore the need to reconsider present growth models, which are based on unrestricted exploitation of natural resources such as water, oil and forests and driven mainly by financial profitability considerations with little concern for the ecological consequences and impacts on people. The case for the adoption of sustainability as the preferred model for organising and planning activities has been strengthened, with the Co-op demonstrating that sustainable development can be cost effective and cost-saving. As explained by MEC:

"In our efforts to find a more environmentally benign alternative, we have actually improved the performance aspects of the PFDs. The foam is lighter, more buoyant, and ages better. Best of all, manufacturing it doesn't require the same problematic chemicals as PVC, produces no dioxins if burnt, and is much easier to recycle."¹¹⁵

The sustainability-related challenges going forward will require society to mobilize and harness all of the moral courage, a commitment to changing wasteful production and consumption behaviours, and the political will to disturb the status quo. Governments, businesses, not-for-profit organizations, communities and individuals will need to embrace and model sustainability in all facets of our lives by refining and improving policies, processes and practices based on knowledge and experiences; adopting the precautionary principle/approach where uncertainties exist; and developing and replicating new and best practices through research, learning by doing and collaborating.

To conclude, it can be said that consistent with the conceptual framework presented as part of this case study, the review of MEC's operations has shown that sustainable development is a dynamic,

¹¹³ MEC, (2009, p.16).

¹¹⁴ MEC, (2009.a)

¹¹⁵ MEC, (2005, p.15).

pragmatic and evolving "journey" (with significant benefits) involving re-orientation, continuous learning, and re-configuration of systems, values, processes and approaches to managing the inter-relationship among society, environment and economy. It is such a powerful concept, serving as a framework for thinking strategically with the long term and diverse stakeholder interests in mind; ensuring clarity and sense of purpose; and providing robust pathways to achieving productive, enduring and resilient outcomes that permeate times and generations.

Questions

1. Based on the conceptual and analytical framework of sustainable development presented, discuss how MEC can be said to be practising sustainability. In so doing, identify and analyse key elements of the policies and processes that make the Cooperative sustainable.
2. Identify and analyse MEC's strengths and weaknesses regarding its practice of sustainability.
3. Greenwashing may be defined as a marketing gimmick used by organizations to promote the perception that their objectives and operations are environmentally friendly. In reality, however, such organizations do not make any conscious and sustained effort to improve their policies, processes and practices to reduce their impacts on the environment and society. To what extent can one say that MEC's sustainability performance, as presented in this case study, is not engaged in greenwashing? Analyze and determine that MEC is not involved in greenwashing.
4. What gaps exist in MEC's sustainable development efforts? How can the organisation enhance its sustainability practices?

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