



ZERO IN

WITH THINKZERO

A World of Sustainability

ThinkZero

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What's Next for Sustainability?

Evolution doesn't announce itself.
It just keeps building.

So does sustainable practice —
quietly, persistently, until it's simply the way
things are done.

In this Issue:

Is the Environment still a Priority?
Sustainability Leadership needs an Ethical Backbone
Revisiting Post-Growth Economics

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Janine Dyer



WHAT'S NEXT FOR SUSTAINABILITY?

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Dear reader,

Sustainability has always been a field that asks hard questions. But lately, the questions have been getting harder — and more interesting.

What happens to the global transition when the world's largest economy pulls back from its commitments? Is economic growth still the right goal, or are we optimising for the wrong thing entirely? And how do we build the next generation of leaders who are equipped — technically and ethically — to navigate all of this?

These are the questions that shaped this June edition of Zero In.

We did not set out to be provocative. But in assembling this edition, we found ourselves drawn to both contemporary practitioners of sustainability excellence, as well as some of the voices and ideas that sit at the edges of the mainstream sustainability conversation — not because they are radical for its own sake, but because the centre of that conversation may no longer be sufficient.

The cover of this edition hints at something we kept returning to as we put it together. Is sustainability practice evolving — updating its tools and frameworks as the context shifts? Or is something more fundamental changing — the underlying assumptions about what the economy is for, how it relates to the natural world, and what success actually looks like?

Bridget Beals might say the assumptions were always wrong. The environment and the economy were never separate systems — we just spent decades treating them as

if they were, drawing an artificial line that the data never supported. From that view, what we are doing now is not transformation. It is correction. We are finally treating the world the way it actually works.

Donnie Maclurcan and the Post Growth Institute might offer an alternative view. If the economy we built during those decades was structurally dependent on endless growth, then correction is not enough. The Offers and Needs Market, the Post Growth Fellowship, the Post Growth Alliance — these are not tweaks. They are early prototypes of something genuinely different.

Both of these things can be true at once. And perhaps that is the point.

Tim Kastle reminds us that innovation rarely moves in straight lines. The organisations building capability and experimenting now — even as one of the world's largest economies pulls back from its sustainability commitments — are the ones best placed when the window for change opens wider.

The transition has its own structural gravity. It does not wait for permission.

Being raised in the Caribbean myself, I am acutely aware that, for small island states, the question of livelihoods and where food will actually come from is not philosophical. It is existential. Durable sustainability has to be rooted in ecological relationships and local realities — not just frameworks and disclosure requirements.

The UQ Liveris Academy is investing in the leaders who will carry this forward — equipping the next generation with both the technical fluency and the ethical grounding to make decisions that matter. And in Mackay, a regional emissions data workshop is doing something equally important: sharing analytic “cheat codes” with small businesses, and building the practical infrastructure of the transition, quietly, in places that rarely make headlines.

I have been asked many times what success looks like for a sustainability advisory professional. My answer has not changed:

We will know we have succeeded when we are near-obsolete.

Not because the work is done. But because the values, the systems and the understanding will have been embedded so deeply that organisations will no longer need someone from the outside to tell them what to do.

Think about what happened with safety. Workplace Health and Safety used to be a specialist function that organisations bolted on. Now it is part of the culture of how serious organisations operate. Nobody debates whether safety matters. It is simply how things are done.

In my opinion, that is sustainability's destination. Not just a department. Not just a disclosure. A way of operating so deeply embedded it becomes unremarkable — because it has become everything.

That work requires optimism, but not naivety. It requires pragmatism, but not timidity. And it requires all of us to keep asking better questions.

We hope this issue helps with that.

Sincerely,



Cle-Anne Gabriel



That is **SUSTAINABILITY'S DESTINATION** - a way of operating so **DEEPLY EMBEDDED** it becomes unremarkable - because **IT HAS BECOME EVERYTHING.**

ZERO IN ON
BRIDGET



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE ENVIRONMENT IS NO LONGER THE NUMBER 1, 2 & 3 PRIORITY?

Bridget Beals

Thrive Sustainability, UK

For years, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report was dominated by climate and the environment. Year after year, they occupied the top spots, reinforcing the view that this represented the defining challenge of our time.

More recently, that changed.

Not because climate change was solved. Not because biodiversity loss reversed. Rather, other risks became too large and immediate to ignore.

Geopolitical fragmentation. Conflict. Energy security. Affordability. Social division. Assumptions we've taken for granted since the post-war era have started to unravel.

At an energy security conference I attended recently, an EU politician said:

"Greening the energy system and short-term affordability are not compatible. But we're doing it anyway for energy independence."

Whether you agree or disagree, it was refreshingly honest.

Over the past few years, many of us have argued that decarbonisation and energy security are increasingly aligned. In the medium and long term, I believe the same is true of affordability.

But short term, affordability matters. And pretending otherwise doesn't help anyone.

Here in the UK, the Government is wrestling with difficult choices on defence, welfare spending, public services and growth. And worldwide, governments are navigating a growing list of competing priorities with finite capital and thin political bandwidth.

Against that backdrop, I wonder whether the sustainability industry has become too reluctant to engage with competing priorities.

We have treated the environment, security, competitiveness and growth as **SEPARATE CONVERSATIONS** competing for political attention and capital. Increasingly, they are the **SAME CONVERSATION.**

We don't need to convince people that the environment matters. Most serious decision-makers already accept that. The challenge is demonstrating how environmental solutions fit in a world that is simultaneously grappling with security, competitiveness, affordability and growth.

Because if climate action is seen as conflicting with those priorities, progress will be slower. If it supports them, the conversation changes entirely.

To do this, we must drive investment in energy infrastructure, industrial competitiveness, resilient supply chains and more efficient resource use whilst also addressing many of the affordability, economic and geopolitical challenges that organisations and governments are facing today.

How do we show it? If we take the best of environmental risk modelling and overlay it on a map of the world's agricultural production systems, we would quickly identify regions where drought, water stress and ecosystem degradation threaten the long-term viability. Acting early would not simply reduce environmental risk. It could help strengthen food security, reduce humanitarian spending, limit displacement and support economic stability in vulnerable regions.

But food insecurity, forced migration, political instability and supply chain disruption aren't contained within national borders. They show up in global food prices, public spending, trade flows and geopolitics. In a highly globalised economy, resilience in one region increasingly supports resilience in another.

The same principle applies to growth.

China provides the clearest example. Over the past two decades it has invested heavily in solar manufacturing, battery production and critical mineral supply chains. The result is that many of the industries underpinning the global energy transition have also become sources of export growth, industrial capability and geopolitical influence.

Whether one agrees with China's approach or not, it demonstrates an important principle. Countries that identify major structural shifts and position themselves accordingly are often best placed to capture the resulting economic opportunities.

Viewed through that lens, environmental considerations are not simply tools for managing risk. They also help identify future sources of growth, competitiveness and strategic advantage.

I believe this is where the sustainability debate needs to evolve.

For too long, we have treated the environment, security, competitiveness and growth as separate conversations competing for political attention and capital.

Increasingly, they are the same conversation.

Environmental risk is showing up as food insecurity, migration, supply chain volatility and insurance risk. Equally, many solutions are becoming sources of industrial capability, economic resilience and competitive advantage.

We must mature the conversation on systems level environmental integration, and maintain our seat at the table.

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ANGELA



THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY NEEDS AN ETHICAL BACKBONE

Angela Koning

Equenti Leadership & Learning

One theme I hear repeatedly when speaking with sustainability leaders is that the challenge is no longer simply generating evidence. It is helping people to trust it, and to act upon it.

We are living through a period where information is abundant, but confidence in that information is scarce. Artificial intelligence, social media, political polarisation and competing narratives are causing many people to question what is true, who to believe, and whose interests are being served.

For sustainability professionals, this creates a profound leadership challenge.

The future of sustainability will require more than technical expertise. It will require leaders who can hold the line on evidence while engaging people with empathy, transparency and integrity. Leaders who resist the temptation to amplify fear, sensationalism or ideology, and instead build confidence through credible science, honest dialogue and ethical decision-making.

Increasingly, sustainability professionals are being called upon to serve as an ethical backbone for change - helping governments, businesses and communities navigate complex decisions while remaining grounded in evidence, accountability and long-term thinking.

CSIRO researcher Dr Justine Lacey's work on trust in science highlights an important reality: trust is not a communication problem to be solved by better messaging. It is something that must be earned through responsible innovation, meaningful engagement and demonstrating that science remains connected to societal values and expectations.

Some climate impacts are now unavoidable, and the scale of the sustainability challenge remains significant. Yet I remain optimistic.

The sustainability leaders I meet are not retreating. They are becoming more sophisticated, collaborative and deliberate in how they create change. They understand that long-term progress depends not only on what we know, but on how responsibly we use that knowledge.

In the years ahead, trustworthy science, ethical leadership and a commitment to evidence-based decision-making may prove to be our most important sustainability assets.

Angela Koning is a leadership consultant and executive coach who works with sustainability leaders around the world to help them lead complex change with greater influence, confidence and impact.

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TIM



INNOVATION AND THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Tim Kastle has spent his career studying how organisations change — and more importantly, why so many of them don't.

As one of Australia's leading thinkers on innovation and entrepreneurship, and Director of the UQ Liveris Academy for Innovation and Leadership, Kastle has a front-row seat to both the promise and the frustration of the sustainability transition. His view is characteristically direct: we're applying 20th century management logic to 21st century problems, and it isn't working.

"Real innovation isn't about incremental efficiency gains," he argues. "It's about changing the underlying logic of a system. And right now, the underlying logic of how we produce, consume, measure and value things needs to change profoundly."

The signals of that shift are real, he says. Organisations are beginning to treat their emissions footprint as a strategic lens rather than a compliance checkbox. Young leaders are entering the workforce with sustainability embedded in their worldview — not bolted on as an afterthought. The conversations happening now, compared to a decade ago, are different in kind, not just in degree.

There is also something important in Tim's insistence that innovation is not the exclusive domain of large, well-resourced organisations. Some of the most compelling sustainability transitions he points to are happening at the edges — in regional businesses, civic institutions and community-led initiatives that are experimenting without the safety net of scale. These are the places where new models get tested, refined and eventually adopted more broadly.

Most organisations are still **OPTIMISING** systems that need to be **REIMAGINED**.

For practitioners, the implication is straightforward: don't wait for permission or perfect conditions. The organisations building capability and experimenting now are the ones that will be best positioned when the window for change opens wider.

But the pace of change in thinking hasn't yet matched the pace of change required. Most organisations are still optimising systems that need to be reimaged — a distinction that matters enormously when the window for meaningful action keeps narrowing.

That gap between optimisation and reinvention is precisely what drives the work at the UQ Liveris Academy. The scholars coming through the program aren't being trained to slot into existing structures — they're being challenged to question those structures, to think across disciplines, and to lead with both ambition and humility.

For Kastle, watching those scholars engage with questions about Carbon Literacy — understanding not just the data, but the meaning behind it — is a reminder that the future of sustainability isn't primarily a technology question or a policy question.

It's a leadership question.

And on that front, he's genuinely optimistic.

Tim Kastle is Director of the UQ Liveris Academy for Innovation and Leadership and Professor at the UQ Business School, where he researches innovation, strategy and organisational change.

TOMORROW'S LEADERS LEARN WHAT COUNTS

There's a particular kind of energy in a room full of people who genuinely believe they can change things.

That energy was very much present when ThinkZero recently delivered its Corporate Carbon Literacy program to a cohort of scholars at the UQ Liveris Academy for Innovation and Leadership — a program designed to give emerging leaders not just an understanding of

carbon data, but a fluency in what it means and why it matters.

The Liveris Academy was established at the University of Queensland with the philanthropic support of Andrew Liveris — businessman, chemical engineer and former Dow Chemical CEO — with a founding vision of developing leaders equipped to tackle the defining challenges of our time.





The scholars selected for the program are, by design, not content with business as usual.

Which made them an ideal audience.

Carbon Literacy isn't the most immediately glamorous topic. But in a room like that, it became something else entirely. The questions were sharp. The connections scholars drew — between emissions accounting and economic systems, between data integrity and corporate trust, between individual action and structural change — were exactly the kind that remind practitioners why this work matters.

What stood out wasn't simply what they knew. It was how they were thinking. These are future executives, policymakers, entrepreneurs and advocates who will make decisions shaping Australia's — and the region's — sustainability trajectory. They approached the material with both rigour and genuine curiosity.

That combination is rarer than it should be.

The Liveris Academy is doing something quietly significant: building the human infrastructure the sustainability transition actually needs. Not just better technology or stronger policy frameworks — but the people capable of holding complexity, leading with integrity, and acting with urgency.

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DONNIE

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THE ECONOMIST WHO THINKS GROWTH IS THE WRONG GOAL

Most economic conversations begin with the same unspoken assumption: that growth is good, more is better, and the goal of a healthy economy is an expanding one. Donnie Maclurcan has spent the better part of two decades quietly, persistently asking what happens when you pull that assumption apart.

Maclurcan is a social entrepreneur, researcher and co-founder of the Post Growth Institute — an organisation built on the conviction that the pursuit of endless economic growth is not just unsustainable, but fundamentally incompatible with the kind of future most of us say we want.

What makes Donnie's perspective particularly useful — even for those not ready to fully embrace the post-growth framing — is his refusal to treat economic transformation as purely theoretical. He is interested in what works now, in real communities, with real constraints. The Offers and Needs Market, the Post Growth Fellowship, the growing Post Growth Alliance — these are not thought experiments. They are practical attempts to demonstrate that a different kind of economy is already emerging, quietly, in the gaps left by the dominant model.

His thinking sits firmly within the tradition of ecological economics — a discipline that treats the economy not as a self-contained system to be optimised, but as something embedded within, and ultimately dependent on, the natural world. Where conventional economics asks, "how do we grow the pie?", ecological economics asks, "how big should the pie actually be?"

It's a deceptively simple reframe — and a profoundly disruptive one.

For Maclurcan, the shift from growth economics to post-growth thinking isn't about austerity or decline. It's about sufficiency — the idea that economies can be designed to meet human needs well, without requiring perpetual expansion to do so. Think less of the relentless upward curve, and more of a system in dynamic balance: regenerative, distributive, and genuinely sustainable.

What makes Maclurcan's work distinctive is that it doesn't stop at critique. Where many economists identify the problem and leave the reader staring into the void, he is actively building alternatives — practical, working models of what a post-growth economy looks like on the ground.

That work is what the Post Growth Institute exists to do.

"The goal isn't a smaller economy. It's a different kind of economy entirely."

It's a distinction worth sitting with — especially as the limits of the current model become more obvious.

Whether or not you share Donnie's conclusions, the questions he is asking are ones the sustainability field can no longer afford to ignore.

It's about **SUFFICIENCY** — the idea that economies can be designed to **MEET HUMAN NEEDS** well, without requiring perpetual expansion to do so.

BUILDING THE ECONOMY WE ACTUALLY NEED



What does an alternative economy actually look like – not in theory, but in practice? The Post Growth Institute (PGI) has been working on that question since 2010, and its answer is characteristically hands-on:

You don't just imagine the new economy, you build it.

Founded by Donnie Maclurcan and colleagues, PGI operates at the intersection of ecological economics, activism and practical experimentation. Its starting premise is straightforward — that an economy premised on infinite growth on a finite planet is a logical impossibility, and that the more interesting work lies in designing what comes next. But PGI is not primarily a think tank. It is, at its core, an organisation that builds things.

The Offers and Needs Market

One of PGI's most tangible initiatives is the Offers and Needs Market – a structured community exchange that turns the conventional market logic on its head.

Rather than beginning with price and transaction, the Offers and Needs Market begins with people: what do you have to offer, and what do you genuinely need?

Participants bring skills, resources, time, knowledge, and the market facilitates connections between them, without money as the mediating force.

It sounds simple. In practice, it's a working demonstration of something economists have long theorised but rarely built: a market organised around sufficiency rather than surplus. Communities across multiple countries have now run Offers and Needs Markets, and the model continues to spread through organic, peer-to-peer adoption.

The Post Growth Fellowship

For those who want to go deeper, PGI offers the Post Growth Fellowship – a structured program bringing together emerging thinkers, practitioners and changemakers from around the world to explore post-growth ideas and develop their own work within that frame.

The Fellowship is deliberately international and deliberately diverse. It draws participants from economics, ecology, community development, policy, design and the arts – reflecting PGI's conviction that the transition to a post-growth economy is not a single-discipline problem. Fellows leave not just with

ideas, but with a network of peers working on adjacent challenges across different contexts and sectors.

It is PGI's investment in the next generation of sustainability leaders.

The Post Growth Alliance

At the network level, PGI convenes the **Post Growth Alliance** – a growing coalition of organisations, initiatives and individuals who share the post-growth orientation and are working, in their own ways, toward an economy that works within ecological limits.

The Alliance is a **commons of aligned effort** – a place where organisations that might otherwise work in isolation can find each other, share resources and amplify each other's work. In a field that can sometimes feel fragmented, it serves a connective function that is easy to underestimate.

Activism as Imagination

What ties all of PGI's work together is a particular understanding of what activism means. For PGI, activism is not primarily about opposition – about what we're against. It's about **imagination and construction** – about what we're building toward.

In a sustainability landscape often dominated by incremental improvement within existing systems, that's a genuinely different posture. PGI isn't asking whether we can make the current economy a little less damaging. It's asking what a fundamentally different economy looks like – and then doing the work of building it, one market, one fellowship, one alliance at a time.



15 YEARS
POST GROWTH INSTITUTE



GETTING THE DATA RIGHT: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Carbon accounting can feel abstract – until you're sitting in a room with a sugar producer, a recycling company, a blasting contractor and an engineering firm, all trying to figure out what's actually in their electricity bill.

That was the scene at the Shamrock Hotel in Mackay on 23 June, where ThinkZero delivered an Emissions Data Workshop as part of the GW3 Decarbonisation Accelerated ESG Masterclass and Mentoring Series. It's a program supporting up to 20 small and medium businesses across the Greater Whitsunday region to move from ESG awareness into genuine action.

The event brought together a genuinely diverse cross-section of regional businesses each at a different stage of their emissions journey. The businesses spanned industries as varied as engineering, recycling, community services, agriculture and specialist contracting – each grappling with a version of the same fundamental challenge:

Where do you actually start?

The answer, it turns out, is simpler than most expect.

The event walked participants through the basics of greenhouse gas accounting – Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions – before getting practical fast.

The framing was deliberate: you don't need to understand carbon accounting theory before you walk in the door. You just need to bring your bills.

In essence, Cle-Anne Gabriel gave the businesses her scope 3 accounting cheat sheet.

Businesses worked through their own data in real time: electricity accounts, fuel records, fleet information, supplier invoices, freight spend. A purpose-built planning template helped participants organise what they had, identify what was missing, and understand the difference between activity data, spend-based estimates and the gaps that can be filled in later.





The message throughout was deliberately unglamorous: organise before you calculate. Use the best available data, not perfect data. Year one is about building a baseline, not achieving perfection.

For many participants, it was the first time they had looked at their operations through an emissions lens. The questions that emerged were telling — about the complexity of Scope 3, where to find spend-based emission factors, how to communicate ESG progress to customers and suppliers, and what "good" actually looks like for a regional SME without a dedicated sustainability team or an in-house data analyst.

Those questions matter. They reflect both the genuine appetite for action that exists in regional business communities and the very real methodological uncertainty that sits underneath it. Most businesses in the Greater Whitsunday region aren't struggling with motivation. They're struggling with **where to begin** and **what good enough looks like**. That's precisely the gap this program is designed to close.

This work continues across the region, with ThinkZero remaining as a mentor to participating businesses throughout the remainder of the program. ThinkZero will be supporting them to move from data collection into analysis, and from analysis into decisions that actually reduce emissions.

Because the data is only ever the beginning.



4 THINGS WE'RE LEARNING ABOUT AI AND SUSTAINABILITY DATA

AI is arriving in sustainability practice faster than most teams are ready for. The tools are genuinely useful. But the biggest risks are not technical – they are organisational. Bad inputs, unclear ownership and misplaced confidence in outputs are creating problems across emissions accounting, nature disclosure, circularity assessments and ecosystem monitoring alike.

1: GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT – STILL

AI amplifies what is already there – good or bad. Organisations feeding poorly defined or unverified data into AI-assisted platforms are getting faster answers, but not necessarily better ones. A clean dashboard can actually make underlying data problems harder to detect.

Practical move: Audit your inputs first. What is being measured? By whom? How often? This applies whether you are tracking tonnes of CO₂, hectares of habitat or material recovery rates.

2: ACCOUNTABILITY DOESN'T AUTOMATE

AI tools expose ownership gaps that were previously hidden by manual workarounds. When a platform generates a disclosure-ready output – for a climate report, a TNFD disclosure or a circularity assessment – someone still has to stand behind it. If that accountability is unclear before the tool is deployed, it remains unclear after.

Practical move: Assign decision rights before selecting tools. Who approves assumptions? Who reviews outputs? Who signs off?

3: EFFICIENCY ≠ ACCURACY

AI tools are very good at making things faster. They are less reliably good at making things right. An AI-generated Scope 3 estimate or biodiversity impact assessment is only as robust as the methodology and data beneath it – and regulators are beginning to ask exactly those questions.

Practical move: Treat AI outputs as a starting point. Build review steps that test assumptions and verify boundary decisions – the places automated tools most quietly introduce error.

4: THE GREENWASHING RISK IS REAL – AND EVOLVING

AI makes it easier to produce sustainability content at scale. It is also creating new greenwashing risk. AI-generated narratives built on incomplete data, overstated circularity claims or nature-positive commitments without credible baselines look polished and move fast through approval processes – which is exactly what regulators and civil society are getting better at identifying.

Practical move: If you cannot explain the methodology, verify the inputs and defend the conclusions, the output is not ready – regardless of how it looks.

A SIMPLE PRINCIPLE

Understand before you automate.

The organisations getting genuine value from these tools know their data well enough to recognise when an output looks wrong. They treat AI as a capability multiplier, not a capability substitute.

Tools are not the problem. Reaching for them before foundations are in place is.

LOOKING AHEAD

Working on Climate Governance and Disclosures? Navigating questions about Circularity and Nature?

WORKING THROUGH THESE QUESTIONS IN YOUR ORGANISATION?

Three Ways to Engage:

- [Book us](#) for a one-hour AASB S2 Skills and Capabilities session with your Board and Executive Team.
- Explore ThinkZero's case studies [here](#).
- Book a conversation [here](#).

WHEN YOU'RE READY:



CONTACT US

- Ask us about the global ["Implementing ESG Strategy" program with Harvard Business Impact](#)
- Ask us about our ThinkZero Greenwashing Risk Assessment©
- Ask us how we can help with your Climate Change Report, including emissions inventories, climate risk assessment, and net zero planning.

ADVISORY@THINKZERO.CO

THINKZERO.CO



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