

# Clemson's Restoration Institute poised to catch new wave of economic growth

A few years ago I was invited to a meeting to hear Storm Cunningham, author of "The Restoration Economy," speak about the coming economic revolution that would be sparked by the need for countries and communities around the world to be better stewards of the environments where we live and earn our livelihoods.



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Asked what I thought about the presentation, I commented that it would be hard for many people to wrap their minds around Cunningham's message.

What is a "restoration economy" anyway? No simple definition will suffice, but here's my take:

Historically, especially in this country, development of almost any kind has been based on abundant natural resources and vast expanses of developable land that could be used with abandon. But there's a big price to pay for that approach in terms of pollution and wasted resources, and the world is reaching a tipping point where the costs of runaway consumption have begun to clearly outweigh the benefits.

At the most fundamental level, our inability to wean ourselves off fossil fuels may radically alter the Earth's climate for the worst and eventually force billions of people to retreat from low-lying coastal land as sea levels rise. Beyond that, we continue in many other ways to "foul our nest" and damage the environment that supports us and must support future generations.

A "restoration economy" is one in which society and business engage in a concerted effort to create a prosperous and healthy economy that reuses and restores all kinds of resources, including buildings, lands, watersheds and materials, allowing us to

minimize the destructive impact on our local and global environments while still enjoying the fruits of our labor.

The countries of Western Europe have often, but not always, been leaders in focusing on restoration and reuse of both urban and rural environments. Typically, Europeans use less energy, occupy less physical space and waste far fewer resources than we do in our country. Yet they generally enjoy good health and "the good life," even if the scale of their material wealth is less than ours. Europeans have by and large learned to reuse, recycle and restore their centuries-old towns and cities and adapt them to modern life.

## The economic wave of the present (and future)

Take a look at this front-page lead-in to a recent story in *BusinessWeek* magazine:

*"Imagine a world in which socially responsible and eco-friendly practices actually boost a company's bottom line. It's closer than you think."*

The article goes on to describe how giant multi-national corporations have begun to focus aggressively on the "sustainability" of their operations in terms of the products and services they sell and the resources they use in conducting their businesses. Sustainability, says the article, is about meeting humanity's needs without harming future generations, and it is fast becoming a mainstream issue for leading corporations.

## Restoration Institute poised to 'catch the wave'

Now I'm going to give you a homework assignment: Go to the Web site for the Clemson Restoration Institute: [restoration.clemson.edu](http://restoration.clemson.edu). In the site's clear and concise presentation, you can read about the institute's mission and leadership, the planned 82-acre North Charleston Research Park and the institute's major areas of work: historic preservation, healthy communities, advanced materials and

restoration ecology.

Reading through the descriptive materials on the site will take about 10 minutes. That's all it should take to convince you that the research park and the institute can be engines of economic growth for the state and the Charleston region. If you're not convinced, read it again. If you're still not convinced, call me.

It's important to see the Restoration Institute as part of another vital and promising trend: Our state's three research universities (Clemson, MUSC and USC) are becoming sparkplugs for innovation and economic development around the state. Their leadership is dynamic and their capabilities are growing by the day. They are becoming to our state what Stanford is to Silicon Valley or Duke, UNC and N.C. State are to North Carolina's Research Triangle.

Listen up, folks, this is "really good stuff!" It's new, it's exciting and we all need to get behind initiatives like Clemson's Restoration Institute and USC's Future Fuels program, to name just two examples.

Collaboration is another watchword in this new academic environment. Clemson engineers and MUSC researchers are combining forces to do work that neither institution could do before. The Lowcountry Graduate Center offers training previously unavailable in our region thanks to Clemson and USC.

It's been exciting for me personally to learn more about what our state's leading schools are cooking up to spur innovation and economic growth. A nod is due to the General Assembly for creating the Endowed Chairs program to help lure top research talent to the schools. That program is working and needs to be continued and strengthened.

How do you fit in? If you're in business in South Carolina, you owe it to yourself to be informed about the programs and initiatives being pursued by our state's higher education institutions. There's not a better or more important investment we can make in the future of our state. ■