

I Am Having Enormous Difficulty With My Lifestyle: My Struggle with the Culture of Ecological Sustainability.

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“I am having enormous difficulty with my lifestyle.”

Arthur Dent
in *Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (Adams 1980)

Introduction

This paper explores some key issues and questions concerning the cultural gaps between the current lifestyles of our communities and possible cultures of ecological sustainability, beginning with the personal. It also considers how people sustain their behaviours and technologies where they live; further it considers cultural factors which create obstacles to sustainable behaviours; and finally, it explores whether the modern technological cultural paradigm driving most of our development (and its subsequent ecological destruction) is capable of the paradigm shift needed to develop a culture of sustainability.

Questions of Culture

In a previous paper (Parnell 2001), I developed contentions regarding the synergies hidden amongst things that are widely known and studied:

- Culture
- Relationships and Connectedness
- Technology
- Place and Economy
- Learning and Personal Capacity
- The Process of Development

I believe, from my experience in working with people and technology, that these factors, working synergistically, have the potential to foster sustainable development. In the paper referred to above, I outlined some questions that places culture at the heart of the sustainability agenda, and which will be explored further here:

- Do cultural factors help people sustain behaviours and technologies?
- Do cultural factors create obstacles to the adoption of sustainable behaviours?
- Can the Western technological cultural paradigm bring about the cultural change necessary for sustainability, when it has largely been responsible for global unsustainability?

In the literature of the sustainability agenda, there are relatively few references to culture and its significance for sustainability. Perhaps because I am reflecting on cultural issues, I have noticed in recent times that some writers are turning their thoughts toward cultural factors of sustainability. This is an inevitable path for anyone who has been an advocate for ESD, especially in the rational realms of science and technology, and who has experienced deep frustration in the slow pace of change.

To illustrate this point, having been an advocate of ESD issues for over 20 years, including writing a book on solar housing (Parnell and Cole 1983), it has been an on-going source of frustration for me that simple technical solutions which would make housing energy efficient, make it more healthy and more comfortable and reduce global warming, are generally not adopted by housing consumers and the housing industry. The increase in the average house size and appliance expectation shows that money is not the problem. It is not ignorance – these ideas have been around for some time, and are regularly featured on numerous television lifestyle programs (usually as a separate lifestyle choice just as picking paint colours, choosing which café to have lunch at, or wearing expensive running shoes are lifestyle choices). It must be something else; I believe it is largely cultural.

While these thoughts arise out of my experience of people with housing issues, I believe that they are indicative of how people develop their attitudes towards environmental issues generally.

Personal Declarations/Personal Culture

Culture is ultimately personal because we absorb so many different cultures as we grow, develop and mature; such a cocktail of cultural milieux tends towards the unique. In my experience working in a cross-cultural environment with an Indigenous NGO in Central Australia, there was an opportunity to observe many cultural worlds colliding. Culture can be so personal that it is difficult for an individual to perceive their own culture if not consciously looked for:

“Anyone who discusses modern culture has to do a great deal of contemplating of the invisible in the obvious.” (Harbison 1989:xiii)

There must be many aspects of my life that represent deep and invisible culture; although experience combined with an open mind tends to bring such material to the surface. For example, my experience with Indigenous people in remote communities has highlighted for me certain cultural baggage that I either wasn't aware of or was in denial about. (Ignorance, racism, insensitivity, and so on). Similarly, travelling in Third World countries has a tendency to highlight my status and culture as a rich, white, Western male.

At the risk of being confessional, some of my cultures can be described variously as:

- Anglo-Celtic white
- Male
- Sydney northern beaches surfer

- Catholic (lapsed)
- Middle class
- Wealthy
- Post-hippie
- Over-educated Intellectual
- Hearty outdoorsy Tree-hugging, duck-squeezing Tasmanian greenie
- Problem-solving outcomes oriented
- Rugby-mad
- Rough Tough Building Professional (I know everything)
- Frustrated improvising musician and drummer
- Technophile
- Technophobic/Neo Luddite
- Materialistic
- Ascetic

It's a wonder I can get out of bed in the morning as I could probably add many more to the list. As I reflect on the mix of these cultures, I can see that some are quite obvious when they kick-in, and indeed, when doing a building project, the Rough Tough Building Professional (I Know Everything) Culture is more useful than most others. But for the most part, I am not conscious of what might be driving my behaviours at any given time. The making of such lists is an interesting analytical tool, but ultimately of questionable value:

“Consciousness is never a series of separate departments. It is a unity, a single identity that is a product of all the influences that have shaped it, which is to say that it is the end result of everything that makes up the culture.....By the same token, there are not fifteen cultures or even two cultures: there is one culture. It is the culture we inhabit. It shaped our consciousness as we grew up, and it continues to influence us throughout life in ways we perceive and in ways of which we are largely unconscious.” (Harbison 1989:xiii)

Personal Sustainability

The line of thinking presented in this paper has caused me to attempt to make visible my own cultures and behaviours and examine them in a fresh way. The reasons for dwelling on my personal cultures is to highlight that for all my education and experience, I *am* having enormous difficulty with my lifestyle: What is it about my life that has made it difficult to live sustainably, *even though I am consciously biased towards such notions?* And more to the point, if someone who is so favourably disposed is having difficulty in changing behaviours, what does that mean for people who are not similarly disposed, particularly when the movement to sustainability requires behaviour change on a global scale?

These questions have significance from the local through to the global. Yet my personal experience highlights how difficult it is to manifest behaviour change.

I have lived the “purist” green existence at several stages of my life, reducing my needs to the barest minimum, and using minimum amounts of energy, the bulk of it being renewable. I have lived with no running water, basic sanitation and a very small ecological footprint, as a cliff-dweller in a depression era hut overlooking the entrance to Sydney Harbour. I hitch-hiked in lieu of a car as often as I could, even while living in a remote valley in the Hunter region of NSW. When I bought

a car during this period it was small and energy efficient. I felt very self-satisfied about my choices, my voluntary simplicity and being more thoughtful and environmentally aware than most. Yet I have never thrown myself in front of a bulldozer, or chained myself, *Chipko*¹-style, to a tree.

Life moves, priorities change to meet the demands of work, the drive to gain experience of the way the wider world works, and the needs of relationships and family, with considerations other than the purist. There are also the inevitable maturing views that the purist position is a middle class luxury or a reason to disengage with the world; it certainly is not a realistic solution to our ecological crisis.

“While I have nothing against religion in general or environmental religion in particular, I do fear the religious intensity that so often infects members of an idealistic generation. . . . Whereas social progress demands broad inclusion, radicalism excludes all persons judged sinful – or, in the current jargon, politically incorrect. Where workable solutions to social and environmental problems require compromise, radicalism calls for implementing one’s own program while vanquishing those of one’s rivals.” (Lewis, 1992:249)

I feel that I have absorbed much that could be described as green culture, but am yet to make it a solid part of my behaviour.

I live in a thermally inefficient house requiring substantial quantities of electrical energy and biomass to keep it comfortable for eight months of the year. I currently drive a thirty year-old gas-guzzler 20km to work which also pumps out lots of pollution (and until LRP, lots of lead) and greenhouse gases. We also have a van for family use. I live on an idyllic half-hectare block, very much in the landscape, close to lots of native animals and water birds; I am cursed with lots of introduced grass species that needs mowing by a ride-on mower or slashing with a petrol-powered brushcutter. I don’t have time or patience to manage a flock of ungulates, who cannot keep pace with the growth when it really needs cutting. I do not use the convenient, but limited, public transport that will pick up and deliver at the front gate, because of timing and connection issues.

While, as an academic, I am on a good income, I also have a mortgage, and like anyone hovering on the verge of financial over-commitment, I am having trouble sustaining my place and my technology: I can’t afford to maintain essential transport, only the barest minimum servicing to keep the cars moving; when the TV or video breaks down, it stays broken for some time. There are several other broken non-essential appliances and lots of blunt tools that are yet to be fixed. I find that the management of the land is a major drain on time, and contributes to wear and tear on equipment. In three years I have not managed to improve the land, to regenerate the bush, improve bio-diversity, re-introduce bush tucker and reduce the introduced plant species.

The grand plans of making the house energy efficient, and a low producer of greenhouse gas, have been put on hold indefinitely; so too the solar hot water

¹ A grassroots anti-logging group in the Himalayan foothills who would chain themselves to trees as a form of protest.

system, the greywater recycling and the rainwater collection. Even the technological fix, while straightforward in conception, is not possible at this time.

The main outcome of this situation has been that I have been engaged in a very deep relationship with my piece of country while meditating on these themes astride the ride-on or while swinging the brushcutter. Most of my thinking that informs this paper is a summary of insights that have arisen during these times. In my most positive outlook on this situation, I feel that while I have not done much to further my personal ecological sustainability outcomes, I am nevertheless connecting with my place, feeling the ecological cycles, watching the tides in the Tamar river as they expose the muddy banks, rejoicing at the snow on Mt Barrow, feeling the space and the depth of the rolling hills in the distance and celebrating the afternoon light, the fog and the rainbows. This is part of my cultural change, and indicative of my personal capacity and current sustainability.

I believe this issue is central to ecological sustainability: behavioural and cultural change, at the personal level, where we live. One day I may just behave consistently with my green beliefs.

The Trajectory of History

In spite of my personal situation alluded to above, I have always believed that people, societies and cultures can change for the better: the improvement in human rights, equality for women, social justice, reduction in poverty and conflict in recent decades in some parts of the world is testament to that.

While meditating in uneven circular patterns during many mowing sessions, a theme occurring consistently is how personal sustainability is linked to the global sustainability prospect. There seems to be a series of intersecting domains that go way beyond our daily life in our local communities, dwarfing our aspirations. However, I have found a number of points of view that have helped me appreciate the trajectory of history, and the implications such a trajectory has for the sustainability movement in a globalised world:

- Clive Ponting has elaborated at length on the connections between cultural and technological development and the collapse of many societies through history as a result of environmental overshoot and collapse. (Ponting 1993)
- Jared Diamond approaches history from a different perspective: geography and environment are the prime drivers of cultural and technological sophistication, and that many things we take for granted as “natural” are the result of sustained co-evolution of humanity and environment over long time frames. Further, very few technological improvements have been made independently: most are appropriated from somewhere else. Cultures that have flourished have been ones that have a tendency to adopt innovative technologies, to the extent that they often absorb neighbouring cultures. (Diamond 1998)
- Frank Wilson demonstrates compellingly that, in an evolutionary sense, what we as humans are today, particularly in terms of brain structure and function is

as a result of co-evolution of the hand with tool usage: that is, we are inherently technological beings.(Wilson 1999)

- Stewart Brand elaborates on the concept of *deep time* and the *long view* as a counterpoint to short-term thinking, and proposes that human development is intimately linked with time cycles that range from the immediate and fashionable to others that allow for long term cultural change. (Brand 1999)
- O.B.Harbison Jr , reviewing the relationship of culture to technology, has identified that technology, and communication technology in particular, is intimately connected to human cultural development in a movement that is, in the long view, continuous. (Harbison 1989)

These writers, taken collectively, may perhaps indicate that there is a trajectory of history, which has had its own unknown, unconscious power which will be the only long term sustainability; as to whether this sustained power results in *ecological* sustainability in the short, medium or long terms, while a compelling and necessary aspiration, is anybody's guess.

The conclusions I reach on reflecting on these combined viewpoints is uncomfortable for me, and goes counter to my usually desperate sense of optimism.

This trajectory of history could conceivably go in opposite directions: a positive one where technological innovation for sustainability is possible and successful (the technical fix approach); and where cultural change is possible, with successful cultures being the one's who adapt their behaviours (using the power of the trajectory) to stave off ecological collapse. The negative outcome is that the world overshoots and its ecological systems collapse at a rate faster than local and global cultures can respond.

Culture, Behaviour and Lifestyle

While some of us are in denial, the issues of the environment are covered and discussed widely in the media, on the Internet, in triple-bottom-line corporate reporting; and not just in the developed world. Environmental education in schools has been occurring for some time now; whether people agree with the full prognosis of impending ecological catastrophe and the worst-case scenarios does not alter the fact that most are aware of the situation and have some kind of viewpoint on the matter.

“Society built sprawled development, and with it a gargantuan dependence on cars, oil, vast acreage of raw land, millions of tons of asphalt, trillions of dollars, billions of wasted hours and half a million lives expunged globally every year in car wrecks. It's an amazing story because we are STILL not confronting what it means to rebuild and reshape our society.” (Register 2002)

And, still, the changes to behaviour and cultural absorption of those changes lags, to the extent that most ecologically positive changes tend to be small, unconnected, of a “boutique” or enthusiast nature, and small change compared to

the rampant, headlong development still occurring here, in North America and particularly in Asian countries, such as China.

Ecological ideas may spring from a base of ecological culture, but more often via a pragmatic or cynical hedging of bets on the future, and the potential profits, political or economic, that may arise. This is the culture of self-interest and domination, not ecological sustainability.

The key to understanding the change of behaviour lies in the understanding of how people sustain their behaviours over long periods of time: that is, their life as lived, whether by conscious choice or not. People may be influenced by fashion in short cycles. Occasionally this benefits environmental issues – there have been at least three cycles of ecological fashion since the early seventies that I have experienced.

Most people, including myself, tend to be habitual beings. Life is too complex to think about what one does and its ecological effects. Yet most of us find our own level of life, with ups and downs. We don't cope well with change, risk or lack of security. We keep doing our thing, and maybe only change over long spans of years. Finding our own level of sustainability (ecological or not) is largely an unconscious process. Raising the energy to sustain a higher order of conscious activity is a difficult task for all.

This is where the cultural aspect is important: I think culture and behaviour interact in a systemic way. Some conscious behaviours by individuals or groups are acted out at key leverage points in systems, and can have a wider effect: change of policy, legislation, improvement of service delivery, facilitation of environmentally positive behaviour by wider groups of people. These kinds of interventions in the system can change culture, making it easier for people to raise the energy of their behaviour and improve their overall lifestyle with little conscious effort:

“So any system which is to serve as a type of common platform must be articulated at low levels of preciseness.” (Naess 2000)

The overall capacity of communities to sustain, in terms of personal and group effort, any form of systematic, self-organising behaviour is a prerequisite for sustaining ecology; but no guarantee of the desired outcome.

There are many prescriptions for making things different, from Naess' humble request for us to develop our personal ecosophies (Naess, 2000) Karl-Henrik Robert's Natural Step² process to Government pamphlets advising us politely: all part of the cultural change, but perhaps too distant from most people. There are also uncounted checklists of “how to save the planet”, which are worthy, entertaining and diverting, and useful for those consciously embarking on cultural change, but which usually don't amount to much.

² A framework identifying steps needed to move to sustainability using a “backcasting”.

Case Study: Housing in a Western Desert Community

Further to the question of how people sustain behaviours is the question of how people sustain the technologies that support settlement and placemaking. Answers to both questions are crucial for ecologically sustainable development.

Since 1995, I have participated in housing and infrastructure development in a remote indigenous community in the Western Desert region of Central Australia. This experience has identified for me the problems implicit in the relationship of technology and local culture in small communities. People in such communities have, for the most part, not been participants in the process of technology selection and implementation, while being responsible for sustaining such technologies. Many of the technologies transferred to communities have not considered local cultures and their ways of living. Such technologies fail regularly and have proved very difficult to sustain.

Note that I make no claims to be speaking on behalf of the people of the Western Desert. The identity and location of the community is not stated to protect their privacy.

Local Cultural Practice and Housing Usage

The concept of a western-style town plan and its associated housing and infrastructure sits oddly with local needs and behaviours. There is an aspect of equity (albeit from a shallow interpretation) driving the process, such that western-style housing is built within a town plan unmindful of living preferences and practices which are acted out. Local people are exposed to images of western-style housing through the housing provided to community staff, on trips to Alice Springs, on satellite TV and videos. This contributes to a local housing aspiration, building up pictures of what constitutes “housing”, without consideration of the differences in lifestyles between mainstream and remote indigenous communities.

Houses are a focal point of the family camp, often merely serving as a cupboard and ablution facility, and mainly providing shelter during rainy periods, cold weather and dust storms. Much of the living occurs outside the enclosed area.

Living practices which are at odds with housing design includes: preference for spending most time in shaded and protected outdoor living areas and yard spaces; overcrowding of houses caused by fluctuating numbers of occupants/users (depending on who is visiting, whether a particular house is the centre for extended family business, or the need to provide temporary security for people from elsewhere in the community); insufficient toilet and ablution facilities; inadequate laundry facilities; lack of safe, secure and healthy food and personal storage space; insufficient (and even non-existent) food preparation areas; traditional bush tucker preparation and cooking on open fires (considerable robust bench space is needed to effectively cut up a kangaroo). Conventional housing also provides obstacles to the ability to keep a clear view of people coming or going, and thus makes it more difficult for occupants to maintain control of access to their living space and yard areas. Another area to consider is the accelerated wear and tear caused by social problems within the community,

where hardware and building fabric become the safety valves/focal points for anger, frustration and anti-social behaviour brought about by family breakdown, petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse (whenever brought in to what is an otherwise “dry” community). Further, the lack of activities and programs to reduce boredom for children has a flow-on effect in creating behaviours contributing to damage of such items as glazing in solar water heater collectors.

The result of the combination of housing aspirations with acted behaviours is that the majority of housing in this community struggles to provide suitable support for local lifestyles. Things wear out and break down quickly.

Obstacles To Maintenance

Given such local conditions and behaviours as described above, maintaining houses in a minimal functioning condition is a constant challenge for this community. For the life of this community there has been a chronic shortfall in available funding. Most funded housing programs are for capital works only, and handed over to community responsibility on completion. The community is required to collect rents to pay for maintenance, but even if the full amount of rent is collected for each house in a given year, the cost of maintenance exceeds it. Collecting rent is problematic: people have been reluctant to pay rent on houses which have not been maintained, creating a vicious circle leading to, in some cases, total failure to maintain healthy living.

Towards Sustainability Culture

This experience in adopting Western technologies to meet the needs of an indigenous culture has great lessons for the global sustainability agenda. Implicit in these technology transfer processes is the transfer of superior technology under the mastery of the transferring culture. In terms of the sustainable development agenda, the existence of global environmental problems, caused by modern technological development, demonstrate that we have not achieved the mastery implicit in the technology transfer process. We fool ourselves about our technological mastery.

If possible, feedback to the mainstream of the remote community experience is a kind of “reverse technology transfer” that may help the wider world understand its relationship to technology and its embedded culture, and thus may help to foster development of technologies closer to the aspirations and world view of local cultures, bringing sustainability closer.

This experience has dramatically altered my personal world-view, and has been instrumental in helping to frame the issues investigated in this paper.

“Cultural evolution should not be understood, any more than biological evolution, in terms of movement from bad to good or good to better. Its absolute direction is best symbolized by an arrow pointing down a dark corridor.” (Harbison 1989:288)

This seems a negative, but realistic, point of view if we pay attention to the trajectories of history: whatever it is we try to do to change culture, the outcome may not be what we envisaged.

Given the uniqueness of the current global situation with respect to globalised economies, global megatechnologies, unprecedented population and the pace of material development, it is difficult to say whether the trajectory of history described above would still apply. Without the benefit of a crystal ball, we must assume that the development of a culture of sustainability must come from within this trajectory, otherwise we would be in a difficult struggle against our deep, hidden and environmentally co-evolved tendencies.

There are many obstacles that prevent change from happening, and these are well articulated by McKenzie-Mohr among others:

“Research indicates that each form of sustainable behaviour has its own sets of barriers and benefits. For example, the factors that impede individuals from composting are quite different from those that preclude more sustainable forms of transportation. Even with apparently closely associated activities such as recycling, composting and source reduction, different sets of barriers and benefits have been found to be important.....multiple barriers and benefits may exist for any form of sustainable behaviour.” (McKenzie-Mohr 2002)

On reflection, it seems to me that the following are the major obstacles to developing a sustainability culture:

- the energy input needed to raise the collective level of unconscious behaviour, especially against the trends of desire and consumption, and our co-evolutionary tendencies.
- finding appropriate points of leverage for intervening in systems, and then having the time, energy and capacity to direct efforts at these points
- sufficient time for systemic feedback to demonstrate that energy levels and leverage is working

How can sustainable behaviour be fostered in a way to get over these obstacles? Social entrepreneurs are at work everywhere, in communities, organisations, institutions, corporations and governments. They are talking it up, designing programs and technologies, promoting, educating and politicking. They are developing processes such as Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM) (McKenzie-Mohr 2001) and Robert Chamber’s Participation-Reflection-Action (PRA)³ and others to build capacity and foster sustainable behaviour.

All these outputs of individuals and small groups cannot be measured in a broad cultural sense, although specific actions that lead to ecological improvements can be measured.

So, given these obstacles, all the energy-raising and leverage, the contested meanings of sustainability and its over-use as jargon, what would sustainability culture be like?

Sustainability culture, in maturity, must feel as comfortable and unregarded as our current personal cultures, a “second nature”.

³ A sustainable development process, applied in the developing world for more than 30 years, fostering grass-roots solutions to local sustainability issues.

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