

## **Strategic Sustainability Discussion Paper**

### **A Story About Sustainability: a personal perspective**

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This paper has been written by sustainability facilitator Sally MacKinnon as a discussion starter for the Scenic Rim's Strategic Sustainability Forum on November 18 2010.

*Tell me the story of the river and the valley and the streams and woodlands and wetlands, of shellfish and finfish. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and roles that we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings us together in a valley community, a story that brings together the human community with every living being in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night...*

*Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth*

#### **The future belongs to the most compelling story**

It has been suggested that stories have the power to craft cultures, whole civilizations and perhaps, the future itself because of their ability to win human hearts and minds and as a result, catalyse behaviours and actions.

In these interesting times where our economies, communities, governments and natural environments often feel vulnerable and brittle, we are all in need of new stories to help us more clearly see our challenges and opportunities in ways that lead to wise, ethical joined-up thinking and collaborative, effective action.

We need stories that are inspiring, energising, optimistic, compelling and authentic. We need stories that not only help us reflect and learn but also inspire us to create our future together in processes of innovation, participation, learning-in-action and growth.

International business sustainability thinker and author Paul Hawken says that humankind has an unlimited capacity to create new narratives and that "...a society capable of naming itself lives within its stories, inhabiting and furnishing them. We ride stories like rafts, or lay them out on the table like maps...because stories are greater than we are, their capacious narratives give us wiggle room to dream...our families and communities connect us to the old and new stories, and guide us to lean into the light" (p25, 26; 2007).

Good stories when created and developed collectively, also have the potential to "solve for pattern" Wendell Berry's marvellous term that refers to solutions that address multiple, connected, systemic problems without creating further problems or unintended negative consequences.

Berry, a farmer, teacher, poet and systems thinker suggests for example, that sustainable food and farming has the potential to address many serious issues simultaneously including: soil and water health, carbon storage and greenhouse gas reduction, worker health and safety, productivity and yield, water conservation, biodiversity, food nutrition and local economic prosperity, if a commitment to ‘health for all’ is at the heart of farming.

For Berry, sustainable agriculture is more than a linear, mechanistic process of production. He sees it as an evolving, systems-based approach to some of the biggest issues of our time which requires more than top-down leadership to implement. Berry’s story of sustainable food and farming is a place-based, localised and evolving act of creativity arising from grassroots collaboration that connects ‘health for all’ across natural, economic, social and governance landscapes. It’s a story that inspires and comforts because it’s built upon patterned solutions that address our complex world.

This informal discussion paper is a contribution to the first Scenic Rim Strategic Sustainability Forum in November 2010. It revolves around the idea of the power of stories to help us see our present situation and collaboratively picture and create a positive future for our region. Collaboration, as discussed in this paper, is importantly founded on our capacity to *align our intentions* for the Rim’s future. Crucially, it’s not dependent on agreement of opinions!

### **The tragedy of the commons**

In 1962, an exceptionally courageous scientist, biologist Rachel Carson, told a story called “Silent Spring” which focused on a theme known as the ‘tragedy of the commons’. This referred to the destruction of land, air, water and other environments which are not owned by any one person but shared by all species for sustaining life on earth.

“Silent Spring” began with the line: “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings” (p21), and it went on to describe the beginnings of a world without birds, brought about by the post World War 2 boom in the use of synthetic chemical pesticides and insecticides like DDT that entered and poisoned the food chain and decimated plants, waterways, insects, birds, fish and other forms of life.

Rachel Carson’s story also reminded readers of humanity’s place *within* nature, as one part of the web of life, not the boss of it.

Ironically, Rachel was suffering from breast cancer as she wrote “Silent Spring” (we now know the connections between chemicals like DDT and cancer), and after its publication the chemical industry and a number of chemical corporations took her to court to try and stop her from speaking out about the dangers of such chemicals. She won the day though and her story contributed to greater scientific understanding about the dangers of toxic chemicals. It also catalysed the modern environment movement. Even though Rachel died from cancer in 1964, “Silent Spring” has lived on as one of the most powerful parables of our time.

However, “Silent Spring” did not influence our governments or policymakers let alone corporations and big business in the same way as scientists and the community and as a result, we are now facing the breakdown of many of the earth’s life support systems. The tragedy of the commons reluctantly predicted by Rachel Carson – the destruction of our shared air and atmosphere, waterways and oceans, soils, forests and creatures from humble pollinators to the largest predators – continues...

## **Three stages of sustainability**

Over the past 30 years we have seen hundreds of environmental protection campaigns flicker across our TV screens and computers. We've also seen the dawn of the business and community sustainability movement. If you look around, you can see there's a lot going on and even here in the rural Scenic Rim Region where we live, it seems that almost every week a new sustainability policy, initiative, activity, workshop, festival or program is on offer.

There's so much going on I've started to wonder how we can make sense of all this activity? Have you ever felt confused about how much environmental and sustainability stuff is going on or indeed, what the word sustainability actually means? Do you ever wonder if it's working? Or why, with so much worthy activity, all the scientific indicators show the earth is still suffering and global warming and deforestation, for example, are worsening?

Recently I began to think about a three-stage pathway that might help to explain how we can turn the sustainability maze into a more logical and coherent series of stepping stones and a useful framework. Here are the three stages I propose:

1. Mitigation – Eco-efficiency
2. Adaptation – Becoming more resilient
3. Transformation – Creating a whole new story

### **Mitigation – Eco-efficiency**

Let's start with 'mitigation', a term that's connected with eco-efficient behaviours and technologies. Mitigation is about lessening our negative impacts on the natural environment.

In theory, by becoming more efficient resource users, we can reduce the amount of energy we use, reduce our carbon dioxide emissions and hopefully start to slow down global warming and the onset of climate change.

By reducing the amount of water we use we can take the pressure off our water sources including rivers, reduce the amount of wastewater we generate and release back into waterways and so on.

It's the easy entry point into sustainability because our households and businesses can save money by reducing our resource use. And new, 'sunrise' businesses are born because they are able to manufacture and distribute smart technologies and appliances that help us to reduce our resource use or generate renewable energy from the sun and wind for example.

There are lots of winners through mitigation. Households and businesses can save money and reduce or stabilise costs, new types of businesses are born, consumers can still consume via ethical and eco-friendly products and there are, in theory at least, fewer impacts on the natural environment because we are using fewer resources to do business.

Mitigation is the place we've spent most of our time in the sustainability world over the past 20 to 30 years, but I think it's vital to understand that mitigation is actually only the first step towards holistic sustainability. And it's clear that so far, it hasn't prevented climate change, forest loss, species extinction or social and economic inequality. It has not delivered the

hoped-for sustainability silver bullet - the painless, win/win, easy way to do business-as-usual *and* save the planet.

### **Adaptation and resilience**

Let's take a look at the next stepping stone – adaptation.

If I had to choose one word to describe adaptation that word would be relationships. While the idea of adaptation within the sustainability story is about our ability to adapt to major ecological and social change brought about by phenomena like climate change and natural resource scarcity, it is also about our ability to build relationships between humans and nature. At its heart, adaptation is about working together (collaboration), learning together (joined-up thinking) and humans living within nature's cycles and patterns (alignment).

When we explore adaptation the best place to look for inspiration and insight is nature herself. All around us are nature's systems – forests, oceans, deserts for example; and cycles – the gigantic global air, soil and water cycles – that show us how to live successfully without destroying the very things that keep us alive.

For example, the rainforests that surround us in the Scenic Rim use enormous amounts of energy to exist. They get this energy direct from the sun and in turn, provide oxygen for living creatures to breathe; they stabilise and enrich the soil and keep rivers and creeks clean and flowing. Their 'wastes' – fallen leaves, branches and animal excrement for example, are important resources that break down over time to create fertile soil for more vegetation to grow in and for the system to keep successfully cycling and regenerating.

In our unfolding sustainability journey, nature is our most powerful teacher.

The sorts of human activities we can see within the adaptation stage of sustainability are all the eco-efficiency (mitigation) behaviours and technologies *plus* a deep respect and knowledge about nature and ecology, and a capacity to align with and live within nature's systems and cycles.

It is here that we:

- understand humanity is just one part of the earth's web of life
- find the humility to create human systems and structures that live well within nature's means
- pass onto *all* future generations (across all species), living conditions that support life and are better than the ones we inherited.

Adaptation is also about improving our resilience – our ability to keep going in the face of unexpected shocks such as extreme weather events – because our human systems have evolved to work *with* nature and we are prepared for uncertainty.

For instance, it means sustainably growing, producing and accessing our food close to home. This means short supply chains between growers, producers and consumers; smaller carbon footprints; care of the surrounding waterways and ecosystems; fresher food; and better relationships between people. Adaptation also means we have good relationships with our regional neighbours in case our local farms take a knock from extreme weather conditions

and we need to source some of our food from somewhere else while our food growing systems recover.

In this stage of sustainability we all share in the risks and rewards of creating communities that nourish and restore.

Adaptation is about living locally – growing, producing, manufacturing, generating energy, supplying water and so on – in local living communities that are creative and prosperous. It's about local businesses meeting local needs so everyone in the local community can live with purpose and meaning.

Examples of adaptation can already be found in programs and initiatives including: Local Living Economy and BALLE (the Business Alliance for Local Living Economy), Social-Ecological Resilience and Resilience Science, the Transition Town Movement, Smart-Growth Business and Economy, Systems Thinking, Biomimicry, First Nations Action, Zero Waste, Renewable Energy, Local Food Economy/Local Food Security, Fair Trade...there are many living examples around the world and some already exist within the Scenic Rim region.

### **Transformation – butterfly economies and communities**

When my son was four years old, he and I had the huge responsibility of caring for his pre-school's box of caterpillars during the September school holidays. We were engrossed, even obsessed with those caterpillars because over the holidays they turned from leaf-munching, fat, green grubs into extraordinary chrysalides hanging from fragile stems and then into magical monarch butterflies which we released into the air around our home. Observing that perfectly natural process was one of the most amazing experiences of my life and it is a good metaphor for 'Transformation' – the third stage of our sustainability trilogy.

The transformation stage of sustainability includes mitigation and adaptation but it involves so much more if humanity is to craft a truly regenerative civilisation on Earth. If eco-efficient business-as-usual is our caterpillar and resilient, prosperous local community and economy are our chrysalis, then let's explore what makes up our butterfly.

To my mind it has at its heart, regional and local economies that are *not* based on material growth nor business operations that require lots of high tech, eco-efficient interventions. To my mind, these butterfly economies, communities and businesses simply provide enough for everyone in ways that are completely aligned with the workings of nature – the flow of sunlight energy, clean air and water, nourished healthy soils. These are economist E.F. Schumacher's human-scale economies, businesses and technologies that support material 'enoughness' and focus on growing meaning, creativity, innovation, participation and lifelong learning.

Our butterfly has flourishing and health – for humans and nature – at its core. It builds on this core through processes that welcome everyone in to help make wise, democratic, local decisions about how our communities and neighbourhoods could look and how they could function more sustainably.

Transformative sustainability is about creating places where we can live, work, play, raise our families, grow our food, create, learn, volunteer, contribute, maintain health and wellbeing, and exchange goods and services fairly between people. It's about creating places and ways

of governing those places which cherish, celebrate and restore nature, invest fairly and locally, generate renewable energy, and circulate and reuse our water. Places where we can learn, pray, practice compassion, grow old, die and then continue to participate in the soil cycle!

Wonderfully, the seeds of transformative sustainability can already be seen in small pockets and on the fringes of our existing civilisation in eco-villages like Crystal Waters at Maleny; in villages such as Boonah and Tamborine Mountain here in the Scenic Rim, in West End in Brisbane and Totnes in Devon; and in processes including placemaking, participatory democracy and genuine progress indicators.

It is also in The Earth Charter ([www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org)), a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we can use to underpin our thinking, planning, storying and activities in the Scenic Rim. The Earth Charter is the product of a decade long, worldwide, cross-cultural conversation about common goals and shared values that integrates four key principles:

1. Respect and care for the community of life
2. Ecological integrity
3. Social and economic justice
4. Democracy, nonviolence and peace

And in a heartening postscript to Rachel Carson's notion of the 'tragedy of the commons', another courageous woman, political scientist Elinor Ostrom, has devoted a lifetime's work to learning more about humanity's potential to work together and with nature. Her research, which was awarded the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, revealed that in communities all around the world, we humans have a tremendous capacity to successfully collaborate in order to protect and restore nature and create and maintain healthy democracies – our commons.

### **Taking our next steps - together**

Like the cells within the caterpillar that contain the emergence of the butterfly, we can look across the existing human landscape and see our potential for transformative sustainability right before us. We simply have to decide as households, businesses, community groups, schools, industry networks, governments...people...if we have the courage and commitment to create this story and this world – together – and then get on with it.

As the possibility of sustainability touches our lives in many ways – from turning off lights when they're not needed to creating communities that can flourish beyond material wealth – it's vital that we continue to create our collective stories and our connected future. We need to look for the threads that connect the past with the present with the future and weave them together in the knowledge that there is always more to come, always deeper to dive. The sustainability journey will never be over as we begin to realise we urgently need to begin our restorative, regenerative journey.

No matter where you work or live here in the Scenic Rim and no matter what your connection to this part of the world, it is our turn to actively and collaboratively create a compelling story and pathway to a sustainable and regenerative future locally and globally.

## Post script

Still not sure about what sustainability is? Think about handing on a flourishing region, civilisation and Earth to future generations of all species. Look to the Earth Charter's four key principles which also closely align with what's known as 4 Bottom Line Sustainability. If we want to not only keep on keeping on, but also repair the damage we've created we need to proactively integrate, apply, deepen and evolve over the long term:

1. Ecological protection, conservation, restoration and celebration (planet)
2. Social, community and cultural nourishment (people)
3. Meaningful enterprise and economic equality (profit)
4. Meaningful participation in governance and democracy (participation).

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