

The Humanities and their perspectives on sustainability

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Western ideas about sustainability

We at CRES are in a Centre committed to integrated research – we all accept that we have to work across disciplinary paradigms and that the commonalities of our research will be in the problems we tackle, not the methods we use. Our mission statement declares that we do ‘research and education for sustainability’. The government’s recent renewal of ‘sustainability’ rhetoric (as manifest in national research priorities like ‘An Environmentally Sustainable Australia’), positions CRES well to take leadership in applied research of perceived national significance, which can ‘make a difference’ to the environment, and perhaps, especially people/environment interactions.

Nonetheless the attention of government to ‘An Environmentally Sustainable Australia’ makes sustainability a target for other types of organizations to adopt as their goal, whether they have the capabilities for this or not. In this competitive world, it is important to explore the ways in which we can offer a richer, more diverse and more nuanced ‘take’ on such a mission.

The humanities are ideally suited to do this ‘nuancing’, to ensuring that sustainability is not simply the touchstone of the big and powerful, seeking a singular, snappy political solution to complex, fragmented and frequently locally-specific, environmental unsustainability. When we ask what exactly sustainability means – and to whom? – we are not being obstructionist. Questions like who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the sustainability juggernaut, remind us all of the ethical and environmental justice dimensions of dwelling sustainably in the world. If, in the interests of efficient, single bottom line research, we roll on without questioning the concept, we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

The humanities disciplines have between us a range of tools to unpack this currently fashionable buzz word. It is sometimes useful to relate current research to current

political fads, especially if we are politically required to ‘be relevant’, but it is a mistake to do this without questioning the baggage that political fashion is carrying. I think sustainability will be with us in the short to medium future at least because it has been around in various guises for a while – well since the early 1990s anyway – but I want to explore here where it originated before that. What is the context out of which such a concept emerged? We need to explore its historical baggage and perhaps use its history to give us insights into some future trends for it. Maybe we can even sharpen it a bit, or make it more multiple or diverse – so that it is not quite such a blunt tool for grabbing together ideas about relations between peoples and environments, but actually resonates with principled, reasoned philosophy for integrating multiple disciplines in understanding the environment.

In this forum today, I want to try to unpack the obvious – we all know that Sustainability is a Good Thing, but if it’s just amorously good, it’s a pretty blunt tool to work with. I think it’s important to use the term critically, and in order to do that I’d like to use this discussion time to look at the ‘edges’ of its use.

Since I’m a historian, I thought I’d briefly introduce one intellectual lineage of the term – mostly past, a little present and a very small bit of future. Then I thought we could look around the experiences of the term in this room – what has changed since you started research in this area? Where do you feel uncomfortable about how ‘sustainability’ is used? Or who is using it?

This is my – very Western, and very sketchy - view of the history of the idea of ‘sustainability’ over about 100 years.

1880s-1914: ‘Progressive Conservation’

The idea of ‘conservation’ – in Australia first used in connection with NRM – especially water.

1881 Water Conservation Act (Victorian legislation).

Similar uses overseas, especially America – for multiple purpose river development. Britain used ‘conservancy’ for natural resources – and preferred ‘preservation’ for land.

Conservation League of America 1908

Started by forester Gifford Pinchot – as a popular force in support of forestry ‘wise use of natural resources’.

Pinchot in contradistinction to John Muir – the hero of the American Wilderness Movement, and founder of the Sierra Club – who described sheep as ‘hoofed locusts’ – Pinchot wanted use of natural resources to be possible, and to have professionals manage such use.

I tell this particular story because I think new ideas often emerge AGAINST other ideas, not in isolation – and to define oneself ‘AGAINST’ or to say what one is not, is sometimes easier to work out than what one is.

Progress = using resources wisely to develop economies that will expand, but within limits. Also closely tied to privileging the educated – those who ‘know how to be wise’, and very much to the State – privileging the Government as manager of the Public Good.

1918-1939 Between the wars: natural resources and human agency

In the 1880-1914 period, the conservation professionals were water engineers (especially irrigators) and foresters.

Although there were exceptions like the Royal Commission into Western Lands in NSW in 1900, and the 19th century warnings of the surveyor, Goyder in South Australia about limits to wheat-farming, the focus was generally on the resource – water or timber – rather than the land or the whole environment.

The simultaneous dust bowls of the 1930s in Australia and midwest America – and interestingly, in Argentina at the same time, I’ve just learned - gave a new value to topsoil. Erosion and sand-drift became terms associated with human agency, not just the forces of nature. They also became the problems of governments.

At the same time, there was a growing awareness that fire-management was not just about beating nature: it was about understanding human practice. Judge Stretton said of the 1939 fires in South Australia and Victoria that killed 71 people as well as wiping out most of the timber in both states: ‘These fires were lit by the hand of man’. The question of blame, of moral responsibility – and the necessity for engaging with human practice not just natural disaster is incredibly strong in the Judge’s words. And his condemnation of the management of the responsible government authority, the Forests Commission of Victoria, was also strong.

Just an aside here: I’m not saying that the idea of human agency in environmental destruction is new at this time – just that it’s in ascendancy. There is another round of ‘human’ consciousness upon us right now, I think. And another moment of deciding the balance between the State and the individual – the public good and the private interest.

Even in the Old Testament there is the notion of human agency (albeit moral) turning on the environment:

*He turns rivers into desert
And springs of water into thirsty ground;
He turns fruitful waste into salt waste
Because the men who dwell there are so wicked*

Psalm 107, 33

1945-1987: Ecological thinking and whole systems

Model for post-war conservation was more professionals, more science and more ecology in particular. The ideal landscape was ‘in balance’ – the climax and equilibrium theories of 1930s and 40s ecology were popularising and becoming the language of a new conservation movement, a movement conscious of the value of science, on the one hand and ‘habitat’ on the other – the whole environment not the endangered species or the compromised resource.

Meanwhile in Australia more habitat was being felled in the interests of post-war reconstruction. Progress was expressed in terms of bigger and bigger Irrigation

Schemes – the Snowy in the 1950s and the Ord in the 1970s – and native forests were clear-felled for pine plantations particularly in the late 60s and 70s when the Commonwealth loans scheme paid states to undertake this work.

The gap between conservation and progress could hardly have been wider – yet the rhetoric of ‘wise use’ professionals continued steadily in places like the Australian Conservation Foundation. It’s my belief that the credibility gap here was one of the chief forces behind a growing technopessimism – it was not just Silent Spring and the Green Revolution – but the fact that so-called experts were juggling too many variables, and forgot to talk to ordinary people as equals. Science was becoming incredible.

Democracy and people power made a big revival in the revolutionary 60s and ‘expertise’ went out of fashion just as ecological science had hit the front in the conservation stakes. More and more knowledge was not translating into more and more action. Research was piecemeal, activism was piecemeal and policymaking was piecemeal. There was seldom communication between even any two of these groups. The Victorian Land Conservation Council processes of the 1970s – bringing some conservation groups, some policy makers and some science together – were the beginnings of ‘integration’, but were unusual in Australia, and eventually in 1997 abolished, even in Victoria. Meanwhile indigenous land rights and understandings of indigenous knowledge systems exploded the questions of land, natural resources and environment in new directions.

1987 Our Common Future and ‘sustainable development’

I need to step out of my mostly Australian story for a moment to take the moment of the Brundtland Report – the World Commission on Environment and Development, which brought the phrase ‘Sustainable Development’ into the language of nearly 200 countries - 179 signatories to the Rio Convention, adopted this language. And it is a language that ties environment and economy exactly in the way that ‘wise use’ did in earlier periods.

Jack Pezzey in 1989 did an excellent analysis of the new language of the Brundtland report for the World Bank. He uses the term ‘sustainability concepts’ to group

together sustainable growth, sustainable development and sustainable resource use and looks at their meanings in terms of neoclassical economic theory.

Australia, in an interesting twist, alone chose to call its path to Sustainable Development ‘ecological’. This was a good example of an idea whose time had already ‘went’. Ecological was a word of the 1960s – even in Australia – and certainly by 1992, science in Australia was very conscious of its society.

Since Rio: Sustainability in the present/immediate future

I now come up to the last decade or so:

and I note the following trends:

we are no longer talking about ‘sustainable development’ (or even so much ESD, despite the 123 pieces of legislation), but about sustainability – for example in the research priority for ‘an environmentally sustainable Australia’.

Why is ‘development’ out of favour?

– are we following Jack and wanting to consider ‘growth’ and ‘resource use’ as well as ‘development’?

Possibly – but I also feel that ‘development’, ‘growth’ and ‘resource use’ are for some people all problematic and uncomfortable in the same way. The problem is in a serious discomfort with valuing environment in economic terms – or just in economic terms.

Environment is more sustaining than just economically – yet ‘sustainability’ is laden with economics. In the latest manifestation of the great biodiversity industry of the 70s, 80s and 90s, we have ‘ecosystem services’ – valuing nature’s ‘goods’ in fractions and indeed multiples of the Gross National Product of whole nations. This movement has been led by ecologists, including some of the 60s radicals that championed the first environmental revolution like Paul Ehrlich, and a whole new generation led by the likes of Gretchen Daily, one of Ehrlich’s students. It serves to keep science on the agenda in important ways for science, and appeals to some economists and

economically trained policy makers. It provides one common language for policy makers to meet ecologists – to force a level of care for the whole household or oecos.

Here is a discussion from the web-page of Gretchen Daily of one product of the ecosystem services approach to sustainability:

'Gretchen Daily serves on the advisory board of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a four-year, collaborative, international effort begun in April 2001, "to improve the management of the world's natural and managed ecosystems by helping to meet the needs of decision-makers and the public for peer-reviewed, policy-relevant scientific information on the condition of ecosystems, consequences of ecosystem change, and options for response.'

Past work in this area includes:

Study of environmental impacts of human population structure (e.g., spatial distribution of people) and how population and environmental policies should be developed from a systems approach.'

Certain methods are privileged here– there is a great deal of talk about a 'systems approach' not just in this website but in much of the literature concerned about sustainability– yet this term tells us nothing about the real method at all. Which elements are considered relevant (or irrelevant) to 'the system'? If an infinite number of considerations are factored in, the 'method' is hardly a method – and if some are left out, who decides which they will be? Is this transparent?

Privileging economics, and using a particular sort of systems approach means that other ways of understanding sustainability become undervalued. What is the price of justice in ecosystem services?

Sustainability is political – and therefore measurable outputs are desirable – if only to keep politicians honest – but to reduce environment to economics in order to measure it to sell it to politicians is to seriously sell the environment short.

Water for instance, is not just a 'resource' – that's just a bean-counter's way of representing it in accounts. It is a highly cultural thing as well as an economic thing –

and every culture's relation with water is important, but different, and we want our 'sustainability' to embrace the cultural too, and to allow for diversity.

But if it gets too woolly - we end up back with the lowest common denominator problem: if its just the least thing that we in CRES or we in Australia or we at Rio can agree on, it isn't doing much for the environment.

In South Africa, where there are significantly more poor people with resource needs – and the questions of poverty and sustainability are tied even more uncomfortably, they have also scrapped 'development' – in favour of something that sounds even more old-fashioned to me 'Sustainable Utilization'. Yet this language is seen to empower the indigenous peoples and the poor.

Sustainability is about equity not fashion – across generations and between nations – 'Environmental justice' is one of the key themes of *Our Common Future* and ensuing global discussions – do we talk about this within nations or regions or only at the woolly-global level? River resource allocations – the drive to set the Snowy free or get the Murray all the way to South Australia in good health – perhaps are the current discussions – upriver vs downriver or upland clearance patterns that cause salinity elsewhere are local/regional issues that raise equity in clear, non-racist, terms, because equity is a question of geography not class or race. Can we use models developed from these in more complex international and cross-cultural situations – or is every situation so different that there are no parallels?

There are other dimensions too – the 'resilience of landscapes' is being discussed by John Kerin in western New South Wales where the land is clearly clapped out and degraded. This is also the language of CSIRO SUSTAINABLE ECOSYSTEMS –we are constantly evolving new language for landscape management strategies –

Perhaps 'resilience' runs counter to an earlier notion of 'fragile' lands –but the risk is that it is strikingly convenient for those who want to do nothing, and 'resilience' is clearly highly variable.

What about the future? – or trying to pick the next trend...

Sustainable habitation – living in the world not just exploiting it?

A statement that there is more to sustainability than economics and that sustainability is not just about humans but all life forms

- dwelling in place has a long history too and yet ‘dwelling’ is possibly more a human word and habitation less ‘speciesist’.

We need to be constantly vigilant about how the meaning of sustainability is changing

- where are the goal posts? Have they shifted in the period we have been working in this area? Why?
- Is the sustainability agenda being hijacked and distorted in ways we don’t like?
- The meaning seems to ‘slip’ around in different contexts – is this a good thing or a problem?
- Perhaps one of the ways to approach the idea of ‘sustainability’ – because it is rapidly becoming so all-embracing - is to look at what is **unsustainable**

in a sense wise-use conservation started as a protest against preservation we need to keep an eye open for ‘how not to do things’, as well as ‘how to’

References:

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