

Business Makes a ‘Journey’ out of ‘Sustainability’: Creating Adventures in Wonderland?

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical exploration of the ‘journey metaphor’ promoted in much business discourse on sustainability - in corporate reports and advertisements, and in commentators’ reports in the political and professional business literature. The portrayal of sustainability as a journey evokes images of corporate adaptation, learning, and a movement away from business-as-usual practices. The journey metaphor, however, masks the issue of towards what it is that businesses are actually, or even supposedly, moving. It is argued that business is constructing ‘sustainability’ as a journey to avoid specifying some future desirable state of affairs. We suggest that by portraying ‘sustainability’ in this way, businesses, and the related political and professional literature, have invoked a subtle and powerful, use of language that appears to seriously engage with elements of the discourse around sustainable development and sustainability. Yet at the same time, by constructing and promoting its own version of the discourse, it de-emphasises discussion of desirable future states of living, and neatly sidesteps any debate about, or need to radically change course. The paper illustrates how journeying is invoked throughout corporate reports and other forms of business communication in a process of corporate myth-making. Businesses are shown to be constructing a “wonderland” discourse.

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—”, said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.
“—so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.
“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.
Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question. “What sort of people live about here?”
“In *that* direction,” the Cat said, waving its right paw round, “lives a Hatter: and in *that* direction,” waving the other paw, “lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they’re both mad.”
“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.
“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”
“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.
“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

(Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll)

Introduction

Although business interest in the concept of sustainability appears to be increasing worldwide, there is considerable evidence in academic, professional and business literature that sustainability is an elusive concept with which to engage (Barbier, 1987, 1989; Dixon & Fallon, 1989; Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause, 1995; Milne, 1996; Pearce et al, 1989; O’Riordan, 1991; Redclift, 1987; & Zorvanyi 1998). How business renders its engagement with such a concept sensible through presenting it as a journey is the subject of this paper. The sustainability journey is, we contend, both a prevalent metaphor in businesses’ representations of their engagement with sustainability and a powerful one that predisposes understanding of sustainability as some kind of process rather than as a particular kind of end-state.

Like Alice, above, in her conversation with the Cheshire Cat, business discourse on sustainability appears less concerned with an ultimate destination than with a journey to somewhere relatively undefined. The Cheshire Cat’s final remark nicely captures the present predicament we might be facing as a species. “You must be [mad] or you wouldn’t have come here” raises the question of whether a rational species would choose to get to the point where it is addicted to growth, consumption and other patterns of thinking and action that ultimately may threaten its very own existence. Understanding why and how business makes sense of such madness through a particular discursive practice is our purpose here, following an emergent tradition of research on accounting and organizational representations of environment and sustainability (e.g., Newton & Harte, 1997; Levy, 1997; Banerjee, 2001; See Welford, 1998 on the need for a critical research agenda in this arena). A thin vein of this research has utilized discourse analysis (see, for example, Everett & Neu, 2000; Livesey, 2001, 2002a & b; Livesey & Kearins, 2002; and Banerjee 2003).

Our analysis examines the presence of the journey metaphor analyzing its usage in specific contexts, and its potential power effects in possibly forestalling the radical change that many commentators (e.g., Shrivastava, 1994; Shrivastava & Hart, 1995; Welford, 1995, 1997 &

2000; Dryzek, 1997; Ehrenfeld, 1999; and Banerjee, 2003)) believe necessary for the achievement of sustainability. We discuss the various dimensions of the sustainability journey present in the business case for sustainable development and show how some powerful businesses and institutions, although (re)presenting particular businesses as seriously engaging with sustainability, are contributing to a process of increasing normalization, or attempting to make orthodox a notion of corporate and business sustainability more akin to weak rather than strong sustainability (see Turner, 1993). We explore some of the implications of seeing this metaphor less as a metaphor and more as a paradox.

The paper is organized, as follows. First, we outline the basis of our approach to analyzing sustainability as journey. Second, we examine the presence of the journey metaphor in management and organizational studies, linking it to discussions of organizational change and learning, as well as to images of heroism and challenge. Third, we contrast two approaches to understanding sustainability present in management, organization studies and accounting literature - the discourse of ecological modernization which is akin to weak sustainability, contrasted with more radical and critical sustainability discourse which points to some of the limitations of the former. Fourth, we provide examples of the weak sustainability framing implied in the journey metaphor present in professional business literature, and in corporate social reports. Finally, we examine the implications of the use of the journey metaphor for organizational change towards sustainability and provide a sense of what we see as the possible destination of the journey, which many organizations currently appear to us as reluctant to define.

The Basis for an Analysis of Metaphor and Paradox

Following what has been commonly referred to as the ‘linguistic turn’ in wider social theory (Rorty, 1967; see also Lafont, (2002)), there has been relatively widespread examination of the use of language in particular contexts not just as a way of representing, but also configuring what various ideas stand for – a means of control – and of predisposing sense-making to serve particular ends, and of constituting reality, even (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Weick, 1979). In an article entitled ‘Reclaiming the legacy of the linguistic turn’, Deetz (2003, p. 421) inspires organisational scholars towards “an understanding of the sociolinguistic structuring of experience, to an understanding of the politics of representation and experience [and] to an affirmation of the dialogic quality of existence. Although there has been a stronger focus on studying language in context (that is in conjunction with the historical conditions in which the language of texts for example was produced and read), Deetz argues for organizational scholarship that has a stronger link to discourse so as to examine the specific ways the world is produced. Discourse theory suggests that the meaning of any text will be constructed differently according to the discourses (ie the knowledges, prejudices and resistances) brought to bear on the text by its readers – and that there is social negotiation of meaning, and hence potential discursive struggle (Foucault, 1980 & 1984; see also, for analysis of discursive struggle around sustainable development specifically, Hajer, 1997 and Banerjee, 2003).

In this paper, our analysis functions at two levels and attempts to link those two levels. The more macro level is that of discourse. The micro-level is that of metaphor. In examining both, we attempt to link a particular linguistic feature of a genre of organisational and accounting texts with a broader discursive formation. Discourse generally refers to a set of statements, concepts and terms which constitute a way of ‘talking’ about a particular issue,

thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue. Following Foucault (1980) discourses are perceived to have particular power effects - that is they "do not just describe; they *do* things" (Potter and Wetherall, 1987, p. 6). Whereas discourse analysis generally aims at establishing patterns of organisation of text at a level above that of the sentence (Blackhouse, Dudley-Evans & Henderson, 1993), we take a metaphor – a fragment of a properly constructed sentence, as the primary focus of our analysis. We note, however, definitional overlap between a particularly powerful metaphor that frames the way an issue is understood and acted upon, and a broader discourse as defined here. This, we explore below.

Our contribution is in how we attempt to relate the sustainability as journey metaphor to broader discourses – to discourses of ecological modernisation, and by way of comparison, to more radical environmental and sustainability discourses. We see the sustainability as journey metaphor as drawing from and making sense to a discourse community – a community that shares certain motives and strategies for writing and reading texts in particular ways (see Hajer 1995; Dryzek, 1997). In making these connections, it is incumbent on us to take a metaphor that is both recurrent and emblematic of the texts we have read - that has the status of a root metaphor, a dominant or defining way of seeing that structures perception (Inns, 2002). We later make this case in respect of the prevalence and iconic nature of the sustainability as journey metaphor in business texts. We explore what happens when one investigates a metaphor from outside the discursive community from which it draws and is likely to make most sense. The metaphor seen in this light becomes something other than a metaphor, a paradox even.

At the micro-level then, we ground our analysis in terms of the precepts of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, as explained by Gerrard (1993). We acknowledge surplus meaning in texts – that is that texts constrain but do not uniquely determine the meanings appropriated by readers. There is some distance between authors, texts and readers; authors become alienated from their texts without direct control over meaning. There is a two way process of readers projecting meaning onto texts (bringing to readings background understandings and viewpoints), and texts affecting readers and the meanings they derive. Readers are being reconstituted through the reading of text. While variance in interpretation is possible, one interpretation may well be more prevalent (though not more truthful or correct) than are others. In our analysis we present the metaphor of sustainability as journey as drawing from and contributing to a particular discourse, but given at least the potential for discursive struggle, and ourselves drawing from a different discourse, we explore means of potentially opening out, rather than shutting down meaning implicit in the sustainability as journey metaphor.

Our work here fits within a tradition studies of accounting and organizations focusing specifically on metaphorical language, ascribing it a powerful role in shaping and constructing what counts for reality in these disciplines (e.g., Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1988 & 1997; Tinker, 1986; Boland and Greenberg. 1992; Tsoukas, 1993, Walters-York, 1996; Oswick and Grant, 1996; Grant and Oswick, 1996; Inns, 2002). With understanding of metaphor in organisation studies dominated by the work of Gareth Morgan, notably his *Images of Organization* (1986 & 1997), there has been a tendency to follow Morgan's early definition of metaphor as implying "*a way of thinking and a way of seeing*" based on a comparison between two discreet domains and the posing of them as somehow similar (1986, p. 12). Metaphor – though a poetic device – features strongly in everyday language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993). It is not just part of the way the world is conceptualised and

understood, it structures experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and (by virtue of its being economical) often substitutes for deeper knowledge (Tsoukas, 1991). However, metaphor does not necessarily provide for singular interpretations. Whereas poetic use of metaphor would suggest the generation of gestalt, emotive or holistic understandings of subjects, organisational theory's particular focus, according to Inns (2002) has been to do this initially – but with the aim of enabling a rational, reductivist understanding. We have a counter-motive here - in that we critique a most probable dominant interpretation (as might be the case in an analysis based solely in terms of Ricoeur's hermeneutics) and we attempt to open out understanding of surplus meaning and reveal paradox, the latter an increasing focus in organization studies (see Lewis, 2000).

We are indebted in the construction of this paper to the work of Grant and Oswick (1996), and Oswick, Keenoy and Grant (2002) specifically, in focusing attention on other tropes of anomaly, paradox and irony based on dissimilarity, and operating within what they call the 'cognitive discomfort zone', challenging rather than reinforcing orthodoxy. In their view, much applied research has reflected the assumption that we should primarily concern ourselves with aspects of sameness implicit in metaphor, rather than difference, as we explore here as an underlying premise of this paper. Indeed, implicit in postmodern approaches is the idea of incredulity towards any form of narrative closure – and hence an opening for research which investigates linguistic constructions such as metaphor that on the one hand orient interpretation in a particular direction, while on the other suggesting broader and more permissive interpretation than would be the case without their use.

The *Collins English Dictionary* (1995) definition of metaphor cited in Oswick, Keenoy and Grant (2002) is “a word or phrase applied to an object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply a resemblance.” The effect of employing an apparent metaphor, such as in the case of this paper – ‘sustainability as a journey’ is to imply that attempts to move towards sustainability resemble a journey in some ways (e.g., movement into the unknown, a crusade or adventure...). Oswick et al (2002) suggest that in this form of expression, there is middle-range overlap among domains, i.e. that there is likely to be a moderate number of comparable characteristics and properties between the sustainability domain and the journey domain. There are also likely to be some key differences that we see as equally worth exploring. Looking into how metaphors generally work, we find that metaphors often involve the transfer of information from a relatively familiar domain to a new and relatively unknown domain (Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Johnson-Laird, 1989; Vosniadou & Ortony, 1989).¹

Anomaly, irony and paradox, the so-called lesser tropes identified by Oswick et al (2002) focus attention on domains where there is minimal overlap. Their application and utility in organization theory is seen, in the case of anomaly, to promote reframing through laterality and potentiate radical and novel ways of thinking about taken-for-granted phenomenon. Irony privileges a certain scepticism as to the similarity between domains and is said to demand an intuitive reflexivity about the deceptive character of appearances – that is a going beyond or beneath the surface rhetoric to reveal paradox. The stuff of postmodern thought, paradox has in recent times captured the attention of a number of eminent organization

¹ In the case of the apparent sustainability as journey metaphor, there is a somewhat back-ended logic here – in that the base or more familiar domain is likely to be that of the journey, and the target domain about which similarities are likely to be inferred, is the less familiar and more elusive domain of sustainability. We return to the point of why this particular target domain might be commonly considered difficult to define, towards the end of the paper.

theorists and others (see, for example, Clegg 2000, and the papers contained therein; Stohl & Cheney 2001; see also Handy, 1995.). Ibarra-Colado (2000:167) points out that the 1990s revealed widespread paradoxical social science representations of the 'real world' at the macro and global level and also within management and organizations: "It appeared that managers and scholars finally understood the dynamics that govern organizations, in terms of the normalcy of the inconsistencies – rather than the consistencies – of rationality."

Following Oswick et al (2002), it seems that what at first pass might be taken as a confirming metaphor can usefully be explored within the cognitive discomfort zone as containing elements of the more marginalized tropes of anomaly, irony and paradox, potentially providing framebreaking insights. 'Sustainability as journey' provides us two discrete domains for investigation: 'journey' and 'sustainability'. These domains we explore in the sections which follow, with a view to defining: first, the separate characteristics and properties of the concepts of journey and sustainability as present in the literature on management and organizations; second, the commonalities or overlap between domains, third, the potential benefits and adverse consequences of the adoption of this metaphor in defining organizational efforts towards sustainability; and finally, the dissimilarities between journey and sustainability that are suggested by a careful analysis and rereading of the apparent metaphor as something other than metaphor, that is anomaly, irony or paradox.

To explore the specific use of the analogy of sustainability as journey, we identify its explicit use, and more implicit uses through other referents (e.g., the road, the path, the map etc.) in three generally distinct but interrelated genres. These genres are (1) academic discourse on management, organizations and sustainability which generally subscribes to either a weak or a strong version of sustainability, (2) professional discourse on sustainability (i.e., that body of knowledge often known as 'the business case' emanating from business and professional associations, as well as academics and consultants), and (3) business, particularly through corporate social reporting efforts and advertisements.

The concept of the journey in management and organizational writing

A plethora of metaphors have been used by organization theorists to characterize organizations and organizational processes. Morgan (1986 & 1997) opened out understanding of organizations by articulating a series of metaphors with distinct advantages and limitations. Over time, particular metaphors have waxed and waned in popularity, within scholarly discourse and within organizational members' and management consultants' accounts of organizations. Perpetuation of military metaphors for organizing (orders, tactics, chains of command etc) have been discouraged by a number of writers including Weick (1979). Family metaphors for organizations enjoyed a certain popularity for a time (many members with different roles, each important to the functioning of the whole) (e.g., Davidson, 1993), and in some contexts, gardening metaphors have been employed (changing in harmony with (human) nature, nurturing, choosing the right time to grow and harvest etc) (e.g., Thompson & Sanders, 1997; Axley, 2002). Each metaphor has considerable implications for behaviour in organizations so-characterised. Organizations change when their members change their metaphors for thinking about them (Pondy, 1993).

The use of journey as a domain term within a metaphor is particularly powerful because it embraces change, as opposed to the more static conception of organization implicit in the first two examples given above. Although the notion of journey is sprinkled liberally through studies of management and organizations, specific discussion of it is relatively light.

'Journey' is invoked in the discussion of a range of change management fads such as total quality management and business process engineering; it is implicated in accounts of organizational learning and change management, sometimes mentioned explicitly or by a range of other referents. TQM is frequently referred to as a journey of continuous improvement; BPR is seen as "a never-ending journey" (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 170). Adaptive learning processes in organizations are seen as akin to journeys. Returning to Morgan's *Images of Organization*, we find references to aspects of journey in his discussion of organizations as brains and organizational learning in particular – in terms of keeping the organization 'on-course', the process of steersmanship implicit in cybernetics, and the concept of strategic direction.

Specific analysis of the journey metaphor in organization studies reveals some interesting points. Clancy's (1989 & 1999) examination of the texts of speeches given by CEOs and books they had written points to six major metaphors: journey, game, war, machine, organism and society. He considers the journey metaphor whose popularity he traces throughout the 20th century as a fairly good fit to the wealth-producing purpose of a business in its entailments of risk and adventure – particularly in its sea voyage incantation. While the metaphor succeeds in capturing some of the emotional intensity of operating a business, it does not, according to Clancy, deal well with operational complexities, nor necessarily with other purposes or ends of business. It is "a problematical guide to action" (Clancy, 1999, p. 42). Clancy considers *le voyage sans but*, that is the journey without a specific purpose or the journey as an end in itself, a variant of the metaphor with strong Romantic appeal – think here of Alice's aimlessness which echoes the French poet Baudelaire's leaving for the sake of leaving, without knowing why, cited by Clancy. This variant, Clancy sees as becoming important again in modern times – although he claims it "can be pernicious for the business leader, guiding him [sic] away from the serious purposes of business and toward the notion of an aimless enterprise, a ship of fools" (pp. 42-43).

Kendall and Kendall's (1993) study of the language of information systems users in 16 different organizations identifies nine main metaphors, of which journey is one of six in common with Clancy above. What they list as the key entailments of the journey metaphor in these expressions of experience and organization are: "the leader; his or her team or crew; unpredictability including the possibility of danger and risk and potentially, adventure". Most often in the stories they heard, the journey was again likened to a sea voyage, with general acceptance of the idea that the organization had a goal though it may be distant. The focus here was more obviously on process and experience – and was linked to the prototyping process that involved a high degree of experimentality and was seen as 'full of the unknown'. The version of journey presented here was basically a linear one, with some sideways diversions/digressions. This perhaps more popular interpretation of journeying has, as we shall see, some fit with its incantation in the business and sustainability arena, particularly in terms of the challenge sustainability represents, its representation as unknown and requiring a degree of brave experimentation on the part of business organizations.

The challenge and heroics implicit in journeying are also present in O'Connor's (1995) identification of the journey metaphor in her study of four accounts of organizational change. She points out "According to the OED, the term journey comes from the Latin *diurnus*, and through the old French *jornee*, meaning a day's expanse of time, and in particular, 'the portion or a march or expedition actually done in one day, or accomplished each day...', 'a day's performance in fighting, a battle, a fight.'" Linked with another prominent metaphor in the accounts of organizational change she studied, that of the champion, she concludes in

these accounts, that change is presented as heroic, it takes patience, stamina and moral strength and, in an important distinction perhaps ignored in the business accounts we later explore in this paper, that change moves towards completion or culmination. Further, she claims that change efforts were portrayed as noble and good, that they took faith and patience as well as tangible resources. Opposing change was thus constructed as the opposite of good. O'Connor (1995) points out an inherent paradox in that organizational change, for many observers, "is a system-contradiction in itself. Change and change processes run counter to the fundamental interests of management, such as control, stability, predictability, rationality, and economic results". Seen in this more complex light, journeying has positive value in its association with the process of change so long as it does not upset the balance of power, or run counter to management and business interests. Managers may officially sanction and want to be identified with change or journeying, though too much change, or journeying too far beyond the status quo may be threatening or problematic..

Lewis (2000) in an exploration of paradox in organization studies, points out a growing body of research that sees individuals, groups and organizations as inherently paradoxical, and necessarily embroiled in such tensions. Researchers are tending to abandon "the notion that change is a smooth, linear and planned journey" and explore the contradictions that both impede and enhance organizational development (p. 760). Indeed, the change journey in organization studies has become one where linearity and rational problem solving is almost eschewed due to this inherent complexity. Paradox is explored in recognition of its power to generate creative insight and change' (Eisenhardt & Westcott, 1988, p. 170, cited in Lewis, 2000).

Mixing up notions of learning and experimentation with the challenge of change, the journey metaphor can thus be employed with strategic ambiguity to accomplish particular (often unstated) goals. In discussing the use of strategic ambiguity in organizational communication, Eisenberg (1984) points out its use in fostering agreement on abstractions (as for example - sustainability) without limiting specific interpretations. Journeying offers paradox and complexity on the one hand (as a potential excuse for relative inactivity and lack of substantive progress) while also expressing a notion of progress, if not actual achievement even in the embarkation on the journey itself. The framework scenario for behaviour evoked in the journey metaphor given recent understandings of learning and organizational behavior is not one of linearity and reaching a destination but one of experimentation, with goals sometimes left unstated, or even undefined. With this understanding of the concept of journey, and its associated imagery in organization and management writing that appears not dissimilar to Alice's aimless wanderings, we now investigate the second of our two domain terms - sustainability.

Two discourses on sustainability

Over several years reading the management, organization studies and accounting literature on business and sustainability, we are able to discern two relatively (but by no means completely) distinct strands of thought which link to broader societal discourses on environmentalism and/or sustainability.² The more dominant of these takes a more

² While we are acutely aware that such a distinction is an oversimplification of the many variants of environmental discourse that might be considered to have developed (see, for example, Dryzek, 1997; Lewis, 1992; Benton & Short, 1999; Jamison, 2001), it is not unusual to collapse such complexity into fewer categories or opposing binaries such as "exploitationists" "conservationists" and "preservationists" (Norton, 1991), "reformists" and "radicals" (Shrivastava, 1994), "prometheans" and "survivalists" (Dryzek, 1997), "ecocentrics"

functionalist line, privileging managerial capture of the concept of sustainability through incremental improvements being able to be effected, and advances what has come to be known as a business case for sustainability. Such incrementalism can be subsumed within the broader discourse of ecological modernisation. The second opposing strand of thought is more radical and more critical suggesting that fundamental changes to current modes of organizing are required for sustainability to be achievable.³

In the incrementalist perspective, labeled reform environmentalism by Dobson, (1990) and Egri & Pinfold, (1996), techno-optimism pervades. Technology is seen as both necessary to scientific and economic progress and as the solution to managing environmental risks. Writers in this arena have tended to focus less on the definitional looseness of sustainability and sustainable development, and rather more on how it might be operationalised by business – ascribing business a major if not the primary role in bringing about sustainability. In many cases, business and organizations come to be seen as central and sustainability as something that can be added in, incrementally. The Brundtland Report definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987: 43) literally opened the door for business engagement with the conflated concept of sustainable development/sustainability, with several organizations beginning to argue that a strong ‘business case for sustainable development’ exists (Day & Arnold, 1998). A number of writers earlier (eg Porter & van der Linde, 1995; Hart, 1995) had contended that business action towards sustainability and the environment in particular yielded win-win situations, that such action was good for both business and the environment. Elkington’s (1997 & 2001) triple bottom line heuristic was based on the possibility of such responsible business action being good for society as well as for business and the environment. Everett and Neu (2000) explain this broad conceptualization as a variant of ecological modernization, and part of that discourse that promotes proactivity as regards environmental management, regulation and controls – at the expense of radical change by business. We frame this discourse as a version of weak sustainability (Turner, 1993) - a form wherein limits are set on natural capital usage, and where the precautionary principle of safe or minimum standards does apply, but which still involves tradeoffs.

Radical and critical theorists in accounting, management and organization studies are fewer in number – but are generally united in their calls for strong sustainability, and often-times a more ecocentric, as opposed to organization-centric approach. They launch a number of criticisms, while themselves being open to criticism perhaps for being short on practical advice as to how sustainability might be achieved. A number of these writers, such as Everett and Neu above, Newton & Harte (1997) and Newton, (2002)), however, have doubted the business case and business-centred approach. Newton & Harte (1997) see the language used in green business literature as strongly evangelical, and are skeptical as to whether it alone will be sufficient to coerce business to become greener. Newton (2002) again looks at the normative rationale for a new ecological order and suggest a de-centring of business and a

and “technocentrics” (O’Riordan, 1981; Pearce, 1993; Benton & Short, 1999), “weak sustainability” and “strong sustainability” (Turner, 1993, Pearce, 1993). Dryzek (1997), too, delineates between discourses associated with sustainable development on the one hand, and ecological modernisation on the other. While both assume economic growth go hand-in hand with environmental protection, and stand in contrast to “radicals” and “survivalists”, ecological modernisation is seen to play down issues of social justice and third-world development. Our own discussion provides a simplified framing of just two relevant discourses as a basis for the analysis of the ‘sustainability as journey’ metaphor.

³ It should be noted, however, that even the incrementalist perspective lays out challenges for business beyond current business practice, and could be seen as radical in some quarters.

focus on networks as a new research perspective. Others, too, consider that organizational studies has failed to seriously engage in environmental and hence sustainability discourses. Shrivastava (1994) for example considers organization studies privileges a view of the organizational environment based on denatured narrow, parochial and economic concepts, a view far removed from the concerns of the natural environment. Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause (1995: 874) also see management theory reflecting an anthropocentric paradigm, calling it “constricted by a fractured epistemology, which separates humanity from nature and truth from morality.” They suggest that the tools of greening implicit in an incrementalist approach while moving organizations in the right direction, “fail to inform them about the distance from or variance with the ultimate destination of sustainability (Gladwin et al, 1995: 900).” In looking across at the incrementalists, Crane (2000) suggests that organizations are likely to use existing organizational narratives to frame the (environmental) change process rather than framebreaking insights that would shape some kind of new order. What is thus seen as the insufficiency of the incrementalist approach in the achievement of sustainability underlies calls for more radical and fundamental change to current modes of organizing by Welford (1995; 1997 & 2000), Shrivastava & Hart (1995) and Ehrenfeld (1999), among others, including proponents of a more far-reaching ecological politics (eg Hajer, 1995; Harvey, 1996).

A focus on sociolinguistic constructionism and corporate politics of survivalism are evident in a number of studies that would fit into the critical/radical camp. Advocating a postmodern perspective, Welford (1998:5) points out that businesses as the major polluters are actively engaged in defining sustainability-related concepts for themselves “in a way which at best gives a weak definition of sustainable development. Banerjee (2003, p. 163) observes a discursive shift from dudtainable development to the more positive-sounding sustainability and then a further change in focus towards corporate sustainability, a shift “from global planetary sustainability to sustaining the corporation through ‘growth opportunities’”. Levy (1997) points to environmental management as offering political stability if not wholesale change. Gray and Milne (forthcoming 2003) liken the practice of establishing the rules of the game, and their subsequent modification in the case of sustainability to a contest – a contest in which organisations have a vested interest in influencing. Some elements of that contest are manifest in the metaphorical representations commonly employed in sustainability/values reporting. Livesey & Kearins (2002) for example focus on the metaphors of transparency and care in the pioneering sustainability values reports of The Body Shop and Royal Dutch/Shell group claiming a juxtapositioning of modernist discourse of business economics and accountancy – as in the professed achievement of transparency – and the more postmodern sentimental discourse of care. That organisations can mix and match discourses with apparent success is a kind of paradoxical achievement in itself, but closer examination also points to inherent tensions within the concept of sustainability that business is trying to resolve. Livesey (2002b) points to Shell’s embrace of the concept of sustainable development as having contradictory and ambiguous effects, characteristic of discursive struggle – implicating both acts of resistance and change side by side. She utilizes Shell as an exemplar to show how “corporate enactments of sustainability should not be conceptualised and evaluated in terms of a steady or one-way progression towards an ideal endpoint, even if it is acknowledged that the endpoint has to be continually aligned with the production of new knowledge” (Livesey, 2002b, 342).

Within management and organizational writing on sustainability, there has been a tendency to draw from and construct different discursive frames of which we delineate just two in our discussion above. Advocates of weak sustainability tend to cite other organizational writers,

or eco-modernists more than they cite authors from deep ecology, or advocates of radical change – and tend to be more prescriptive. Advocates of strong sustainability tend to be more critically oriented and base their work on a reading of deep ecology, environmental justice and politics. Most contend, however, that there is more organizations could be doing to advance the environmental and sustainability cause. According to Dryzek (1997, pp 123-152) discourses on sustainable development and ecological modernisation (which we have termed weak sustainability) also tend to rely on metaphors which seek to link economic growth with environmental protection, suggest progress and seek to reassure society that we can have it all. Such metaphors stand in contrast to those invoked in the discourse of ecological survivalism that emphasises limits, carrying capacity, overshoot, catastrophe and which suggest more emotional, biological, and interconnected ties between humans and environment.⁴

Notably, a small number of writers, whose work we would locate within the discourse of ecological modernization, explicitly employ the journey metaphor in describing sustainability not as destination but as an ongoing adaptive learning process. In this vein, Rowledge, Barton & Brady's 1999 text *Mapping the journey: Case studies and action toward sustainable development* "features – and honours – people and organisations charting unknown paths in a ...challenging landscape" none of whom it was claimed had reached the destination (p. 15). Allen & Bonazzi's (2001) *Metaphors for change: Partnerships, tools and civil action for sustainability* promises "a roadmap for sustainability" in a collection of articles which they claim provide better metaphors than catastrophism or manicheism whose impact was limited "because they failed to connect with the mainstream of cultural, political and business ideas". The connection that these authors see must be made with current business practices – despite their being inherently unsustainable – and which focuses more on tools than on visions of sustainability, seems to us to call for more critical analysis.

We focus now on an even more significant manifestation of the journey metaphor in the business and professional literature – that found in corporate social (and environmental) reports, advertisements, and those of business associations set up to make pronouncements on businesses' capabilities in delivering sustainable development. These reports and other communications have been seen as having rhetorical significance in defining (and in not defining) what it is that sustainability stands for in the business context (see Livesey & Kearins, 2002). In exploring the usage of the journey metaphor in business discourse on sustainability, it makes sense to ask exactly what is it that organisations are professing to learn about sustainability. Similarly, given that organisations themselves have a hand in defining these concepts, what is it they are expecting audiences to learn about sustainability and their particular achievement of it? Where is business headed on its journey?

Dimensions of the Sustainability Journey in Business and Professional Texts

The notion of journey in connection with sustainability and sustainable development clearly has international currency beyond just business and professional texts. As a forerunner to our discussion of how these latter two sources construct the journey metaphor, we conducted a search using the Google search engine. Appendix 1 shows the prevalence of the term journey in connection with sustainability and sustainable development in relation to the frequency of other terms that we drew from definitions of sustainability and sustainable development used

⁴ Again, we are oversimplifying the range of metaphors that are used in a variety of discourses on environmentalism. See Dryzek (1997) for a more careful and detailed examination.

by various organisations and agencies.⁵ A search of many of these pages finds the coincidence of journey with sustainability and/or sustainable development in texts of political speeches, CEO's speeches, opening and closing statements at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, corporate advertising, corporate reports, corporate websites, newspaper reports, corporate and government agency newsletters, business association press releases, conference flyers and the titles of conference presentations. Appendix 1 also shows that some terms that we might have expected to show higher frequency in texts about sustainability and sustainable development – terms like 'limits', 'constraints', 'carrying capacity' and 'social equity' are less favoured than is 'journey'.

When business conceptualises the domain state of sustainability in reports and advertisements, there is typically some discussion of the difficulty of defining sustainability. Many then go on to employ a definition of sustainability closely related to the oft-quoted Brundtland definition⁶ of sustainable development that does not explicitly challenge growth, and that indeed assumes there is the ability to reconcile development and planetary imperatives. We thus see in the report of a major New Zealand power producer that “sustainability [is] a philosophy which enables organisations to meet the needs of the current generation, without compromising the needs of future generations” (Meridian Energy, 2001, p. 40) – this, despite it being “a broad concept, and we have been working to put our own meaning to it” (Meridian Energy, 2001, p. 4). With similar intent, Waste Management proclaims in its New Zealand report that “Sustainable development is achieved when measures of economic, environmental and social value creation are all advanced together” (Waste Management, 2001, p. 11). That SD has been appropriated into business discourse is made explicit in the following two examples from the WBCSD and Shell.

Sustainable development involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity. Companies aiming for sustainability need to perform not against a single, financial bottom line but against this triple bottom line (World Business Council for Sustainable Development).⁷

⁵ These included, for example, Earth Council: Sustainable development requires environmental health, economic prosperity and social equity. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (an agency of the European Commission): Sustainable development is the achievement of continued economic and social development without detriment to the environment and natural resources. The quality of future human activity and development is increasingly seen as being dependent on maintaining this balance. Redefining Progress: Sustainability means resolving the conflict between two competing goals: the sustenance of human life and the integrity of nature. Why two competing goals? Living beyond our ecological means will lead to the destruction of humanity's only home. Having insufficient natural resources, and living in unsatisfactory and inequitable ways will cause destructive conflict and degrade our social fabric. In a sense, we're putting a new spin on the old nature vs. nurture question. How can we get nurture without destroying its ultimate source, nature? The World Business Council for Sustainable Development: Sustainable development involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity. Companies aiming for sustainability need to perform not against a single, financial bottom line but against this triple bottom line. World Conservation Union: Improving the quality of life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems. UK Sustainable Development Commission: Sustainability means quite simply the capacity for continuance into the long term. On Planet Earth, that capacity is determined by the laws of Nature, by the biophysical constraints and self-regenerating capacities that sustain all life.

⁷ The origins of this quotation are not entirely clear. This quote no longer appears on the WBCSD website, but it is attributed to the WBCSD on numerous websites. However, it is also attributed to John Elkington in *Cannibals With Forks: The triple bottom line of 21st Century Business*. Whether the WBCSD acquired its definition of sustainable development from Elkington is unclear. What is clear, however, and as we shall see later, is that “journey” as a metaphor is also frequently attached to the triple bottom line, and especially the process of triple bottom line reporting.

Sustainable development means just that, taking into full consideration all economic, environmental and social aspects of investment decisions and operational activities. It's the way we do business (Johnson, Chairman of Shell NZ, in Springett, 2001, p. 26).

In many corporate social (and environmental) reports, and other corporate pronouncements, there is an emphasis on 'continuous improvement' and 'moving forward', especially 'towards sustainability'. Forward movement, progress, continuous improvement, and learning all feature strongly associated with journey and sustainability/sustainable development. If the 'journey' metaphor is not invoked directly, then it is often done so indirectly through other entailments such as movement down a path or road, taking steps, or even through the achievement of milestones. We are told, for example, that "Kodak is making sustainable development a key component of its corporate environmental goals and product planning initiatives" and that "Kodak's journey toward sustainable development involves a commitment to ongoing improvements in the environmental performance of our existing manufacturing operations as well as environmentally conscious design of new products and processes." (Timmons, 2001). A particularly illustrative example of how journey can be invoked in statements about how organisations are seeking to deal with sustainability comes from URS New Zealand:

...URS New Zealand recognises the importance of managing its own operations in a sustainable way — "walking the talk" with meaning. As in our work with clients, we are continuously looking for ways to improve performance through innovation and initiatives. Waste minimisation is among the steps we have taken. We recognise this is a journey and we are constantly looking to challenge the way we think and operate. We do so further encouraged by the knowledge that we are just part of a wider group of New Zealanders travelling the same road together. (Mark Drury, CEO URS New Zealand, p. 14, *Industry Guide to Zero Waste*, August 2002, NZBCSD).

Similarly, from the UK Off Shore Operators' Association – for the Oil & Gas Industry, we read about their sustainable development "roadmap" for 1990-2010:

In developing this strategy, a roadmap has been produced to explain the key milestones and external events that have had most impact on the oil and gas industry and the most significant actions already taken. To this analysis of past events have been added milestones and key actions now planned for the future. The roadmap is intended to present a broad view of change over time and how the different strands of sustainable development are woven together (www.ukooa.co.uk/issues/sustainability/sectiona.htm).

Invoking the journey metaphor also permits organisations to emphasise the difficulties involved, and to perhaps indicate that they are only just starting out. So, in a promotional flyer advertising a presentation by Deborah Zemke, Director Corporate Governance, Ford Motor Company, we are told:

...the transition [to sustainable products and product usage] is still elusive. Even in good times, changing the company's culture and business processes is not an easy process — and financial woes have since made the task even more challenging. Ford's path is less a straight line than a jagged trail with many switchbacks — but it has been a learning journey nonetheless (Brands, Boards and Business Models: Beyond the Triple Bottom Line, 2003).

In Landcare New Zealand's 2000 annual report (p.4), the CEO states, "It is my belief that radical targets are also required if we are to stimulate the innovation and thinking 'out of the

square' necessary to make significant progress along the road towards sustainable development." While Landcare in this instance plays up the significant challenge sustainability poses, others choose to downplay it, noting for example, that the company is "at the early stages of the sustainability journey" (Meridian Energy, 2001, p. 5). In other cases, the challenge is acknowledged, but credit is sought for having made a start. "We have some way to go but we're on the road. Welcome therefore to Tall Poppies first TBL report" (Directors Statement, p.5, Tall Poppies, 2001-2002 Triple Bottom Line Report).

Despite pervasive reference to journeying, our analysis reveals there is far less emphasis in the texts on destination. Indeed some companies state there is no destination. "...there is no defined end point – the commitment is to a journey" states electricity generator, Mighty River Power (2001, p.17). Coupled with an emphasis on journey and a de-emphasis of destination is reference to progress and learning. Dow Chemical, for example, in an advertisement headed "While we learn, we make good progress. Judge for yourself", tell us that "The challenge we face on our journey toward sustainability is that the end point is not defined. Neither by us, nor by our stakeholders. We are all learning and adjusting course and expectations as we travel along... (Dow Chemical Company, in *Tomorrow Magazine*, Vol. 6, December 2002). The same point is made by a Dow executive, who suggests:

At Dow we view Sustainable Development as a long-term journey during which we will have to invent and discover a sustainable future. Like most journeys, there is more than one way to get to a destination. Equally, we recognize we still have many more miles to travel. Nonetheless, the sooner you start the sooner you show progress! (George Biltz, Business Vice President, Custom & Fine Chemicals, Washington, D.C., 14 May 2003, www.dow.com/dow_news/speeches/20030514a.htm)

Similarly, Canadian aluminium giant Alcan, titles its sustainable development report "Our Journey", stating:

Sustainability is not a destination. It is a continuing journey of learning and change. Our values serve as our compass. Our stakeholders provide insights about the best possible routes to travel and ways to make the journey valuable for all who are involved. Our business systems—the combination of our policies, commitments, management systems and metrics—help us define our path and measure progress along the way. (*Our Journey*, Alcan Corporate Sustainability Report, 2002, p.1).

While forward movement and learning might imply progress, we also see here elements of paradox and contradiction in the way business has chosen to conceptualize its approach to sustainability. On the one hand, we are told sustainability is not a destination: it is a journey. Yet on the other hand, we are told it is possible to measure progress towards sustainable development. Without a defined end point, future state of affairs or future condition of (or for) sustainability, though, how is it possible to know one is making progress *towards* sustainability? It seems to us that to deny sustainability a destination is also to deny one the logical possibility of arguing that progress is being made *towards* sustainability. Yet, at the same time, with no defined end point, it is possible always to show "progress" is being made relative to a *previous* state of (unsustainable?) affairs. And indeed this would seem to fit the more 'normal' notion of progress: as something or some state that is 'better' than what existed before.

Being less unsustainable, however, is not equivalent to being sustainable. As long-term green campaigner, Jonathan Porritt, Chairman UK Sustainable Development Commission, and Programme Director, Forum for the Future, notes:

...behind sustainable development lies the even more important concept of sustainability. Sustainability means quite simply the capacity for continuance into the long term. On Planet Earth, that capacity is determined by the laws of Nature, by the biophysical constraints and self-regenerating capacities that sustain all life. Learn to live within those limits, and our prospects for continuance as a species are fine. Continue to live as 'outlaws', as we do now, and our survival prospects are dodgy. The rest of life on Earth will, in time, recover from our devastating impact, but we'll be stuffed.

Against that backdrop, sustainable development should be best seen as the journey we must take to arrive at the destination of sustainability; as a dynamic, politically contested, often muddled set of ideas and processes with which we are painfully learning to engage for the very first time (*Moving Sustainable Development Centre Stage*, Speech given on 24 May, 2002, www.culture.gov.uk/PDF/sustainable_heritage_porritt_speech.pdf).

The business discourse on sustainability that we have investigated more generally is one that does not fully reference 'limits', 'constraints', and the possibility that as a species we are living like "outlaws" beyond the laws of nature, yet it is one that claims to be aiming and making progress *towards* sustainability. Moreover, increasingly organised efforts through business associations around the world emphasise movement towards sustainability and/or sustainable development. The stated aim of the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, for example, is to "...accelerate progress towards sustainable development by providing leadership and demonstrating best practice..."(Spiller, 2002). Similarly, the Cement Sustainability Initiative (CSI), a group of ten leading cement companies from around the world, released a report entitled *Our Agenda for Action* in July 2002, and went on to say "[W]e actively invite other cement companies to join with us on the journey towards a more sustainable future."(www.wbcdcement.org). Like pronouncements have also come from the international council of chemical manufacturers associations (ICCA) in their *Responsible Care Report* (July, 2002) and their *On the Road to Sustainability: A contribution from the Global Chemical Industry to the World Summit on Sustainable Development* (August, 2002 – see www.icca-chem.org). Within the UK, too, a series of progress reports "towards sustainability" have emerged from a raft of manufacturers' associations including, *inter alia*, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT), the UK Off Shore Operators Association (Oil & Gas), the UK Aluminium Industry, the British Cement Association, and the Brick Industry (see, www.pioneersgroup.co.uk/documentlibrary.asp).

Business organisations, and their spokespeople, too, through a variety of media (corporate reports, press releases, CEO speeches) also appear keen to make use of other events at which they can continue to emphasise their commitments and achievements towards sustainability. The Shell Oil Co. Foundation, for example, having announced a \$3.5 million endowment to Rice University to establish the Shell Center for Sustainability, tell us that they "...believe corporate decision-making should be a critical component of the world's journey toward a sustainable future, and the foundation of this center demonstrates Shell's commitment to play a meaningful role in promoting understanding and employment of sustainable development principles in corporate decisions" (Watts, Chairman of Managing Directors, Shell, 2002). Emphasis on journey, progress and success also appears in the acceptance speeches of business leaders receiving awards for their organisations reports on social and environmental

performance. Clive Mather, Chairman of Shell UK Ltd, for example, after winning the ACCA's 2001 UK Sustainability Reporting award, tells us "we have set out on a long journey to bring sustainable development thinking into the way we run our businesses. This recognition received today gives us encouragement that we are heading in the right direction" (Quoted in Steckel, 2002, p. 18).

The increasing prevalence of both "journey" and "sustainability" in business discourse can also be seen through the way in which both terms have "morphed" into new but related uses. In particular, it is increasingly observed that "reporting" on an organisation's triple bottom line, is, itself, a journey, or part of the journey, and that such reporting shows a commitment to, and potentially leads to becoming a "sustainable business", as opposed to business contributing to a sustainable society. Tall Poppies, a New Zealand -based consultancy, for example, invite us to "...journey through [their] report, provide feedback..." and that "...completing our first TBL report is another step along the way [towards sustainability]." (Triple Bottom Line Report, 2001-2002). Similarly, Lindsay Gow, acting CEO for the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment, tells us that the Ministry "know there will be some gaps in [their] first report but [they] are keen to start on the journey" (quoted in *Environment Update*, March, 2002, p. 1). In developing guidelines for sustainable development reporting by organisations, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) state they "...believe the June 2000 Guidelines represent a major step toward a generally accepted, global framework for sustainability reporting at the organisational level. Of course, even with this progress, we are at the very earliest stages of a long journey" (www.globlareporting.org/GRIguidelines). Similarly, the president of the Group of 100, the organization representing the CFOs of Australia's leading companies, tells us in a press release titled "How to Navigate your way through the Triple Bottom Line" the triple bottom line "is a journey the form of which will depend on the objectives and the strategies of particular companies...the decision to undertake TBL is to embark on a journey. Once commenced it is difficult to turn back and the approach adopted by a company today is unlikely to be the same as that adopted in future years" (www.group100.com.au/media/mr_20030305.htm).

Organisations, thus, tell us that "Our decision to report triple bottom line is a further declaration of...commitment to being a socially accountable and sustainable company in balancing our economic, social and environmental goals" (The Warehouse, Triple Bottom Line Report, 2001, p. 1), and that, in the words of Lloyd Taylor, Shell NZ Chairman, business is keen to:

...earn the trust of our many stakeholders, and to win them over to our argument that you can have robust, sustainable, profitable businesses, alongside a sustainable future where people are valued equally with profits. This 2003 Sustainability Series [of conference presentations] will continue to ensure the dialogue occurs which can help the business world along on this journey. (Extracts from the Boards, Brands and Business Models: Beyond the Triple Bottom Line, 2003, conference flyer).

Or to put it in a way that controverts the original Brundtland definition of sustainable development:

Industry is on a three-stage journey from environmental compliance, through environmental risk management, to long-term sustainable development strategies... Business strategies for sustainable development mark the final phase in the journey. The aim is to seek win-win situations which can achieve environmental quality, increase wealth, and enhance competitive advantage... For the business enterprise, sustainable development means

adopting strategies and activities that meet the needs of the enterprise and its stakeholders today while protecting, sustaining and enhancing the human and natural resources that will be needed in the future. (International Institute for Sustainable Development, www.iisd.org).

While *stakeholders* often feature as part of the journeying rhetoric, at other times companies are somewhat more candid that shareholders are the likely beneficiaries of their journey. Port of Tauranga, for example, states “Internationally there has been a strong trend for leading companies to follow [triple bottom line reporting] and studies show that this is a feature increasingly sought by investors, who are looking to identify companies that can achieve consistent growth through operations that are genuinely sustainable.”(Port of Tauranga, Annual Report, 2002, p.5). According to the CFO of Port of Tauranga, triple bottom line reporting gives “...shareholders an additional insight into the work [they] are doing to ensure the long-term success of the enterprise.” (Press release: Port wins award for annual report, 16 June, 2003, www.port-tauranga.co.nz).

There are fairly common dimensions of journeying in the corporate reports, advertisements, press releases, executive speeches, and business association literature that we have analysed. The journey is long, difficult, on-going, perhaps never ending, and ill-defined. Defining the destination of such a journey, however, is avoided, often denied, but yet it remains possible to aim and measure progress towards sustainability. The journey metaphor is applied to both *commitments* (and possibly to) *actions* (behaviours, decisions, etc.) that might be considered to lead towards sustainability, and to the process of *reporting* on the triple bottom line. Indeed, for some companies pursuing the triple bottom line is what sustainable development is all about. According to the outpourings of business and its associations, the journey is also about how business can contribute towards a sustainable future for stakeholders and society, and how the journey can help sustain business for the interests of shareholders. Organisations that attempt this journey see themselves as bold and pioneering. They present as wanting to be seen as honest and open about their business activities –and some claim in their reports to reveal “warts and all”. They appear keen to earn to the trust of stakeholders, and tend to assume that reporting will lead to them being seen as trustworthy compared to those who do not report. Reporting and other business communications thus provide a stage on which ‘enlightened’ organisations choose to display aspects of themselves and their engagement with sustainability. These business texts produce an orthodoxy that takes the form of weak sustainability – in which continued profits, growth, and organizational survival remain unquestioned, and for which its purveyors by virtue of their self-professed leadership, sometimes win for themselves considerable acclaim. They, and thus the use of metaphor within them, are not without significant power effects.

Discussion – A Metaphor with Subtle and Powerful Effects

With metaphor being “the most significant feature of poetic composition” (Walters-York, 1996), its embrace in sustainability discourse, and specifically in business reporting of sustainability aims and achievements, has both subtle and powerful effects. Presenting sustainability as a journey with such prevalence is to subtly shape and construct knowledge about organisations and their practices with regard to sustainability in a variety of ways.

The sustainability as journey metaphor has the effect of simplifying sustainability into something even a layperson or someone new to sustainability could likely understand. Metaphor according to Lakoff (1993) is very much part of everyday language – it can serve as a device to make things appear ordinary. Because of prior use of the ‘journey’ concept in

a variety of contexts including organizational and business contexts, it is not a novel metaphor which serves to defamiliarise, and hence raise questions or force a reconceptualisation. Rather, the concept is familiar and largely supports current practice. Sustainability is thus collapsed within this metaphor into something understandable – and do-able, even, and this is perhaps more so, when sustainability is itself coupled with or defined as the triple bottom line.

A second effect of this metaphor is that of deferring sustainability, in the sense of forestalling radical change that many commentators believe is necessary for its achievement. Though sustainability becomes do-able, the doing is embedded within the notion of journeying, with, in current business incantations of that term, a strong emphasis on embarkation on the journey. We note here that we have seen little in the way of ‘we are about to embark’ or ‘we will embark’ – rather that businesses have embarked, and that having embarked they are on the journey, that is that they are doing sustainability – without having defined the latter term with any real degree of specificity. The employment of a metaphor imbued with strategic ambiguity here preserves future options.

The third effect of the sustainability as journey metaphor that we identify is that of humanising sustainability. Presenting sustainability this way is to do so in human rather than in scientific terms that appeal to logic, truth and/or reason. Journey within the organisational context are less precise affairs, where learning is perceived to be of importance, confusion is more likely to be tolerated, and imperfection in execution (trial and error, backtracking etc) expected in the pursuit of overall and possibly even long term progress. Metaphorical expression could be seen as a good substitute for more literal language if one was seeking to avoid the kind of specificity that more scientific language would routinely try to use as the basis for formulating testable theories.

A fourth effect is that of redefining sustainability in ways that do not threaten business as usual. The wider debate around the meaning of sustainability has played into the hands of business who, expected to engage in the debate and practice of sustainability, seen as both cause and potentially as solution to global environmental and social problems, has conveniently supplied a meaning largely in its own interest. Journeying, however, as we have suggested provides a persuasive metaphor because its meaning is evocative rather than particularly precise. Journey is very much a postmodern term in its polyvalency. Journeys can be long or short – or even never-ending which we suspect is the version business currently concurs with. Journeys can be straightforward or difficult, direct or circuitous depending on how they are contextualised and how they are read. In short, and following Humpty Dumpty in his conversation with Alice, at the end of this paper, journeys can mean whatever the masters of the term want them to be. It seems to have become fashionable to say that sustainability cannot be defined or is difficult to define. ‘Journey’s’ polyvalence has a good fit here. It does not suggest sustainability has any precise meaning thus it does not suppress sustainability’s commonly understood conflicted nature. It supports it – and in supporting a lack of clarity as to what sustainability might really mean, it serves to justify incremental rather than radical efforts to change – precisely because it avoids all discussion of what it is business might change to. By portraying themselves as “on the path to” or “moving toward” sustainable development, company managers can avoid the stigma of being seen to be doing nothing and wedded to the old-fashioned paradigm of economic exploitation, while at the same time deflecting attention away from debating the kind of (radically different) performance that is needed to provide a sustainable future. Journey in

this context couples economic growth with environmental protection and links it with progress.

Let us further explore the elements of paradox here. If, as Sutton (2000) suggests – as in the business case and within the discourse of ecological modernisation - that “sustainability is fundamentally about maintaining valued things or dynamics that already exist”, then a journey to some other state is entirely paradoxical – unless that journey represents a kind of conservative progress toward some state where resources (whether currently valued or not) are increased beyond what currently exists. Such a state would of course require definition.

There are some interesting insights to be had if we open our minds to the voices of those who examine paradox rather than to just those who seek to preserve the status quo- and in the name of favouring metaphor which opens out understandings (as with journey) actually employ it in the service of closing down or suppressing at least one of the possible meanings – that of destination. Following Sutton’s argument further: “Sustainability is the flip-side of loss or extinction so it makes no sense to be concerned about sustainability unless the aim is to try to actually achieve it. Sustainability should always be approached with a sense of immediacy and practicality even if the task to achieve the sustainability of something that is valued is enormous” (Sutton, 2000). We do get that sense of immediacy in business talk about sustainability – these businesses have embarked upon a journey - but there remains a problem in how the rhetoric actually translates into sustainable business practices. Again, the journey metaphor, while capturing emotional intensity, as Clancy (1999) observed, is short on operational complexity. Perhaps this is most obvious when one considers that although particular business action is billed as a journey *to* (or *towards*) sustainability, the operational detail that corporate environmental and social reports give is mostly about a journey *from* unsustainability. It is about embarkation and not destination. Gray & Milne (2003) make the point that all discussion of the triple bottom line is aspirational and does not yet describe what happens in practice. What we see in business discussions of sustainability is excitement around initial forays and experimentation. Description of what a sustainable business would actually look like (i.e., one that contributes to a sustainable society rather than one that sustains itself at the expense of society) is generally avoided.

Sutton (2000) makes the following comments specifically in relation to the conceptualization of sustainability as a journey. “When we deal with sustainability we cannot afford to have an open-ended attitude. In the case of sustainability, the ‘destination’ is definitely more important than the ‘journey’. But a sustainable state is not a place, it is a condition.... just like health is a condition and not a place. There are a huge range of ways to be sustainable but it’s imperative that we actually achieve one of those configurations, otherwise we will not achieve sustainability and something that we value highly will be lost....Working forever ‘towards’ is not enough!” (Sutton, 2001).

Conclusions

In line with much critical commentary, this paper takes the position that strong sustainability is something which is paradoxical, and which is about fundamental and quite radical change to current business practice. The journey metaphor employed in corporate social reports and elsewhere in the business literature is argued to be a potent excuse. Organizations who adopt it are representing themselves as doing some things to change and are aware that they have to do more, without necessarily specifying in any particular detail what the ultimate destination of their respective journeys will be.

Some businesses have been quick to grasp the (eco) efficiency nettle (e.g., resource, waste and energy management), and lately some concept of stakeholder engagement and dialogue. Virtually unaddressed, however, are issues of equity and social justice, and completely unaddressed are issues of the scale of development, limits and constraints to that development, and future generations. While such issues remain central to many definitions of sustainability and seriously challenge the notion of unlimited economic growth and current ways of thinking and acting, business claims to be responding to the demands of becoming sustainable. To grow sales, enhance reputation, reduce risks and pre-empt regulation, businesses are seemingly able to embrace a concept that potentially denies them such outcomes.

The journey metaphor translates sustainability (or sustainable development) into a never-ending process. Through adopting an infinite process approach, companies can continue to defer addressing key issues: limited resource availability; finite substitution possibilities; a lack of connectedness and our collective peril; and no special place for the environment at all. The concept of sustainability is being defined in ways that largely permit business-as-not-too-unusual; a strategy that sidesteps the difficult challenges posed by questions such as, “What is to be sustained?” and “How is it to be sustained?” This paper uses discourse analysis to situate a powerful and subtle metaphor to demonstrate how business is seeking mastery over the sustainability debate. In opening out reductionist understanding of the ‘sustainability as journey’ metaphor, we have revealed an important paradox in business representations of sustainability.

It is argued that business is constructing ‘sustainability’ *as a journey* to avoid specifying some future desirable *state of affairs*. We suggest that by portraying ‘sustainability’ in this way, businesses, and the related political and professional literature, have invoked a subtle and powerful, use of language that appears to seriously engage with the elements of the sustainable development discourse. Yet at the same time, by constructing and promoting its own version of the discourse, very much as Humpty Dumpty does, it de-emphasises discussion of desirable future states of living, and neatly sidesteps any debate about, or need to radically change course. The paper illustrates how the word ‘journey’ is invoked throughout corporate reports and other forms of business communication in a process of corporate myth-making. Businesses are constructing a “wonderland” discourse.

“There’s glory for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’ ” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’ ”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’ ” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

(*Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll).

Appendix: Number of “web pages” uncovered using Google™ search engine when searching for *Sustainability* and “...” or “*Sustainable Development*” and “...” on April 25, 2003.

	Sustainability	Sustainable Development
Progress	474,000	514,000
Nature	512,000	507,000
Conservation	392,000	441,000
Poverty	285,000	397,000
Environmental Protection	213,000	283,000
Economic Growth	198,000	207,000
Environmental Management	157,000	188,000
Survival	176,000	156,000
Ecosystem	159,000	150,000
Exploitation	124,000	143,000
Preservation	141,000	140,000
Future Generations	142,000	136,000
Environmental Health	65,000	81,600
Environmental Quality	80,700	80,300
Social Justice	66,200	68,300
Journey	62,800	64,200
Nature Conservation	35,200	51,600
Renewable Resources	34,800	32,200
Substitution	39,800	30,400
Precautionary Principle	17,800	23,000
Carrying Capacity	28,800	22,400
Social Equity	18,500	20,100
Eco-efficiency	14,600	17,500
Economic Prosperity	15,800	16,700
Non-renewable Resources*	14,580	13,900
Natural Capital	14,900	12,800
Triple Bottom Line	14,200	10,100
Over-population*	8,160	8,850
Ecosystem Health	14,400	8,810
Ecological Footprint	11,600	8,380
Inter-generational Equity*	6,670	6,620
Shareholder Value	10,600	6,600
Over-consumption*	6,780	6,090
Environmental Constraints	5,590	6,050
Limits to Growth	5,600	5,170
Unsustainability	5,790	3,870
Irreversibility	3,300	2,650
Assimilative (Capacity)	2,470	2,290
Environmental Limits	1,940	1,950
Ecological Limits	2,160	1,910
“Towards”	26,600	29,400
“Achieving”	8,960	21,500
“Path to”	1,760	1,430
“Road to”	1,240	1,020

* Indicates pages counted with and without the hyphen and summed.

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