

Preface

We appear to be living in the best of times and the worst of times, a time of paradoxes. Much of what appears to be progress may actually be decline. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union offer unparalleled opportunities for democracy worldwide, while, at the same time, the level of ethnic and regional conflicts has never been greater (Head 1992). Although we increasingly recognize the importance of plurality and the

While I was finalizing my research proposal in the summer of 1996, one of my best friends died very suddenly and at a young age. Once in a while, a special person or animal walks into your life. Odessa Mamut was such a being; he was the gentlest creature I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Since his death, the words “compassion for all living beings” and “doing no harm” keep reverberating.

diversity of human societies worldwide, homogenization through globalization appears to be accelerating. Postmodernist thought is paralleled by a worldwide trend in fundamentalism. We live in an information age, and yet many people remain fundamentally ignorant of most key ecological processes. Overall wealth is increasing at the same time as income disparities are widening. We have the technology to travel to the moon, yet we do not know anything about, nor have we even named, most of the species on our planet – many of which are threatened with extinction. We can explore Mars, and yet the internal combustion machine continues to pollute our planet. We produce arms and sell them to countries who then turn around and use them against us. Many of the world’s scientists are engaged in arms and war-related research. It is, indeed, a paradoxical time, as biophysical evidence continues to mount that human growth and consumption patterns are slowly destroying the habitat on which survival depends, earth.

Paradoxes, however, can be viewed as both crises and opportunities. The solutions we seek for moving towards more sustainable societies may well lie in learning to reconcile the tensions within the paradoxes rather than in denying their existence simply because we feel powerless to change our current planning, decision-making, and activity systems. Whether a paradox is perceived as a crisis or an opportunity depends very much on where one is located in what Foucault (1980) refers to as “power/knowledge” systems (Lather 1991). As the following chapters outline, feelings of powerlessness allow us to continue living in massive denial of our present ecological reality, as we degrade our current and, some analysts would argue, our future ecological capital at an unprecedented rate and scale (Capra 1996; Daily 1997; Earle 1995; Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1997; Gordon and Suzuki 1990; Hill 1975; Meadows et al. 1992; Odum 1973; and Wackernagel and Rees 1996).

The central assumption of my story is that the implementation of sustainable development is the human imperative of the twenty-first century, requiring strong leadership by local, regional, and national governments, and that governments must move beyond simply being governments to governance, actively engaging all sectors of society in its implementation. How? Through reconciliation and dialogue. Sustainable development can be regarded as a process involving the reconciliation of three imperatives: (1) the ecological imperative to live within global biophysical carrying capacity and to maintain biodiversity; (2) the social imperative to ensure the development of democratic systems of governance that can effectively propagate and sustain the values by which people wish to live, and (3) the economic imperative to ensure that basic needs are met worldwide. And equitable access to resources – ecological, social, and economic – is fundamental to its implementation.

Human activity, as implied in the notion of sustainable development, affects three broad external systems: the ecological, the social, and the economic, all of which are ultimately dependent on the development of one internal system: the individual. It is counter-productive to debate which is more fundamental. Addressing all four is both necessary and sufficient. The three external imperatives are causally interdependent: it is not possible to change the direction or nature of one without also affecting the other two. Given this interconnectedness, failure to properly consider any one will make it impossible to address the other two. And failure to integrate the personal and the professional may well prove, in the long run, to impede any real progress in reconciling these three imperatives.

There are two inter-related levels of human activity – the personal and the political – and these are often mistakenly separated. This book focuses on the latter and its organizational implications, as I believe that sustainable

development will not be realized without effective government leadership – leadership that will enable us, over the next decade, to diffuse sustainable development concepts and practices before we reach irreversible thresholds. I have also assumed that the socio-economic system is a closed rather than an open system and that human activity systems are a part of natural systems, with biospheric limits.

Government leadership will not ensue, however, unless a framework based on the reconciliation of ecological, social, and economic imperatives is implemented across governments at all levels. Such a framework is critical for consistent and effective government leadership in all sectors of Canadian society, ultimately leading to new forms of governance if sustainable development is to be effectively implemented at all levels of human activity. So far, in the absence of an organizing concept, efforts to coordinate natural resource policies either have been largely ineffective or have been used to favour one use over others (Caldwell 1970).

This story begins, in Chapters 1 through 3, with a discussion of the overall context of sustainable development, including the specific research context that led to my writing this narrative. Although sustainable development is still a fairly amorphous paradigm (Pierce 1999), I argue that, because of its integrative potential, it offers the best possibilities for reconciling human activity systems and natural systems over both the short and the long term. In Chapters 4 through 6, I offer a global discussion of the three sustainable development imperatives – the ecological, the social, and the economic. There are numerous debates as to whether the glass is half empty or half full. I have chosen, however, to focus on the half-empty glass, because although numerous positive examples of sustainable development are now emerging in all sectors of society and in a number of communities, the condition of our world and its continuing deterioration is so great that it requires special attention. Particularly notable failures are the Kyoto Convention on Climate Change and the 1992 Biodiversity Convention. In the case of the former, in spite of enormous government efforts and measures, it is now clear that we will not even meet the new greenhouse gas reductions of 6 percent below 1990 levels by 2012. With respect to the Biodiversity Convention, as is discussed in Chapter 4, it has neither slowed the destruction of habitat nor slowed the rate of human-induced species extinction rates. Therefore, I argue that, given the global ecological, social, and economic evidence, it is clear that human societies everywhere must embrace a new paradigm, adopt new metaphors, and create new space for policy alternatives that re-direct human activity systems to face our critical ecological realities.

I then turn from the global to the Canadian context. In Chapter 7, I detail the systemic restraining forces working against the implementation

of sustainable development at the federal level – namely, the solitudes, silos, and stovepipes that characterize Canada. By solitudes I am referring to the deep cleavages that separate us by language, geography, and gender. Stovepipes are the great divides between sectors – between the research community and governments, between the research community and the private sector, and between each of these and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Silos are the separations within and between government departments, and in universities between academic disciplines. I believe that a failure to address such restraining forces would make any proposed framework for reconciliation merely theoretical. In Chapter 8, I discuss the centrality of social actors and their institutions, since sustainable development must be socially constructed, that is, social and economic arrangements must be made purposively and responsibly (Cernea 1994). Chapter 9 looks at purposeful decision making for sustainable development. The last chapter, entitled Reflections, shares some of my thoughts on my own context while writing this book.

Some understanding of my own location and context may enhance your appreciation of the arguments put forth in this book. Most of my career has been spent in a large bureaucracy, working with very senior decision makers. For over twenty-three years I was exposed, on a daily basis, to a dominant male system that placed a high value on rational, objective behaviour that was, in turn, based on an expert model of modern science. In large bureaucracies, often in order to meet brutal political deadlines, aggression is seen as positive. Detachment and emotional neutrality are the preferred professional behaviours, whereas compassion and caring are seen as undesirable. The possibility of detachment, however, may well be one of the greatest myths humans have adopted in their working lives. For we are very subjective creatures, and our perceptions of reality are strongly influenced by the paradigms, myths, and metaphors that find their way into both personal and professional contexts. We are not value free, and, paradoxically, we may achieve greater degrees of objectivity only when we can appreciate our subjectivity.

Values emerged as key to my research in a number of ways. First, my co-researchers in the electronic collaborative inquiry that was the platform for my work unanimously agreed on the centrality of values in their own lives and work as well as on the importance of values in any study of sustainable development. Second, my own work is passionately informed by my fundamental belief that we live in a world of false dualities and pathological separations that powerfully shape how we view our world, our place in the world, and our relationships with one another as well as with other species. Because I firmly believe that there is no real difference between my life and the life of “others,” my core value is a deep respect for all living beings.

And this core value affects the depth and nature of my grief when “other” creatures die, never mind members of my own species. My story, therefore, has been deeply affected by my context, and, perhaps, has become richer as a result of my internal journey. All stories, mine included, are greatly influenced by the prevailing cultural myths, metaphors, and paradigms that affect how we organize our activities at all levels of society.

Reconciliation became critical, for many, many reasons, while I was researching and writing this book. I lost four beloved animal companions and my only child. In my attempts to reconcile my grief and to continue my “professional” commitments, the only way through despair was to flow with my emotions. The one way I found to reconcile their loss was through the reintegration of my emotions with my intellect. Their deaths, paradoxically, freed me from an emotional straitjacket by opening up different pathways through despair. Just as life is a process, so is grief (and, I suspect, so is death). Most people survive grief, but to transcend the tragedy of premature death requires one to integrate the heart, the mind, and the soul. My personal experiences with grief have deepened my belief that the widespread denial of ecological reality is related to modern society’s denial of mortality and bereavement. We deny the existence of limits because recognizing biophysical limits means facing our own mortality. Recognizing that there are limits to the earth means accepting that there are limits to our being and to human activities. And because we perceive our human activity systems to be apart from natural systems, few of us really believe that what we do to the biosphere we also do to ourselves.

I have tried to tell my story as clearly and as simply as possible. Hopefully, the narrative is powerful enough to convince you of the need for reconciliation at all levels and of the central role of values, reconciliation, and dialogue in any framework for sustainable development.

There are always many ways to tell and read a story, and this book is designed to be read on multiple levels, through the interplay of boxes, text, and margins. The reader can choose to read only the boxes, or to read only the text, or, I would hope, to go between the text and the boxes so that each enriches and informs the other, enabling the centres and margins to shift (Hooks 1984). The text and boxes are not meant to substitute for one another but, rather, to complement one another. They are also a means of reconciling the emotional with the intellectual and the spiritual. I have used most of the boxes to highlight specific values and issues, providing quotes that attest to a diversity of knowledge.

My aim is to enlarge the boundaries of the text and the margins, thereby transcending the limits that both place upon each other. I believe that process and product are not separate from one another but, rather, that each is informed and influenced by the other. Thus, I have tried to mirror

principles of sustainable development in my choice of tools and techniques. I offer a kind of mapping of multi-level contextual space, where reconciliation of the ecological, social, and economic imperatives of sustainable development becomes an emergent process, and

the discourse [becomes] not a closure but a trace in an endless passage that can only aspire to a temporary arrest, to a self-conscious drawing of a limit across the diverse possibilities of the world. As Gilles Deleuze puts it, sense is a surface-effect, an event, and not the sign or symptom of an absent origin, a lost totality, or a pure consciousness. It is precisely this lack of a fixed referent or stable foundation that produces meaning. For to produce it does not mean to touch a sacred stone or turn the right key that will reveal the nature of things, but involves tracing out a recognizable shape on the extensive complexity of the possible. Our interpretations of society, culture, history and our individual lives, hopes, dreams, passions and sensations, involve attempts to confer sense rather than to discover it. (Chambers 1990: 11)