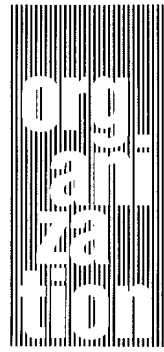


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Creating Adventures in Wonderland: The Journey Metaphor and Environmental Sustainability

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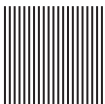
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Abstract. *This paper provides a critical exploration of the journey metaphor promoted in much business discourse on sustainability—in corporate reports and advertisements, and in commentaries by business and professional associations. The portrayal of ‘sustainability as a journey’ evokes images of organizational adaptation, learning, progress, 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 in constructing ‘sustainability as a journey’, business commentators and other purveyors of corporate rhetoric can avoid becoming embroiled in debates about future desirable and sustainable states of affairs—states of affairs, perhaps, which would question the very raison d’être for some organizations and their outputs. ‘Sustainability as a journey’ invokes a subtle and powerful use of language that appears to seriously engage with elements of the discourse around sustainable development and sustainability, but yet at the same time, paradoxically, may serve to further reinforce business-as-usual. **Key words.** business communication; journey; metaphor; paradox; progress; sustainability*





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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)

Business interest in the concept of sustainability appears to be increasing worldwide as evidenced through the emergence of various dedicated business associations, award schemes, reports and discussion documents on the implications of sustainability for business, as well as numerous environmental, management and accountancy consultancies positioning to offer businesses services connected with sustainability. Despite these developments, however, there is also considerable evidence in academic, professional and business literature that sustainability is a contested and elusive concept with which to engage (Barbier, 1987, 1989; Dixon and Fallon, 1989; Gladwin et al., 1995; Milne, 1996; Pearce et al., 1989; O'Riordan, 1991; Redclift, 1987; Zorvanyi 1998). In some instances, sustainability is considered to imply the need for the radical reorganization and restructuring of society along ecological principles, in other instances it is considered in terms of incremental reforms to the status quo. In seeking to understand and critique how business renders its engagement with sustainability through presenting it as a journey, in this paper we consider sustainability in its widest and contested sense. 'Sustainability as a 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, much 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



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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.¹ 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. Banerjee, 2001; Levy, 1997; Newton and Harte, 1997). A thin vein of this research has utilized discourse analysis (e.g. Banerjee 2003; Everett and Neu, 2000; Livesey, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Livesey and Kearins, 2002), but not focused exclusively on metaphor as we do.

Our analysis examines the presence of the journey metaphor analysing its usage in specific contexts, and its potential power effects in possibly forestalling the radical change that many commentators (e.g. Banerjee, 2003; Dryzek, 1997; Ehrenfeld, 1999; Shrivastava, 1994; Shrivastava and Hart, 1995; Welford, 1995, 1997a, 2000) believe necessary for the achievement of sustainability. We discuss various dimensions of the journey metaphor present in the business case for sustainable development and show how some businesses and business associations, although (re)presenting themselves 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 provide a review of the literature on sustainability. We contrast two approaches to understanding sustainability present in management, organization studies and accounting literature—the discourse of ecological modernization which is related to weak sustainability, contrasted with more radical and critical sustainability discourse which points to some of the limitations of the former. Second, we tease out the importance of metaphor before outlining the theoretical basis of our analysis of metaphor and paradox. Third, we examine the presence of the journey metaphor in management and organizational studies, linking it to discussions of organizational change, learning and progress, as well as to images of heroism, adventure and challenge. Fourth, we provide examples of the weak sustainability framing implied in the journey metaphor present in professional business literature, and in corporate social, environmental and sustainability 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.

Literature on Sustainability

Over several years reading the management, organization studies and accounting literature on business and sustainability, we discern two



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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 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 modernization (Hajer, 1995). 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 This strand sees existing and looming crises from the over-exploitation of resources and the unequal and unfair access to resources, due to such causes as over development, over consumption and over population. In essence it argues there is a need to live within the means of nature, there are limits to growth, and we are likely already beyond those limits.⁴ Both these strands are further outlined below.

Within the incrementalist perspective, labelled reform environmentalism by Egri and 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 tend to focus less on the definitional looseness of sustainability and sustainable development, and rather more on how it might be operationalized by business—ascribing business a major if not the primary role in bringing about sustainability. 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) incited 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 and Arnold, 1998). A number of writers earlier (e.g. Hart, 1995; Porter and van der Linde, 1995) had contended that business action towards sustainability and the environment in particular yielded win-win situations: good for both business and the environment. Elkington’s (1997, 2001) triple bottom line heuristic was further based on the possibility of such responsible business action being good for society as well as for business and the environment. Eco-efficiency thus became the *modus operandi* for many organizations and their promoters seeking to ‘create more value with less impact’ (WBCSD, 2000; Hukkinen, 2003). Everett and Neu (2000) explain this broad conceptualization as a variant of ecological modernization, and part of that discourse that promotes pro-activity 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



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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, organization studies, economics and political theory are fewer in number—but are generally united in their calls for strong sustainability, and often-times a more ecocentric, as opposed to an organization- or techno-centric approach. Definitions of strong sustainability emphasize not just an efficient allocation of resources over time, but also a fair distribution of resources and opportunities between the current generation and between present and future generations, and *a scale of economic activity relative to ecological life support systems* (e.g. Daly, 1992). Wackernagel and Rees (1996: 32–40) argue that sustainability is a simple concept that means: ‘living in material comfort and peacefully within the means of nature’. A number of these writers (e.g. Beder, 1997; Daly, 1973, 1992; Dobson, 1998; Everett and Neu, 2000; Gladwin et al., 1995; Gray, 1992; Gray and Bebbington, 2000; Gray and Milne, 2002, 2004; Milne, 1996; Welford, 1997b, 1998) have doubted the business case and business-centred approach, and are thus critical of current practice based on eco-efficiency as a sufficient solution. Eco-efficiency, as McDonough and Braungart (1998: 4) note:

... works within the same system that caused the problem in the first place
... It presents little more than an illusion of change. Relying on eco-efficiency to save the environment will in fact do the opposite—it will let industry finish off everything quietly, persistently, and completely.

Sufficiency, not efficiency, is the call from those who see the seriousness of environmental threats of a wholly different order from incrementalists (Pricen, 2003; Sachs, 1999). Daly (1992), for example in defining sustainability specifies: (1) rates of use for renewable resources that do not exceed their rates of regeneration; (2) rates of use for non-renewable resources that do not exceed the rate at which sustainable renewable substitutes are developed; and (3) rates of pollution emission that do not exceed the assimilative capacity of the environment. To these three, the OECD (2001) has added a fourth: avoiding irreversible impacts of human activities on ecosystems. As Zovanyi (1998: 151) notes, on the basis of Daly’s definition, there are clearly limits to the human enterprise, and there appears to be little evidence so far of sustainable behaviour at either global or lesser regional scales. He suggests that:

Among those seeking to formulate measures of sustainability during the closing years of this [20th] century, there appears to be a growing awareness of the need to end growth in both human and economic terms if there is to be any hope for a sustainable future. In terms of operational measures of sustainability, further human and economic growth would therefore be considered to present evidence of unsustainable behaviour under current demographic, economic, and ecological realities.

By ignoring the cumulative impact of economic activity on a limited resource base, eco-efficiency, and other organizational conceptions of



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sustainability are seen to fail to seriously connect with more urgent environmental and sustainability problems. 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. Newton (2002) looks at the normative rationale for a new ecological order and suggests a de-centring of business and a focus on networks as a new research perspective. Gladwin et al. (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). 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 including from proponents of a more far-reaching ecological politics (e.g. Hajer, 1995; Harvey, 1996). Davidson (2000) and Ratner (2004) also see the need to squarely place ethics and morality in the frame (see also Crane, 2000), and seek something more than technical consensus.⁵ Whether ethics and moralizing will help, however, is open to question. Gowdy (1994: 55), for example argues that the trouble with both those seeking to preserve economic growth, and those seeking environmental enlightenment, as means to environmental salvation, is that they both cling to false notions of progress— notions that need abandoning so we can 'concentrate on making do with what we have rather placing our hopes on some future material or ethical utopia'.

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 (2003:163) observes a discursive shift from sustainable 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'. Taylor (1992) had earlier warned that sustainable development are 'dangerous words now being used . . . to mask the same old economic thinking that preaches unlimited consumption in the crusade to turn more land into glorified golf courses, deadly suburban ghettos, and leaking garbage holes . . .' (quoted in Wackernagel and Rees, 1996: 40). Levy (1997) points to environmental management as offering political stability if not wholesale change. Gray and Milne (2004) liken the practice of establishing the rules of the game, and their subsequent



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modification in the case of sustainability to a contest—a contest in which organizations have a vested interest in influencing. Some elements of that contest are manifest in the metaphorical representations commonly employed in sustainability/values reporting. Livesey and 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 organizations 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: 123–52) discourses on sustainable development and ecological modernization (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 it is possible to have everything we might want without downside risk (see also Beck, 1992, 1995), invoking a false sense of the future perfect. Such metaphors stand in contrast to those invoked in the discourse of ecological survivalism that emphasize limits, carrying capacity, overshoot, catastrophe and which suggest more emotional, biological, and interconnected ties between humans and environment. Again, however, 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).

Notably, a small number of writers, whose work we would locate within the discourse of ecological modernization, explicitly employ a



journey metaphor in describing sustainability not as destination but as an ongoing adaptive learning process. In this vein, Rowledge and colleagues' 1999 text *Mapping the Journey: Case Studies and Action Toward Sustainable Development* features—and honours—people and organizations charting unknown paths in 'a . . . challenging landscape' none of whom it was claimed had reached the destination (1999:15). Allen and 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 those invoking catastrophe or evil versus good and 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.

The Basis For an Analysis of Metaphor and Paradox

Our work here fits within a tradition of studies in 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. Boland and Greenberg, 1992; Grant and Oswick, 1996; Inns, 2002; Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1988, 1997; Oswick and Grant, 1996; Tinker, 1986; Tsoukas, 1993, Walters-York, 1996). With understanding of metaphor in organization 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: 12; see also Ortony, 1993). Metaphor—though a poetic device—features strongly in everyday language (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). It is not just part of the way the world is conceptualized and understood, it structures experience (Lakoff and 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, organization 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 et al. (2002) specifically, in focusing



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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 might be the case without their use.

The *Collins English Dictionary's* (1995) definition of metaphor cited in Oswick et al. (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 (Johnson-Laird, 1989; Lakoff and Turner, 1989; Vosniadou and Ortony, 1989).⁶

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 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 organization theorists and others (see, for example Clegg 2000 and the papers contained therein; Stohl and Cheney 2001; see also Handy, 1994.). 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'.



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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 frame-breaking insights. 'Sustainability as a journey' provides us two discrete domains for investigation: 'journey' and 'sustainability'. Having explored the concept of sustainability above, in the next section we explore the separate characteristics and properties of the concept of journey in the literature on management and organizations and beyond. We then examine the commonalities or overlap between the domains, and then the potential benefits and adverse consequences of the adoption of this metaphor in defining organizational efforts towards sustainability. Finally, we turn to 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, as paradox.

Journey in Management and Organizational Writing

Many metaphors have been used by organization theorists to characterize organizations and organizational processes (Morgan, 1986, 1997). Over time, particular metaphors have waxed and waned in popularity. They have included military metaphors for organizing (orders, tactics, chains of command, etc.)—now discouraged by a number of writers including Weick (1979), family metaphors (e.g. Davidson, 1993), and, in some contexts, gardening metaphors [e.g. changing in harmony with (human) nature, nurturing, choosing the right time to grow and harvest etc.] (e.g. Axley, 2002; Thompson and Sanders, 1997). Each metaphor has considerable implications for behaviour in organizations, and organizations are said to change when their members change their metaphors for thinking about them (Pondy, 1983).

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 and 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



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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 and books by CEOs 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: 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' (1999: 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. They describe the following key entailments of the journey metaphor in these expressions of experience and organization: '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 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. 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. Somewhat less emphasized, however, are the notions of risk, danger and failure. 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 *journee*, meaning a day's expanse of time, and in particular, 'the portion or a march or expedition actually done in one



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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 paradox⁷ 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.

Journeying, we should reiterate, is generally construed positively in the above literature; the experimentation, learning and change it implies usually connotes progress. Progress, however, is more routinely problematized in the literature beyond management and organization studies—and we allude but briefly to some relevant ideas on progress here. Faith in progress, Beck (1995) maintains is the dominant attitude in industrial society (as in all past societies which can be shown to have exhibited a false belief in their own immortality). Faith in progress ‘affirms what happens anyway’ (Beck, 1995: 65). All progress and hence all journeying can thus be (naively) perceived to be good. With its mantra of ‘More! Bigger! Keep it up!’ (Beck, 1995: 3), industrial society typically proffers itself (through intensification of the technocracy) as the solution to any problem it creates. We see this response within eco-modernist optimism in technical solutions to environmental and social problems; we also see it within the commitment to incrementalist experimentation and learning (or journeying). Journeying is thus more about what can in the scheme of things be considered relatively minor changes to business-as-usual practices over time, than it is about movement or radical transformation. Earlier, pre-Enlightenment conceptions of journey and progress did refer more to movement or progression through space (Newton, 2003; Saul, 1995), rather than as has come to be the case, movement or progression through time.⁸ In the current incantation, then, journeying offers no grand vision or utopia, yet paradoxically hints at such a possibility. With journeying, the future remains unspecified.



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Rather, action of some sort or another, and progress through journeying, precludes the disruptive and radical leap in imagination that is utopianism (McManus, 2003). Journeying is the temporal bridge, maintaining and justifying the present into the (unspecified and perfect) future.

Mixing up notions of learning and experimentation with the challenge of change (albeit not specified as unradical), 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 behaviour is not one of linearity and reaching a destination but one of experimentation rather than radical transformation, 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 focus 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 and 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 organizations are professing to learn about sustainability. Similarly, given that organizations 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?

The Journey Metaphor in Business and Professional Texts on Sustainability

Previous qualitative analyses identify a number of prominent themes associated with sustainability in corporate reports including journeying. As noted, Livesey and Kearins (2002) identify caring and transparency as major themes in the sustainability values reports from Shell and the Body Shop. Similarly, in a recent bounded study of eight annual reports from



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organizational members of the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, Milne et al. (2004) identify caring and sharing; measuring and managing; commitment; balancing; and journeying, as major themes associated with the (re)presentation of sustainability. While 'journey' is not always the most dominant theme associated with sustainability in business and professional texts—'progress' and 'commitment' seem to occupy this position—it is a prominent theme, and our point here is to illustrate the ways in which business and professional texts use, construct and (re)present sustainability as a journey. Interestingly, however, in some texts journey is given preeminent status,⁹ and in others it is coupled with other dominant themes like commitment and progress.

The notion of journey in connection with sustainability and sustainable development, like several other prominent themes, 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 themes noted above, and from terms that we drew from definitions of sustainability and sustainable development used by various organizations and agencies.¹⁰ 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. Terms like caring, sharing, balancing, and particularly commitment and progress are also associated with sustainability and/or sustainable development throughout a wide range of these texts. 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'.

To further explore and illustrate how journey is used in these texts, we examined several thousand of the website references, and extracted pages and sources related to business and organizations. Extracts of texts were then initially organized under the types of texts they represented (e.g. corporate reports, advertisements and websites, business association press releases)—our intention here was to draw a range of illustrations from a range of textual sources. We next read through the extracts to see how journey was being invoked in conjunction with sustainability and/or sustainable development, and sought to organize its various (re)presentations under several thematic headings. Selected extracts are presented below to illustrate these various (re)presentations.¹¹



Looking Forward and Blending People, Profits and Planet

When business conceptualizes 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 definition of sustainable development that does not explicitly challenge growth, and that indeed assumes there is the ability to reconcile development and planetary imperatives.¹² We thus see in the report of a major New Zealand power producer that ‘sustainability [is] a philosophy which enables organizations to meet the needs of the current generation, without compromising the needs of future generations’ (Meridian Energy, 2001: 40). Meridian, however, also does not consider it necessary to be tied to definitions of others since sustainability is ‘a broad concept, and we have been working to put our own meaning to it’ (Meridian Energy, 2001: 4). That sustainable development is being appropriated into business discourse is made explicit in the following two examples from the World Business Council for Sustainable Development 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)¹³

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: 26)

Commitment to a Challenging Path of Continual Improvement, Learning and Progress

In many corporate social and environmental reports, and other pronouncements, there is an emphasis on a commitment to ‘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).

Invoking the journey metaphor also permits organizations to emphasize that they may be just beginning their engagement with sustainability,



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that there are difficulties involved, and that sustainability is about a process of continual learning. In a promotional flyer advertising a presentation by Deborah Zemke, Director Corporate Governance, Ford Motor Company, for example, 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)

A similar 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, 2003)

In Landcare Research New Zealand's 2000 annual report (2000: 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'. In *There is No Alternative*, Shell reports that 'Creating a sustainable world will be a daunting challenge—a tough journey of continual learning'.

A Journey With No Destination, But One in Which Progress is Made Towards Sustainability

Reference to journeying based on our analysis reveals there is little emphasis in the texts on destination. Indeed, some companies state there is no destination. 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', tells 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, 2002).

Interestingly, and in line with our earlier discussion about voyaging and exploration, one also finds references to navigating and having a compass. At Interface, for example, in addition to reference to 'our journey' there is also reference to 'our compass' and 'our progress' (see, Interface, 2004a). Similarly, one finds The Natural Step (TNS)—a consultancy seeking to promote sustainability—referring to being a compass or guide for business,¹⁴ and its clients referring to using the TNS framework as its compass.¹⁵



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Nike recognizes there is a long road ahead, and with The Natural Step as their guide, NEAT [Nike Environmental Action Team] is striving to encourage and empower everyone involved with their business—employees, subcontractors, vendors and customers—to join them in their journey toward sustainability. (The Natural Step, 2004)

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: 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. As we noted earlier (see note 8), however, logic has little to do with modern ideological notions of progress as both history *and* future inevitability.

Being less unsustainable 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. (Porritt, 2002)



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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 making progress *towards* sustainability.

Banding Together On A Shared Journey

A particularly illustrative example of how journey can be invoked in statements about how organizations 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, *Industry Guide to Zero Waste*, August 2002: 14, NZBCSD)

One can also see reference to camaraderie in the earlier Nike quote. Increasingly organized efforts through business associations around the world also 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.wbcscement.org). Similar pronouncements have also come from the International Council of Chemical Manufacturers Associations (ICCA) in its *Responsible Care Report* (July, 2002) and its *On the Road to Sustainability: A contribution from the Global Chemical Industry to the World Summit on Sustainable Development* (August, 2002—see ICCA, 2002). 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 and Gas), the UK Aluminium Industry, the British Cement Association, and the Brick Industry (see www.pioneersgroup.co.uk/documentlibrary.asp).

Business organizations, and their spokespeople, too, through a variety of media (e.g. corporate reports, press releases, CEO speeches) also appear keen to make use of other events at which they can continue to emphasize their commitments and achievements towards sustainability.



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The Shell Oil 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 organizations 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: 18).

Everything's A Journey

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 organization'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. Such reports are also the means to communicate an organization's progress. In developing guidelines for sustainable development reporting by organizations, for example, 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 organizational level. Of course, even with this progress, we are at the very earliest stages of a long journey' (GRI, 2000). 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. (Group 100, 2003)

We hear in the words of Lloyd Taylor, Shell NZ Chairman, that 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



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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, and brings us full circle in our analysis:

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, 2004)

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 some business and its associations, the journey is also about how business can contribute towards a sustainable future for stakeholders and society, but for others, and perhaps the majority, it is about how the journey can help sustain business for the interests of shareholders.

Organizations that attempt this ‘sustainability 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 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’ organizations 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 in which society and environment remain blended, balanced and traded-off. Purveyors of this rhetoric, by virtue of their self-professed leadership, sometimes win for themselves considerable acclaim—acclaim that serves



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to reinforce and strengthen a particular version of sustainability, and undermine and deflect attention away from (more critical) alternatives. These texts, 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 communication of sustainability aims and achievements, has both subtle and powerful effects, as we outline below. Presenting sustainability as a journey with such prevalence is to subtly shape and construct knowledge about organizations and their practices with regard to sustainability in a variety of ways.

The ‘sustainability as a 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 that serves to defamiliarize, and hence raise questions or force a reconceptualization. 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 perhaps more so, when sustainability is itself coupled with or defined as the triple bottom line.

Sustainability is further rendered familiar by journey through its effect of *binding* (or conflating) businesses’ pursuit of sustainability to the notion of progress. While faith in progress *might* be on the wane (see Marx and Mazlish, 1998) or in need of abandonment (Gowdy, 1994), we would suggest journey and forward movement through time conveys if not a sense of inevitability, then optimism and hopefulness. That sense of hopefulness is not conveyed through reversing and abandoning development, nor through carrying on as usual, but rather through the promise of stepping stone market reforms and, as businesses’ response to the Rio Earth Summit put it, seemingly through ‘changing course’ (Schmidheiny, 1992).

Journey also has the effect 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 or state with



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any real degree of specificity. The employment of a metaphor imbued with strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) here preserves future options.

Moreover, the ambiguity involved in the journey metaphor creates a means to close down or *deflect* dissenting voices. By portraying themselves as 'on the path to' or 'moving toward' sustainable development, businesses 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 about what kind of (radically different) performance is needed to provide a sustainable future. The metaphor emphasizes (beginning a) process and not outcomes, in much the same way as do the slogans 'Rome was not built in a day' and 'a 1000 mile march begins with a single step'. Sustainability as a journey offers a 'rhetoric of presentation' (Mayhew, 1997) that uses language in a non-referential way (i.e. does not directly refer to factual claims about objects) that becomes difficult to counter. Similarly, as evidenced in several of the extracts, the journey is often portrayed as shared or common, and one which emphasizes (technical) consensus. It is, we would suggest, a metaphor that downplays (sustainable) development as a struggle, a contest of conflicted values, in need of a politics of scarcity (Cotgrove, 1982: 101–119; Ophuls, 1977; Ratner, 2004; Scott, 1974).

A further effect is that of *redefining* sustainability in ways that do not threaten business as usual. Expected to engage in the debate and practice of sustainability, and seen as both cause and potentially as solution to global environmental and social problems, business has conveniently supplied a meaning largely in its own interest. Journey is very much a postmodern term in its polyvalency. Journeys can be long or short—or even never-ending which we suspect, when coupled with notions of continuous improvement and progress, is the version business currently concurs with. Journeys can be straightforward or difficult, direct or circuitous depending on how they are contextualized and how they are read. As Myers and Macnaghten (1998) note, rhetorics of environmental sustainability may emphasize one or more of futurity, equity, quality of life or environment. Business conceptions often underplay issues of ethics and morality, and equity and environment (Davidson, 2000; Sachs, 1993, 1999) as we noted, for example with the truncated and contrived use of the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, and the emphasis on efficiency rather than sufficiency. Journey, then, appears to especially emphasize *futurity*, and increasingly we would argue the futurity of business and our (Western) selves. It provides a particular and selective sense of progress.

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. In part it suggests sustainability does not have any precise meaning thus it does not suppress sustainability's



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commonly understood conflicted nature. Yet, it also presents a sense of sustainability, or a process to it, that is largely amoral and apolitical. In supporting a lack of clarity as to what sustainability might really mean, it serves to justify and reinforce incremental rather than radical efforts to change—precisely because it avoids all discussion of what it is business might (or needs to) change to. But going further, and following Cheney (1992) and Burke (1966), we might recognize that much if not all of our world is largely symbolic, and that symbols (words and others) are not merely representations of some other reality, they *are* the reality. ‘Words and images are magical in that they often bring something new into being’ (Cheney, 1992: 176). In this sense, then, we might recognize that the metaphorical use of journey does not merely present sustainability *as if it is like* a journey, or present an argument that sustainability should be like a journey, but that through its use, at least some of us come to know sustainability *is* a journey. And this might be especially so, if we also recognize that many messages that are designed for external audiences also serve as instances of organizations ‘talking to themselves’ (Christensen, 1991, cited in Cheney, 1992: 174).

Knowing sustainability *is* a journey, however, expresses strongly socially constructivist notions—that language makes up the world.¹⁶ Our point here is not to argue or express the belief that language constructs all that we know about the world or all that exists in the world. Unlike Edwards *et al.* (1995), Gergen (1985), and Potter (1996, 1998), for example we do not adhere to the strongly constructionist or relativist position that there is nothing outside of the text, and that all phenomena are fundamentally linguistic in origin. To hold such a position, as Palmer (1990, cited in Nightingale and Cromby, 1999) notes, is to suggest talk is just words, divorced from the material, historical, and social conditions of its origin, and, consequently, the world is no more than idealist speculation. This, indeed, is our concern that in coming to know sustainability *is* a journey, insufficient change will occur and continue to lead to an underlying material and social reality which is destructive, unjust, and ultimately unsustainable for a large number of species, including humans. Realism versus relativism in regards to nature and the environment (see, for example Crist, 2004; Kidner, 2000; Peterson, 1999; Smith, 1999), and more generally (see, for example Ibánñez and Íñiguez, 1997; Nightingale and Cromby, 1999) we acknowledge is far from a settled debate, but further expanding on it now is beyond the current paper.

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. For a start, journeys are not always the pleasant, positive and successful events depicted by business. In keeping with Clancy’s ‘ship of fools’, and notions that progress is illusory both generally (Marx and Mazlish, 1998; Sorel, 1969) and in conjunction with sustainability (Gillespie, 2001; Gowdy, 1994), Czech’s (2000) critique of



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economic growth, errant economists and shameful spenders suggests a journey more like that of a runaway train. Further, if ‘sustainability as a journey’ is intimately bound up with notions of progress, then it may inevitably lead to yet greater levels of the domination of nature by man (Marx, 1998). As a collective mentality, ideology, myth or worldview, Marx (1998: 205–208) argues the modern notion of progress is history itself—a boundless and inevitable human progress associated with the ‘perfectability of Man’, which he sees as deriving from and referring to ‘that distinctively modern kind of social change made possible by acquiring *from* the realm of nature the unprecedented power to establish a steadily increasing domination *of* nature (1998: 203, emphasis in original). Secondly, if, as Sutton (2000) suggests—as in the business case and within the discourse of ecological modernization—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, and would be more indicative of calls for restorative ecology than those espoused by business.

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 dimension 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 and Milne (2004) 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. Indeed, as the metaphor works its magic, it is ever likely that members of business, if not others, come to know a sustainable business as one that has committed to, and is on a journey.



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Sutton (2001) 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 about 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 ideology embracing a fundamental lack of transformation. Organizations who adopt it are (re)presenting 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.

The journey metaphor translates sustainability (and sustainable development) into a never-ending process privileging the search for technical consensus. Through adopting an infinite process approach implying progress over time, companies can continue to defer addressing key moral 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 preserves 'unsustainability'—sustainability as the shadow of development (Sachs, 1995), and sidesteps the difficult moral challenges posed by questions such as, 'What is to be sustained?', 'How is it to be sustained?' and 'In whose interests is what being sustained?' (Sessions, 2001).

It is argued that business is constructing 'sustainability' *as a journey* to avoid specifying some future desirable *states 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-emphasizes discussion of desirable future states of living, and neatly sidesteps any debate about, or need to radically change course. Moral and political debate is sacrificed to a continuing ideology of progress. By opening out reductionist understanding of the 'sustainability as a journey' metaphor, we suggest an important paradox in business (re)presentations of sustainability is revealed.



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‘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)

Notes

The authors thank Stewart Clegg, Rob Gray and Lee Parker for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The authors are also indebted to two anonymous reviewers for further insights which helped further improve the paper.

- 1 Anne and Paul Ehrlich (1987: book cover) in *Earth*, for example, suggest ‘No sane person would want to travel on a plane whose airline did not have a “progressive maintenance” program . . . and only a lunatic would want to ride on Spaceship Earth if the components of its ecosystems were being dismantled so fast that maintenance could not begin to keep up with repairs. Yet here we are—and we have no other spaceline offering transport’.
- 2 While we are acutely aware that such a distinction is an oversimplification of the many variants of discourse that might be considered to have developed (see, for example Benton and Short, 1999; Dryzek, 1997; Jamison, 2001; Lewis, 1992; McGregor, 2004), 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), ‘eco-centrics’ and ‘technocentrics’ (Benton and Short, 1999; O’Riordan, 1981; Pearce, 1993), ‘weak sustainability’ and ‘strong sustainability’ (Pearce, 1993; Turner, 1993). Dryzek (1997), too, delineates between discourses associated with sustainable development on the one hand, and ecological modernization on the other. While both assume economic growth go hand-in hand with environmental protection, and stand in contrast to ‘radicals’ and ‘survivalists’, ecological modernization 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 a 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.
- 4 These perspectives on sustainability and the role of organizations are, in fact, reminiscent of earlier debates over development and environment. Work by Cotgrove (1982), Dunlap and Van Liere (1978, 1984), Milbrath (1984), Olsen



et al. (1992), and Pirages and Ehrlich (1974) for example, review the basis for the Dominant Social Paradigm grounded in limitless growth and techno-optimism, and the need for or likely replacement by the New Environmental Paradigm. Similarly, Lele (1991), Redclift (1994), Shiva (1992), and more recently Banerjee (2003), trace the history of sustainable development to earlier phases of development, economic growth, and progress. Scott (1974) also provides an earlier review of classical and systems theory in organizational research, suggesting they are both based on the paradigmatic values of material growth, material abundance, and consensus. He suggests, as does Shrivastava (1994) 20 years later, that organization theory needs to seriously reconsider these values and perhaps generate more radical theory based on stability, scarcity and conflict. See also Cairns (2001), Norton (1991), and Ophuls (1977). Welford (1998) outlines the need for a critical research agenda in this arena.

- 5 Davidson (2000), for example, argues it is only the radical conceptions of sustainability that embody the ethical capacity to address issues of 'How should we live?' and 'How should we arrange our systems of production and consumption to ensure the sustainability of the Earth under conditions of conspicuous and pressing environmental limitations?'. Her concern is that issues of equity and 'quality of life' are excluded from more incremental approaches to sustainability.
- 6 In the case of 'sustainability as a journey', 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.
- 7 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 (2000: 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 and Westcott, 1988: 170, cited in Lewis, 2000).
- 8 The Marquis de Condorcet's *Outline of the Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* is often held to represent the early expression of modern notions of progress. As Stanley (1969: xix-xxi) notes, Condorcet's expression suggests: (1) progress occurs in all fields (intellectual, moral, political, and technical); (2) is projected into the future; (3) rejects inevitable annihilation and the pessimism that goes with it; (4) renders civilization indefinitely perfectible; (5) has a linear view of history, and; (6) regards the future as having inevitable patterns which are calculable. Stanley suggests this view of progress in which history is linear not only sees enlightenment as something that should take place, but something that *will* take place—'Progress is both a pattern of development perceived through historical observation and a law of human inevitability. It is this law of inevitable progress which produces the most extraordinary optimism' (Stanley, 1969: xx-xxi).



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- 9 A recent report (October 2004) reviewing the first five years of the activities of the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development (NZBCSD), for example is simply entitled ‘the journey’. Similarly, Alcan’s 2002 Corporate Sustainability Report is entitled ‘Our Journey’. ‘Our Journey’ also dominates Interface’s webpage, a company whose CEO Ray Anderson is renowned as a pioneer in business and sustainability (see Interface, 2004b). The Australian Minerals Industry 2003–4 Report is entitled ‘Towards Sustainability: Our Journey Together’. And Western Mining Company (WMC)—a leading Australian corporate environmental reporter—emphasizes ‘Our journey so far’ and ‘WMC’s pathway to sustainable development’ on its website (see WMC, 2004).
- 10 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 versus 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.
- 11 Our intention here, then, is not to empirically establish that sustainability as a journey is *the* dominant theme business has constructed for itself; clearly others like balancing, caring, and sharing also exist. We would argue based on our reading of these texts, and the Google™ search, however, that journey is *a* dominant theme. Similarly, our approach is also a (re)presentation of how journey is invoked and (re)presented in these texts. We are not claiming to have provided an exhaustive or objective set of themes, for we believe no such representation is possible. Overall, we argue we have sourced a wide range of illustrations of how business (re)presents sustainability and/or sustainable development as a journey as a basis on which to critically analyse such constructions. Ideally, we would have preferred to have included a more extensive set of extracts—to let the texts speak for themselves. Even here, however, since we believe all readers bring with them their own biases in interpretation, we would not expect universal agreement



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- on businesses' (re)presentations. While many examples of texts within our given themes echo each other, space, unfortunately, also constrains our ability to provide further illustrations.
- 12 An important observation here is that many business and political texts quote only a part of the original definition from Brundtland, and in such a fashion to downplay the conflicts involved. The original and full definition suggests: 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: The concept of "needs", in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs' (WCED 1987: 43). Typically it is only the first sentence that is selected for (re)presentation, and again 'the journey' document by the NZBCSD, for example, contains the limited quote on a full page on the inside cover of its report.
 - 13 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 the journey metaphor is also frequently attached to the triple bottom line, and especially the process of triple bottom line reporting.
 - 14 See, for example Robèrt *et al.* (1997).
 - 15 A further example of the use of compass can be found at COMPASS (COMPANies' and Sectors' path to Sustainability)—a management tool which aims to 'develop a sustainability indicator set in order to measure and report on progress made towards sustainable business development' (see COMPASS, 2004).
 - 16 We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this point, and the consequential literature that further explores this issue in terms of nature and environment.

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Appendix 1

Number of 'web pages' uncovered using Google™ search engine when searching for *Sustainability* and '. . .' or '*Sustainable Development*' and '. . .' on 2 December 2004.

	Sustainability	Sustainable Development
Progress	2,140,000	1,880,000
Nature	2,080,000	2,360,000
Conservation	1,760,000	1,730,000
Commitment	1,690,000	1,180,000
Managing	1,410,000	965,000
Poverty	1,140,000	1,500,000
Sharing	1,080,000	860,000
Environmental protection	792,000	1,090,000
Economic growth	757,000	1,010,000
Environmental management	654,000	742,000
Measuring	647,000	417,000
Survival	579,000	438,000
Ecosystem	579,000	473,000
Transparency	559,000	531,000
Preservation	544,000	435,000
Exploitation	461,000	455,000
Future generations	451,000	385,000
Environmental quality	291,000	258,000
Balancing	278,000	189,000
Environmental health	275,000	325,000
Social justice	266,000	257,000
Journey	265,000	201,000
Caring	246,000	149,000
Substitution	166,000	121,000
Tradeoffs	164,000	93,800
Nature conservation	157,000	186,000
Renewable resources	130,000	111,000
Carrying capacity	105,000	79,000
Win-win	97,600	82,600
Eco-efficiency	89,000	93,000
Triple bottom line	76,000	49,700
Social equity	74,500	63,000
Precautionary principle	72,000	92,000
Economic prosperity	66,000	68,400
Natural capital	58,100	48,700
Non-renewable resources*	57,900	67,000
Ecosystem health	57,000	35,100
Ecological footprint	45,000	37,000
Shareholder value	40,100	26,200
Over-population*	34,100	33,200
Inter-generational equity*	29,100	23,100



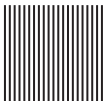
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	Sustainability	Sustainable Development
Over-consumption*	25,100	20,100
Limits to growth	23,700	18,900
Unsustainability	22,900	14,300
Environmental constraints	22,200	21,300
Irreversibility	13,000	10,700
Assimilative (capacity)	9,000	9,800
Environmental limits	8,400	7,890
Ecological limits	7750	6,570
‘Towards’	106,000	128,000
‘Achieving’	36,500	82,400
‘Path to’	8,060	6,080
‘Road to’	4,950	3,570

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

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