

# **Transforming Sustainabilities: Grassroots Narratives in an Age of Transition.**

**An Ethnography of the Dark Mountain Project**

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# Abstract

The framing of sustainability as a goal of aligning human needs with protection of the environment has been pursued through various definitions and frameworks in policies and programmes across a wide range of contexts. And yet, unsustainable modes of production and consumption are accelerating the global destruction of natural habitats, depletion of resources, release of greenhouse gasses and other forms of pollution. Thus, the nature and scale of the changes that the earth is undergoing is bringing conventional approaches to, and understandings of, the sustainability challenge into question.

This thesis re-examines the framing of the sustainability challenge instead as one of understanding the relations between humans and nature implied by dominant cultural narratives. Through building a theoretical understanding of how human-nature relationships can be understood and studied, and devising a methodology for examining individual and collective ontologies and epistemologies, it investigates how alternative worldviews are imagined and embodied in grassroots innovations. Specifically, it provides an in-depth ethnographic study of the Dark Mountain Project – a network of writers, artists and thinkers who explore cultural narratives that move beyond the meta-narrative of progress. It shows how engaging with the beliefs and assumptions entailed by the dominant Western meta-narrative can open up for new knowledges and actions to address the sustainability challenge.

The thesis suggests that creating sustainable ways of living involves active participation in the way ‘sustainability’ is imagined, storied and enacted. Findings indicate that creating spaces for active experimentation with alternate ways of seeing, co-creation of new vocabularies and development of creative practices, is a direct way to enable re-narration and re-experiencing of human-nature relations. It concludes that engaging with transitions in worldviews as a transformation in the experience of social life provides a promising starting point for future work on the sustainability challenge.



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