

Is Sustainability a Breakfast Cereal? Public Program Based Research into Community Understandings of Sustainability

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Abstract

What meanings and values does the community (the general public) attach to the term “sustainability”? As this complex concept is widely used in academic, political and policy arenas and gradually becomes embedded at institutional level, it is possible that the community does not share the understandings of sustainability that are guiding developments in many spheres which affect their lives. Use of terminology at policy level which is unfamiliar to the community is not unusual, so does it matter in the case of “sustainability”? This paper reviews research, both qualitative and quantitative, undertaken between 2000 and 2004 for the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation in the context of development of a sustainability education program known as *Our Environment: It's a Living Thing*. This research both explored understanding and concepts of sustainability and developed a community segmentation on the basis of environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. The implications of this research for future research and for programs aimed at developing community understanding of, and commitment to, sustainability are also discussed.

Introduction

Over the past decade, “sustainability” has become broadly embedded in many areas at policy and organisational level in NSW. Brought into focus as a national responsibility by the Rio Earth summit in 1992, it has since flowed into adoption of an Australian National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (COAG, 1992). The New South Wales State Government first framed discussion in State of the Environment (SOE) reporting in terms of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) in 1997, later broadened to environmental sustainability in 2000, while recent departmental reorganisations also highlight sustainability responsibilities. Local governments are also adopting sustainability issues in State of the Environment (SOE) reporting and a range of other initiatives such as the introduction into the development approval system of a web-based tool (known as BASIX) for assessing the water and energy efficiency of new residential developments. Sustainability is also an integral part of the *NSW Environmental Education Action Plan 2002–05*, a document which encourages

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the broadest range of agencies and organisations to play their part in educating for sustainable outcomes.

However, a sustainable future depends on the involvement and actions of all community sectors. It is thus important to consider just what the community understands about sustainability and about their role in contributing towards a sustainable future. If professionals in a broad sphere of activities, including education, are basing their work around policies and programs designed to achieve sustainability, is it understood at community (or general public) level? Are members of the public behind it? Will they be involved? Is it something happening over their heads, or is it achieving recognition and acceptance through the wider community?

“Sustainability” is a long, many-syllabled word, in itself a barrier to some. If people do not understand the term, we must first consider whether this is just a question of terminology – the use of the word “sustainability”, or “sustainable” development/living/agriculture/ resources, etc. If we chose another word or set of words, would it be more easily grasped, or is it the complexity of the definitions and associated concepts, the interweaving of social, economic and environmental issues, equity issues, both intra- and intergenerational, and the precautionary principle, which challenge many?

There is a significant literature surrounding the thought, meaning and social power of language (for example see summary in Finlayson, 1999). In the environmental context, Bowers (1996, 2001) argues that critical evaluation of language is essential, as is understanding the way that language encodes cultural beliefs and patterns which perpetuate individualism, consumerism, environmental damage and the pre-eminence of the scientific/technological “fix”. New ways of thinking and acting require organising concepts and this depends on language. “Sustainability” cannot be replaced with another word, precisely because it is a connecting concept with complex dimensions, even if those dimensions are value-laden and contested (Fien & Tilbury, 2002; Black, 2004). As debate continues, greater agreement may be reached, we may live with multiple meanings, or a new concept for organising discourse may evolve.

Education program planning in the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) has been grappling with these issues over several years in the context of an education campaign based on environmental sustainability goals. For example, *Our Environment - It's a Living Thing (OEILT)* is a broadly-based program to promote community awareness, knowledge and understanding of the overarching concept of sustainability and to “develop new norms in adopting specific environmentally friendly behaviours to help achieve sustainability” (NSW Environment Protection Agency (EPA, 2001, p. 3). It includes both a public communications campaign and a range of other community-based education and capacity-building components. Its ambitious “sustainable living” goal involves significantly greater challenges than are associated with the promotion of the simple messages of “don’t litter” or “the drain is just for rain”. The DEC therefore commissioned a range of social research to guide its planning, development and implementation.

Publicly available research that considers the evolution of the conceptual understanding of “sustainability” at community level in Australia is difficult to find. By contrast, a recent review of research evidence available in the United Kingdom on the concept of “sustainable development” in relation to the general public (Darnton, 2004a, 2004b) has made available the findings of a range of qualitative and quantitative studies not normally published or easily available (Darnton, 2004c).

Research Summary

This paper reviews the NSW DEC research to consider what it tells us about the ways people in New South Wales are interpreting sustainability, the dimensions which

have resonance and those which are poorly understood. It also outlines community segmentations derived from this research. Qualitative research was primarily conducted prior to new phases of the public communications campaign to help shape campaign direction and messages. The implications of this research for future research and for programs aimed at developing community understanding of, and commitment to, sustainability are also discussed.

The research was conducted by several NSW contract research companies. Both qualitative and quantitative research are included in this review but the focus is on qualitative research as a more appropriate method to explore understanding and concepts (Darnton, 2004a), despite the variability and limitations inherent in such research and its evaluation (Reid & Gough, 2000). Qualitative research was primarily conducted prior to new phases of the public communications campaign to help shape the direction and messages of the campaign. The quantitative research discussed was undertaken as campaign evaluation with pre- and post-campaign measures. Only two of the five pieces of research considered here were primarily designed to test concepts of sustainability, and only Study 4 (see Table 1) provided opportunities for participants

TABLE 1: Summary of the research reviewed

Date	Purpose	Methodology	Participants	Who Conducted
1 Dec. 2000	Identify key issues, audiences and messages for new public education program to encourage environmentally sustainable behaviours	Qualitative – 6 focus groups 48 people	18-60yrs, mixed gender, segmented on age and life stage: 4 groups Sydney city, 2 x Goulburn	Taylor Nelson Sofres
2 early 2001	Evaluate potential effectiveness of the first public communications element for specific audience groups and the power of its branding theme in the context of sustainability	Qualitative – 6 focus groups of 6-8 people	18-40yrs, mixed gender, fairly or slightly concerned about environmental problems (not extremes)	Dangar Research
3 June - Aug 2001	Evaluation of first delivery phase of campaign and its impacts on environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviours	Quantitative - sample = 2000, 800 pre-campaign, 1200 in tracking study	Geographically stratified random sample of NSW households, post-weighted to reflect actual NSW population distribution, with quotas for non-English speaking background residents, 50/50 gender split	Woolcott Research
4 Feb. 2003	Provide insights into community interpretation of 'sustainability' and associated concepts, as well as meanings associated with dominant elements of campaign	Qualitative - 38 individual in depth interviews, see also Table 3	Range of life stage in inner suburbs, middle ring suburbs and outer suburbs of Sydney, regional town and farmers.	Woolcott Research
5 Jan-Feb. 2004	Test likely responses to proposed advertising with identified community segments	Qualitative – 5 focus groups 41 people	Sydney, western Sydney and Goulburn	Instinct and Reason

to express thoughts relating to social and economic dimensions of sustainability without influence of thinking about the environment. Most of the other research had an emphasis on environmental sustainability.

Early research and its impact on campaign direction

In late 2000 the first qualitative research with six focus groups in Sydney and Goulburn was undertaken to explore the way in which a campaign targeting sustainable behaviours would best be designed (Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2000).

The exploration of the meaning of the term “sustainability” found participants associated the following with the term:

- not spending more than your budget;
- maintaining, standardising, keeping constant, being consistent, keeping things going;
- opposite to what we’re doing now;
- for ourselves, our future, aesthetics;
- re-using, recycling, reducing, replacing – not wasting things; and
- using renewable resources (natural light, cooling, solar panels, wind).

Sustainability was generally seen as a good thing (able to co-exist with modern life), although for a small number of participants it was seen in opposition to progress, and it therefore implied sacrifice.

This initial research was followed by testing of advertising drafts with six focus groups in Sydney and Tamworth. Participants were screened to represent the potential audience for the campaign: younger age groups (18–40yrs) who were “fairly” or “slightly concerned about the environment”, i.e., excluding those very concerned or not concerned (Study 2, Table 1). This research found participants reasonably well educated about environmentally friendly behaviour in the context of daily living - aware of what they should be doing and aware they should be doing more, but “sustainability” had little resonance (Dangar Research, 2001).

Following this research, it was decided that the term “sustainability” was insufficiently recognised in the community to support a broad-based campaign. The slogan and logo *Our Environment: It’s a Living Thing (OEILT)* was adopted to encapsulate the concept in a more communicable way through the double meaning of the environment being alive and that it is about the way we live, reinforced by the emotive Electric Light Orchestra song *It’s a Living Thing*. It was planned that the song, logo and slogan would carry these core concepts through a range of communications and also be used across government in conjunction with existing and new environmental messages, reinforcing its all encompassing nature (NSW EPA, 2001). Three phases of the campaign followed in 2001–2002 which did not directly use the words “sustainable” or “sustainability” in broad media advertising (“sustain” was used but was not prominent). Instead the focus was on positive messages about the environment as a living entity and the range of everyday things individuals can do at home, work and play to help protect it.

However, “sustainability” was embedded in more specifically targeted education programs, which were part of the wider integrated campaign (Table 2). These projects all involved working directly with small groups of people: in professional development workshops, at neighbourhood centres or within specific organisations, such as Scouts Australia and childcare associations. The programs allowed people to directly engage with concepts of sustainability in the context of their work or other activities, to consider what it meant for them and the future, and to devise the most appropriate strategies to implement in their work or workplaces to become more sustainable.

TABLE 2: Education elements of the Our Environment – It's a Living Thing Program 2001–03

Program	Audience	Objectives
Professional Development	Community education deliverers	To develop knowledge of sustainability; Increase understanding of education for sustainability approaches, assist providers to integrate education for sustainability content and perspective with their existing courses and activities.
Scouts Australia (NSW) partnership project	Scouts and Scout leaders	To increase awareness of environmental sustainability and the implementation of environmentally sustainable practices with the Scouts Award Program and Leadership Training Programs.
Early childhood centres partnership project	Early childhood workers	To enhance the awareness of early childhood workers in environmental sustainability by provision of a training program that aims to enhance the knowledge and skills of childcare centre managers in environmentally sustainable management of their facilities.
Eco-Friendly Centres, partnership project with the Local Community Services Association (LCSA)	Neighbourhood and community centre staff	To increase the capacity of neighbourhood and community centre staff and volunteers to facilitate learning about and taking action for the environment. Reinforce existing campaign messages using a community development model

In-depth testing of understanding of “sustainability” and associated concepts

In late 2002, further qualitative research to explore understanding of the term “sustainability” was undertaken in the context of a re-evaluation of campaign directions and design (Study 4, Table 1). The objectives were to determine whether there had been any changes in the recognition and understanding of the term since the earlier research, and to explore what key concepts were being associated with the term.

This qualitative research (Woolcott Research, 2003) was conducted via 38 face-face individual in-depth interviews/discussions in order to probe quite deeply into the thoughts and understandings of the individual interviewees, unaffected by peer influence which may be present in focus groups. The sample was drawn to reflect a range of age, life stage and residential location (Table 3).

The initial questions in the interview did not mention sustainability or the environment. Participants were first asked to express their thoughts and feelings about how we live today. Environment was not “top of mind” for anyone, rather social issues: the pace of life and change, driven by technology, and the loss of other values to work and monetary rewards were commented upon. Second order responses focused on values relating to human relationships, particularly conflict and the way people treat each other. However, upon being asked about how we are affecting life in next 10–20 years, environmental concerns were raised by half the interviewees, although not particularly strongly expressed as people could not visualise major changes in the next 10–20 years.

TABLE 3: Sample for qualitative research in 2002

	INNER CITY	MIDDLE SUBURBAN	OUTER SUBURBAN	REGIONAL CENTRE	RURAL	TOTAL
Young singles	2	2	2	1	-	7
SINKS/DINKS	2	2	2	1	1	8
Young families	2	2	2	2	1	9
Older families	2	2	2	1	2	9
Empty nesters or older no kids	1	1	1	1	1	5
TOTAL	9	9	9	6	5	38

This is consistent with the DEC's triennial research into the NSW community's environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, *Who Cares about the Environment?*, conducted in 2003. Since the first survey in 1994, this research has consistently shown that people in NSW consider the environment more important as a future issue than an immediate priority, that they are concerned about the environment and that the dominant basis of their concern is for future generations (DEC, 2004).

In Study 4 future concerns were visualised in terms of personal impact on their lives or the world their children will live in and were expressed with some anxiety:

"The environment will get very bad health-wise ... we'll be breathing bad air".

"There will not be enough resources available for our children".

"The land is being eroded ... we won't be able to live off the land".

"The environment is not well looked after ... litter, ozone layer, extinct species ... younger generations won't get to see these, they should be able to enjoy these things".

However, the causes were seen as global: population growth and the actions of governments around the world.

When asked directly about the term "sustainability", the term was quite unfamiliar, except to those expressing the greatest levels of environmental knowledge and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. When probed, participants could think through the meaning by linking it to what they knew. They understood that "sustain" meant to nurture/feed/keep alive (and was also a breakfast cereal that keeps you going). They were then able to associate "sustainable", as in sustainable energy and resources, sustainable economics and farming and sustaining a way of life/lifestyle, with maintenance, keeping things going, continuation, and preventing deterioration. Therefore, they concluded that sustainability is the extent to which something can be maintained.

This "maintenance" meaning was applied broadly, to a range of non-environmental themes. Country people (farmers and townspeople) were most likely to apply it to the environment. However, this research was also exploring the meanings and associations with the *It's a Living Thing* music and campaign logo so that half the sample were asked about sustainability after the discussion about the logo and music. These participants were more likely to put the word into an environmental context and

were then more able to interpret its meaning in that context. They also included more expressions related to “it’s a terrible thing to lose”.

Probing meanings of and associations with “sustainability” generally elicited positive images and personal feelings but few could discuss what it meant for them, or how it is relevant to their lives. It was not a personally relevant or urgent issue, except to the greenest segments (see Table 5) and to rural people, who related it to sustainable agriculture and, for example, to biodegradable products, water use and planting trees. If asked after exposure to OEILT, “looking after the environment” was more readily discussed, along with familiar environmentally friendly activities, although few expressed anything which suggested issues such as interdependence of ecosystems. Overall, sustainability was generally considered more a global issue (than personal), an “official” term, “such huge difficult thing”, a slow, long-term process and something for governments and industry who could have bigger impact.

A final part of this research tested the extent to which some key concepts were associated with “sustainability” through reactions to six descriptive statements. These statements were developed to reflect a number of the core principles of sustainability, including environmental protection, inter-generational equity, intra-generational equity, interdependence of Earth and all life forms and the precautionary principle. A more present and personal “quality of life” dimension was added to test the extent of this aspect compared to the core principles. Statements were rotated in presentation to interviewees. Respondents were asked what each concept suggested to them personally and how it could translate into their lives. Responses are summarised in Table 4.

TABLE 4: Reactions to specific sustainability concepts

Statement	Reactions
<i>Leaving our environment as good as it is now, or better, for future generations</i>	Had the most personal resonance (especially those with or planning families), engaged in emotional sense, tapped many issues spontaneously raised earlier. Liked the optimistic aspect.
<i>Meeting needs of current generations without reducing quality of life for future generations</i>	Generally meant 'status quo'. Suited young singles and empty nesters because it implied less sacrifice, but had a more economic, materialistic, less environmental focus. Some did not understand the phrase.
<i>A relationship between living and non-living parts of the environment, where they depend on each other. People are part of this</i>	Difficulty with 'non-living' parts of the environment (especially if after the <i>It's a Living Thing</i> discussion) Liked and easily understood people as part of the environment.
<i>In the living environment avoiding any action that might cause irreversible damage, even if you are not sure that the action will cause this damage</i>	Strong term, related to global, 'violent' issues. Overall, too difficult to understand and irrelevant in a personal sense where most actions are small, not likely to cause 'irreversible damage'.
<i>All people have a right to a standard of living that shares the Earth's resources equally</i>	Nice but too idealistic 'sharing and caring'. Aroused strong feelings about giving up current standard of living (not prepared to).
<i>Making sure we can really enjoy our life today and do the things we want to do</i>	Had general appeal but not a responsible way to live – too hedonistic for family people, appealed to some singles.

In summary, the research indicated that this small sample, with the exception of the “greenest” segment (see Table 5) and some rural people, had very little real notion of “sustainability”, although if pressed they could work out that it has something to do with maintenance. In the environmental context, it meant a fairly generic “looking after the environment” and doing this for future generations had the strongest meaning and personal relevance, especially for the parents and grandparents who made up the majority of the light to mid-green segments (Woolcott Research, 2003).

In moving into the next phase of the *Our Environment – It’s a Living Thing* campaign, this research clearly indicated the need to bring forward this overarching concept more overtly. Study 5 (Table 1), testing advertising ideas for the next public communications campaign in focus groups, also explored aspects of people’s understanding of sustainability (Donnelly, 2004). Indications are that this understanding is evolving. Although not directly comparable to the 2002/3 Woolcott research, both due to differences in method (focus groups vs one-on-one in-depth interviews) and in subject matter (testing environmental advertising concepts that sensitised participants immediately to these issues), differences seemed apparent. Although participants were not confronted individually with the term “sustainability”, they did not appear fazed by it in group discussions, with or without the facilitator. However, although clearly associated with the environment due to the concept advertisements under discussion, the meanings associated with the term were still relatively limited and tended to focus on the sustainable use of natural resources.

TABLE 5: Community segments derived from qualitative sustainability research (Study 4)

Segments	Knowledge	Attitudes	Behaviour	Size % (from Study 3 data)
Real Greens	Know a lot, articulate	Positive attitudes, passion and enthusiasm	Active leaders, multiple behaviours	5
Green Posers	Know a lot, articulate	Claimed positive attitudes, but lacking passion	Light green behaviours	15
Mid Green to Light Green Continuum	Mids know a reasonable amount, lights much less	Claim positive attitudes, follow the social norm	Some make more effort, most adopt easier behaviours	36 20
Environment is Irrelevant	Only know about basics	No strong views	Might adopt easy behaviours but from habit/not aware of why	21
Anti-greens	Aware but often misinformed	Scathing about ‘tree huggers’	Selfish - reject any activities that are at all inconvenient	3

Community Segmentation

Analysis of the in-depth sustainability research interviews (Study 4) developed a segmentation of research participants based on their attitudes, knowledge and reported behaviour towards the environment. Quantitative evaluation of the first phase of *Our Environment- It's a Living Thing* campaign in 2001 (Study 3, Table 1) had included questions measuring all three of these attributes (attitudes, knowledge and self-reported behaviour). Following Study 4, cluster analysis was applied to the total sample of 2000 from this 2001 pre-campaign benchmark and the campaign tracking measures to verify the segments from the qualitative study and to provide a measure of the size of these segments across NSW at that time (Table 5) (Woolcott Research, 2003, 2004).

This analysis placed respondents on a spectrum of environmental orientation and it may be encouraging that this study indicated 41% moderately or strongly "green" (across all three indicators). However, as both the knowledge and behaviour questions involved a self assessment rather than a direct measure, this should be treated with caution and tested further. There were few clear demographic trends in the composition of the segments. The greener end tended to be older (over 35), white collar,

TABLE 6: Community segments derived from Study 5

Segment	General attitudes and views	Position on sustainability/ environmentally friendly behaviour
Living it	Understand the world changes slowly. More in tune to the need for subtle messages "...people forget...that you need to keep doing it a bit at a time" Overarching concern is the environment... "the key is to value that environment"	Living sustainably, pay more, look for opportunities to do more, read labels, read articles and feel good about what they do, need to be re-assured they are doing the things needed of them. Some are partly living it - they want to be reassured but they also want to know what else they can do.
Disillusioned	Don't accept the world changes slowly, get disappointed when they see others fail to behave sustainably but aren't selfish. Do not have environment as their overarching concern, more concerned with being a good member of the community. Haven't really understood their lives will have to change - they thought it would be easier.	Know about sustainability and do act but they are doubting. The size of the problem overwhelms and they feel insignificant or disillusioned because of a perceived lack of action (on the part of government, business and their fellow citizens) to solve the problems. Are getting bored with environmental messages and cynical about sustainability ideas.
Afraid	Are highly individualistic and more in tune with their own needs. Have little concern for the environment. Want benefits in return to induce them to change. Do what they have to (eg recycling). Inclined to throw responsibility back to government.	Understand the concepts of sustainability but are afraid. They love their lifestyle too much, are often too busy to learn and act. They know the future needs them to act but this motivation isn't enough for them change.
Don't understand	Don't understand as clearly why the world is changing, Laggards in the sense of their rate of adopting new ideas. Overarching concern is the here and now... "I'm a battler...I'll do what I can but that's the best I can do"	Don't understand the ideas of sustainability and don't know how their lifestyle and actions are connected Many are not aware of sustainability, and without an awareness and a degree of knowledge the sustainability message is not reaching them

and employed, while the non-greens were younger (almost half were in the 15–24 age group), and male.

The subsequent preliminary concept-testing for the Phase 5 campaign developed a segmentation on the basis of participants understanding of sustainability, albeit again in the context of a group discussion about the environment and environmentally friendly behaviours (Table 6) (Donnelly, 2004). This segmentation clearly indicates that for these participants, there is not a simple progression in propensity to environmentally sustainable behaviours from those with low environmental knowledge, weak or anti-environmental attitudes and consequent behaviours to those strongly oriented to environmental sustainability. Rather a more complex range of considerations and personal views affected the extent to which they had personally moved towards sustainable living.

Discussion

The word “sustainability” can be narrowly interpreted, particularly in its application to resource use, or it can encompass a range of complex concepts and provide an overarching conceptual framework for both public policy and private lives, as discussed by Black (2004). However, if we are to genuinely work towards a sustainable future, some argue it is critical individuals develop a broader understanding of the goals of sustainability, as well as the motivation and appropriate capacity, so that they can and will participate in trying to achieve those goals (Palmer & Birch, 2003).

The research discussed here is primarily qualitative, particularly those studies which dealt directly with understanding of the term “sustainability” and can thus only provide some indications and pointers to further research. It indicates that recognition in the NSW community of “sustainability” may be low but growing, with increased use of the term in a variety of contexts ... “a word that is being used more ... in the last couple of years”, “a word that is popping up at work” (Donnelly, 2004). This research primarily focussed on environmental sustainability and found “sustainability” more easily recognised in an environmental context. However, there was a very limited range of concepts associated with the term, mainly those associated with the notion of sustaining something, or of maintenance. Behaviourally, even those with some knowledge were responding in varied ways, from concerned action to ignoring the messages either deliberately or with some degree of “guilty” feelings.

Taken with the *Who Cares?* research (DEC, 2004) there is a consistent message that people in NSW understand the future and their children’s future depends on a healthy environment, but the research reviewed here suggests that many may not be sure how this translates into immediate priorities or actions at a local/individual level that will make a difference to the scale of the problems. They have not brought together their knowledge of individual environmentally friendly behaviours into a conceptual framework of sustainability that allows them to understand their interconnectedness to the bigger picture.

In the United Kingdom, a research review (Darnton, 2004a) found public recognition of the term “sustainable development” from quantitative studies (conducted mainly 2001–2003), to be less than 30% while qualitative studies suggested almost no-one could explain the term, and some found it quite “off-putting”. In one study (Macnaghten et al., 1995), “sustainable development” was recognised by only two participants in eight focus groups. It was seen, even resented, by some participants as a term used by governments to confuse and distance people and most saw it as a global issue, not related to their lives at local or regional level. However, participants in several studies were able to discuss the component issues of sustainable development in a reasonably integrated way including social, economic and environmental implications, if the

discussion began from a point familiar in their daily lives. Darnton (2004a, 2004b) concluded that “sustainable lifestyles” may be a more useful and relevant term for the general public.

A common thread across studies is that language has been acting as a barrier or at least is not fulfilling its promise in providing a framework for understanding a range of interconnected concepts. The introduction to this paper argued that sustainability cannot be replaced with another term, despite possible community difficulties with its meaning. The question raised by these studies is whether development by individuals of an understanding of the overarching and interconnected nature of “sustainability” is a necessary pre-cursor to broader social change towards sustainability goals and action. Do people need to understand their place in the larger picture and the extent to which their actions matter? Kollmus and Agyeman’s (2002) extensive review of analytical frameworks to explain the gap between possession of environmental knowledge and awareness and displaying pro-environmental behaviour would suggest that amongst the multitude of conflicting and competing factors that shape daily decisions and actions (Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002, p. 256), knowledge and understanding may play a relatively small role. Likewise, the community-based social marketing field sees analysis of barriers and benefits (in respect to both pro-environmental and competing behaviours) as a far more fruitful way to achieve behaviour change towards sustainability (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999).

However, sustainability differs from other more specific environmental, economic or social issues because it is so complex and all-encompassing, spanning diverse dimensions, and characterised by highly complex interrelationships. This makes the task of developing understanding in the wider community problematic at best, but it is also a term which may have strong explanatory power so that a more sophisticated and integrated understanding of the term at community level may lead to a greater propensity to contribute to sustainability goals. Clearly there is need for further research in this area to test this proposition and for research which monitors evolving conceptualisation of sustainability at community level.

Governments, business and industry need to lead by example and demonstrate responsibility and action, embedding sustainability into policy and practice at all levels. However, research with the general public both here and elsewhere indicates there is a need to also involve the community more directly in the discussion about sustainability and common goals. Broad media campaigns might promote general awareness and provide some meaning and associations for the term. They may provoke discussion and assist in elaboration of concepts and evolution of ideas and, over time, may communicate foundation ideas and connecting concepts that help bring together what people already know about the environment and environmentally friendly behaviours in a more integrated sustainability framework.

However, to introduce sustainability as an integral part of people’s everyday lives is likely to require their direct engagement with its meaning and implications for their lives and their vision for the future through locally based programs. Such programs may directly develop knowledge and understanding of the broader dimensions of sustainability and implications for their concurrent maintenance (Herremans & Reid, 2002). Such programs can also encourage elaboration of what sustainability means for daily lives at a personal and community level, connections to the wider picture and personal contribution to a sustainable future (Agyeman, 2000; Fien & Tilbury, 2002; Jensen, 2002; Evans, 2004).

Keywords: Qualitative research; evaluation; community segmentation; environmental sustainability; sustainability concepts; environmental education programs.

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