Māori Values in Sustainability Assessment

- The concept of sustainability and what is considered to be worth sustaining is underpinned by values and morals .
- Māori and Western approaches to sustainability differ in their motivation and their extent.
- A common ground can be found in an indicator selection that considers both Māori and Western sustainability value frameworks.
- Tension between Māori and non-Māori is likely to occur when standards of an indicator or values of what is to be sustained differ.

Sustainability assessment systems are underpinned by values and morals.[1] Any decision concerning 'what should be sustained,' whether soil health, economic growth, or a tradition, is based upon the value and importance attributed to a particular thing.[2] There are many commonalities and differences across human cultures, communities, and groups concerning what things are considered important, and therefore what should be sustained. Although generalizations are often difficult to make, within the New Zealand context there are some important value differences between Māori and what might be thought of as a Western approach to sustainability.[3] These differences present a problem given that it may be difficult to arrive at sustainability assessment systems that reflect the values of both cultures.[4]

Western Values

Within the Western tradition there is a continuum of viewpoints concerning 'what should be sustained' ranging from what is termed an anthropocentric view – where only things that functionally serve human ends should be sustained – through to the ecocentric – where both humans and nature are considered intrinsically valuable and as such should be sustained for their own sake.[5] Despite this spectrum of approaches, the anthropocentric view has come to dominate and is encapsulated by the concept of 'sustainable development'.[6] Under this approach the progress of human societies is prioritized over nature – but only to the extent that such development does not compromise nature's limits.[7] This approach can be illustrated in the use of terms such as natural capital, or ecosystem services, where nature is understood as resource whose functions are maintained to serve human-oriented goals - particularly economic growth and technological advancement.[8]

Māori Values

In contrast to this orientation Māori consider themselves obligated to care for and maintain other species and natural processes.[9] This moral imperative has its roots in the Māori worldview, which casts humans, non-humans, and the elements that support them, as interdependent members of a single extended family.[10] The relationships between these entities is of primary importance from a Maori perspective - in particular the maintenance of *mauri* and *mana*.[11] *Mauri* refers to the vitality of an entity and its life supporting capacity. A relationship that maintains *mauri* involves humans engaging with other 'family' members (e.g. rivers and land) in a way that maintains, or increases their *mauri*, or capacity to support life.[12] Fulfilling this obligation enables the *mana*, or dignity and integrity, of both humans

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and other family members to be maintained.[13] This worldview is reflected in commonly referred to Maori values such as kaitiakitanga, which refers to the ability of humans to protect and care for nature, and in turn be provided and cared for by nature in a mutualistic way.[14]

Do Māori and Western Approaches to Sustainability Fit Together?

The Maori understanding of sustainability is underpinned by a moral sense of duty and obligation to ensure the *ora*, or health, of other 'family' members.[15] In comparison the Western approach is concerned with the flow of resources, or capital flows, to meet human economic, social, and technological goals. On one level these two approaches are incompatible – they are based on what are currently irreconcilably different cultural narratives (Polynesian and Judeo-Christian) concerning the roles of humans and nature. However, there are parts of the Western tradition that are similar to that of Maori and if these came to dominate sustainability thinking then compatibility might be possible.[16] On another level however, the two approaches are compatible – in that both are concerned with maintaining the functioning of social and ecological systems, albeit with different motivations.

Areas of Alignment

Generally speaking there is alignment between the Māori and Western approaches in terms of the use of sustainability indicators.[17] From a Māori perspective, indicators should be used to determine the extent that obligations toward maintaining the health and vitality of human and non-human communities are being met.[18] In comparison, from a Western perspective, indictors should be used to determine the extent that ecological functions are being maintained to support ongoing access to resources for human use.[19] In many circumstances the same indicators can be used for assessing either health and vitality, or the sustainability resource extraction. For example, indicators that signal water quality and quantity may be used both to demonstrate the life supporting capacity, or *mauri*, of water, or to signify the quantity and quality of water available for human development and activity.[20] Consequently, alignment between Western and Indigenous Māori approaches may be found through common indicator selection.

Areas of Difference

Standards - Although many of the same indicators may be used, Māori are likely to demand that higher standards in relation to a particular indicator be maintained. For example, Māori may demand higher levels of water quality out of an obligation to maintain a water body's *mauri* and *mana*.[21] This is comparison to a Western perspective, which may be primarily concerned with the water's usability (e.g. for drinking, swimming, or irrigating) and therefore link standards to a particular level of usability. Often the levels set for usability will be below what Māori consider necessary for maintaining *mauri*.[22]

Culturally Specific Indicators – In some cases culturally specific indicators may need to be developed. This is likely to occur in circumstances where Māori wish to sustain something, which from a Western perspective is not considered particularly useful, or essential to the ongoing function of an ecosystem.[23] For example, Māori often have long associations with *wahi tapu*, or sites of cultural importance, such as mountains, springs, and rivers.[24] Due to these long on-going relationships there is a sense of obligation to maintain their mauri, an action which from a Western

perspective might be considered unnecessary.

Indigenous Knowledge - Māori possess their own knowledge systems built upon intergenerational experience and wisdom of living within particular land and seascapes. This experiential knowledge of related to the sustainable management of place, is encoded within different Māori traditions and can be used to develop sustainability indicators that may not be present in Western contexts.[25] For example, Māori have systems of *rahui*, which involves the exclusion of taking resources in areas that have become depleted.[26] The imposition of *rahui* are based on indicators of resource depletion present within *matauranga* Māori - Māori knowledge.

Policy Recommendations

Māori and Western approaches toward sustainability are underpinned by different morals and cultural stories. Despite these differences Māori and Western approaches can share the use of many sustainability indicators – although what these indicators signify are culturally different and are attached to different values. From this insight the following policy recommendations may be made in regards to the cross-cultural development of sustainability assessment systems.

1. A focus should be placed on developing sustainability indicators that signify both the *mauri* of human and non-human communities and sustainable levels of resource utilization. Through focusing on indicators that both Māori and non-Māori can agree upon a level of commonality may be established. This same set of indicators can be used to report back against both Māori and Western sustainability value frameworks.
2. Although in many cases the same set of indicators may be used, it must be realized that Māori are likely to have higher standards when indicators are applied. This is likely to be a source of tension between Māori and non-Māori communities and groups.
3. Culturally-specific indicators should be developed in circumstances where Māori wish to sustain something that from a Western perspective is not considered essential for maintaining the functioning of ecological, economic, or social systems. There are likely to be value-tensions between Māori and non-Māori about sustaining particular things, and the development of indicators for measuring their *mauri*.
4. The development of indicators based on *matauranga* Māori should be prioritized to improve the quality and efficacy of sustainability assessments systems.
5. Within the Western philosophical tradition there are non-anthropocentric approaches to sustainability that are more closely aligned to the Māori worldview. These traditions could be used to develop sustainability assessment systems based on values that are shared with Māori. Long-term the development of a shared approach to sustainability assessment should be explored.

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Further Information

Notes and citations can be found on the
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http://www.nzdashboard.org.nz/

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