Our Professions, Organizations, and Societies Are Addressing Sustainability Management: A “Retro-Prospective” Collaborative Editorial on Why We Need “More-Better, Soon”

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Welcome to our third Organization & Environment (O&E) collaborative editorial. In this issue, in addition to six excellent sustainability management scholarly contributions, we are pleased to feature authors from all the articles in a volume published about 20 years ago related to that sustainability management O&E theme, titled Research in Corporate Social Performance and Policy (referred to in this editorial as RCSPP) and subtitled “Sustaining the Natural Environment: Empirical Studies on the Interface Between Nature and Organizations.” The volume, published by JAI Press in 1995, was coedited by Denis Collins (now at Edgewood College in Madison, WI, USA) and one of this journal’s coeditors, Mark Starik. Our intention in this O&E collaborative editorial is to highlight sustainability management research conducted both by some newer authors and by those who helped pioneer these efforts. Hopefully, we are providing a glimpse of how the latter topics have developed and where they are headed, with the intent of informing today’s researchers on how sustainability management can be advanced in some potentially effective ways in the future.

This Issue’s Featured Articles

Before we discuss the RCSPP volume, both retrospectively and prospectively, we want to highlight this current O&E issue’s other contributions. In addition to this editorial, this issue includes one essay and five articles, all examining different aspects of environmental and socioeconomic sustainability, representing perspectives from authors at institutions in six different countries on four different continents. First, from Australia, Robert Perey, in “Organizing Sustainability and the Problem of Scale: Local, Global, or Fractal?” discusses several interesting aspects of alternate ways to consider scale in sustainability management, introducing the intriguing idea of a fractal approach to this important topic. Second, from the United States, in “The New Heretics: Hybrid Organizations and the Challenges They Present to Corporate Sustainability,” Nardia Haigh and Andrew Hoffman introduce readers to “hybrid organizations,” such as Benefit

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Corporations, and suggest several ways that these organizations can present an interesting (and perhaps more effective) alternative to typical corporate sustainability approaches. Third, from Sweden, in “Past, Present, or Future? Managers’ Temporal Orientations and Corporate Climate Action in the Swedish Electricity Sector,” Steven Sarasini and Merle Jacob present information from one of the most energy-consuming sectors often considered in sustainability analyses—the energy sector itself—to assess some of its managers’ time orientations on climate issues. Fourth, from Belgium, in “Reducing the Environmental Bootprint? Competition and Regulation in the Greening of Europe’s Defense Sector,” Daniel Fiott explores the rationales for and strategies of the “greening” of European public and private defense organizations and develops a framework that identifies significant diversity in environmental management approaches throughout that sector. Fifth, from Chile, in “Ride On! Mobility Business Models for the Sharing Economy,” Boyd Cohen and Jan Kietzmann shed light on the concept of the “sharing economy”, in which resources of various kinds, especially those with excess capacity, can be shared by various stakeholders, that is emerging in many of the world’s cities, focusing on transportation and the relationship between service providers (agents) and local governments (principals). Finally, from the United Kingdom, in “Restorative Counter-Spacing for Academic Sustainability,” David Jones advances an interesting conceptual argument for the necessity and realization of academic settings that incorporate and highlight deeper attachments to local natural environments. We think our readers will enjoy both the intellectual content and diversity in perspectives this set of contributions offer. What follows next in this editorial is a combined retrospective and prospective look at a sustainability management academic volume approaching its 20th anniversary. Future O&E editorials will likely continue to shed a bit of historical light on sustainability management scholarship from the past that may still have relevance today and tomorrow.

Sustainability Management “Retro-Prospectively”

Twenty years is a generation for some societal observers. For those of us who have spent our careers trying to do more than observe the state and evolution of sustainability management, 20 years may seem, if more than a blink of an eye, then not much more. Research projects and student classes come and go, but the “tune” many of our featured authors have been “singing” (and to which some of our stakeholders have been listening and heeding) has not changed much over that time period—all organizations, including businesses, need to do more and to do a better job improving our capacities, to sustain this planet and its people. Happily, many thousands of business academics have acted on this crescendo-like message, including more than the dozen special colleagues who joined this editorial’s writers two decades ago in researching and writing articles on the ever-pressing topic of sustainability management.

In 1994, Professor James Post of Boston University, then editor of the JAI series volume Research in Corporate Social Policy and Performance (RCSPP), asked us to guest coedit a research volume on the interaction between business and the natural environment. Given that the Academy of Management interest group, Organizations and the Natural Environment (ONE), was just then forming, we jumped at the chance to feature some of the excellent work on this topic from colleagues who either were involved in organizing ONE or who were members of other academic groups interested in the topic, such as the Society for Business Ethics, and the Organizational Management and Theory, the Business Policy and Strategy, and the Social Issues in Management divisions of the Academy of Management. We were very proud of the set of 11 research articles published in that volume, which for some of us was the first time we had published on this topic. In the spirit of being practical, we required each contributor to provide recommendations from the research studies for managers, government policy makers, and environmentalists, as well as for future researchers.
One of us (Denis) was experiencing a life-threatening cancer challenge at the time, so during an Academy “preconference” session on the volume, those authors and the audience in attendance, including Jim Post, were asked to pause and send their best thoughts and wishes to Denis, who, with an additional assist from modern medical science, made a more-or-less full recovery. Thankfully, 20 years later, we are all “still at it,” with most of us researching, teaching, and doing service in the general area of business and the natural environment. When the two of us met after the March 2014 O&E issue (which featured an essay by Denis) was in press, we conjured up the idea that a combination retrospective/prospective collaborative editorial focusing some attention on the RCSPP articles might be both fun for us and interesting (and, hopefully, useful) for both our contemporaries and our (and their) successors.

We developed five questions for our author sets (as many of the pieces were coauthored), both for the purposes of this editorial and for potential use for a volume of essays on these topics that we are considering. The themes of the questions were the following: (a) a summary of the initial article; (b) ideas on what the authors might have done differently (with 20 years of hindsight); (c) how the authors’ respective topics evolved over that time period; (d) where they think their topics may be headed in the future; and (e) what recommendations they have for future work done by scholars interested in their particular topics. We were delighted all of our authors (or author sets) agreed to participate in this “retro-prospective,” and we, the volume coeditors, take full responsibility for organizing their responses in this O&E editorial to develop a composite portrait of business and environment of 20 years ago, evolving to the present day and beyond.

In response to the first question we posed to the RCSPP authors, Table 1 identifies their article summaries. One interesting aspect of these articles is that the respective topics are still salient, including to the extent that recent issues of O&E have included articles closely related to some of these same topics. As can be seen, the RCSPP authors covered a wide variety of subjects, with those in the first half of the volume focusing on sustainability strategies (Stead & Stead), formulating environmental plans (Henriques & Sadorsky), leading-edge environmental management (Lawrence & Morell), and innovative environmental policy changes (Winn). Just last year, Zollo, Cennamo, and Neumann (2013) in O&E addressed some of these same sustainability fundamental issues and concepts in their examination of multiple sustainability models. The second half of the volume features articles on business relationships with environmental organizations (Clair, Milliman, & Mitroff, and Turcotte), multiparty environmental problem solving (Feyerherm), natural resources planning and management policies (Selsky & Memon, and Swinth & Raymond), and public utility demand side management programs (Greening). This volume’s emphasis on multi-stakeholder sustainability approaches has also been reflected in recent O&E articles, including those by Hahn and Pinkse (2014) and Ashraf, Meschi, and Spencer (2014). Near the end of the RCSPP volume is an empirical article on green pension funds and organizational performance (White), and Albertini (2013) has continued the exploration of the connection between environmental and financial performance in a recent issue of O&E. One obvious takeaway from this table and the mentions of recent work in this journal is that that the field of business and the natural environment was broad 20 years ago and continued to broaden since then. That evolution includes both new topics such as the current impacts of climate disruption and the effects of rapid economic development in developing countries, and work on continuing topics, such as sustainability models, multi-stakeholder sustainability collaboration, and sustainability connections to financial performance.

Among the several other questions we asked our 1995 RCSPP sets of authors was what they might have done differently in their respective studies had they the opportunity to do so. While a few author sets indicated they would not have changed anything, in general, most said they would have made changes in their respective methodologies. These included changes in their survey design, definitions of performance, depth of inquiry, and method and measurement selection. Besides methodology, several author sets also mentioned changes related to the amount of
Table 1. RCSPP Volume Research Article Titles, Authors, and Results.

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<th>Article titles and authors</th>
<th>Research results</th>
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<tr>
<td>“An Empirical Investigation of Sustainability Strategy Implementation in Industrial Organizations,” by W. Edward Stead and Jean Garner Stead</td>
<td>“... responding firms were implementing process-driven and/or market-driven sustainability strategies, resulting in enhanced revenues, reduced costs, and effective responses to green-stakeholder pressures.”</td>
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<td>“The Determinants of Firms That Formulate Environmental Plans,” by Irene Henriques and Perry Sadorsky</td>
<td>“... firms who formulated environmental plans were motivated by customer pressure, shareholder pressure, expected positive impact on domestic competitiveness, and an environmental managerial mindset.”</td>
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<td>“Leading-Edge Environmental Management: Motivation, Opportunity, Resources, and Processes,” by Anne T. Lawrence and David Morell</td>
<td>“... leading-edge environmental management resulted from the complex interaction of four factors: motivation, opportunity, resources, and processes.”</td>
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<td>“Corporate Leadership and Policies for the Natural Environment,” by Monika I. Winn</td>
<td>“... four vastly divergent companies ... and their equally divergent policies ... (provide) insight into key factors supporting and hindering the adoption and successful uptake of these innovative efforts.”</td>
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<td>“Clash or Cooperation? Understanding Environmental Organizations and Their Relationship to Business,” by Judith A. Clair, John Milliman, and Ian I. Mitroff</td>
<td>“... four dimensions described differences and similarities among environmental organizations: (1) ecosophi scipy, (2) methods for ecological advocacy, (3) desired end-state, and (4) organizing structure.”</td>
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<td>“Conflict or Collaboration: The Interfaces Between Environmental Organizations and Business Firms,” by Marie-France Turcotte</td>
<td>“... the relationships between environmental groups and business firms ... could be characterized not only as conflicts but also as collaborations.”</td>
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<td>“Changing and Converging Mind-Sets of Participants During Collaborative, Environmental Rule-Making: Two Negotiated Regulation Case Studies,” by Ann E. Feyerherm</td>
<td>“... mental frameworks ... of purpose, interests, and outcomes shifted or expanded (such) that during environmental regulations negotiations, participants’ thinking.” demonstrated both stability and flexibility ...”</td>
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<td>“Managing Complex Common Property Resource Systems: Implications of Recent Institutional Reforms in New Zealand,” by John W. Selsky and P. A. Memon</td>
<td>“... advanced a behavioral model of the (Otago Harbour in New Zealand) ecosystem and its stakeholders, and built two ‘composite pictures’ of the ecosystem as a de facto commons ... based on the model.”</td>
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<td>“Sustainable Development in Practice: The Management of Yellowstone Lake for Fishing and Ecosystem Protection,” by Robert L. Swith and Bruce C. Raymond</td>
<td>“... four organizational strategies associated with sustainable development at Yellowstone Lake ... were organizational networks, systemic learning, leader initiative, and data collection/analysis.”</td>
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<td>“The Performance of Environmental Mutual Funds in the United States and Germany: Is There Economic Hope for ‘Green’ Investors?” by Mark A. White</td>
<td>“... (using) risk-adjusted measures as a measure of financial performance, neither U.S. nor German environmental funds ‘beat the market’ during the study period.”</td>
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<td>“Conservation Strategies, Firm Performance, and Corporate Reputation in the U.S. Electric Utility Industry,” by Daniel W. Greening</td>
<td>“Little support was found for the relationship between a firm’s adoption of five demand side management (DSM) conservation programs and its financial performance and moderate support was found for the relationship between DSM programs and firm reputation.”</td>
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Note. All quotations in the table were selected directly from personal communications between this collaborative guest editorial’s coeditors and the lead author of each article (May-June 2014).
attention given to implications of results, the number of research questions and hypotheses, and the inclusion of a more complete set of potential independent variables. While all sustainability management researchers can benefit from the hindsight of these pioneering authors, less-experienced researchers may want to especially note these several areas of greater scrutiny in their own sustainability research.

We also asked our authors how their respective topics have evolved in the 20 years since the volume was published, once again with an eye toward providing information to help guide future research on these sustainability management topics. Here, the responses followed one general, and expected, pattern: most of their topics have received continuing and even greater attention by both academics and practitioners. Anne Lawrence and David Morell (in Lawrence & Morell, 1995) suggest that, while many of the factors they studied are still salient, “. . . firms face much more rigorous constraints imposed by international treaties, national regulations, and industry standards like ISO 14001.” Mark White (in White, 1995) indicated that his topic of “. . . socially-responsible investing has exploded over the past 20 years (and) . . . (a) wider variety of environmental investment vehicles are now available, e.g. green bonds, green mortgages, green venture capital funds, etc.” Irene Henriques and Perry Sadorsky (in Henriques & Sadorsky, 1995) also indicated that sustainability management research has progressed to the extent that “(w)e are now examining energy issues, comparing the performance of environmental management systems, building environmental sustainability business models and undertaking some interesting interdisciplinary work with scientists . . .” Most authors indicated that either they themselves have attempted to build on their own work, or that other sustainability management scholars have done so, or both (the latter indicated by John Selsky and P. A. Memon, in Selsky & Memon, 1995).

The fourth question we asked our authors related to their projections on how their respective topics would or should develop over the next 20 years. Here, the responses varied widely, including those focusing on more research attention to ecosystems (compared with organizations), on more studies examining a greater variety of economic sectors, technologies, and databases (the latter suggested by Dan Greening, in Greening, 1995), and more focus on stakeholder confrontations (perhaps resulting from different sustainability values, as offered by Robert Swinth and Bruce Raymond, in Swinth & Raymond, 1995). Marie-France Turcotte (in Turcotte, 1995) opined that

(C)ontroversies developing at light speed on the web, the multiplication of devices to measure and assess sustainability performance, and the possibilities associated with open source innovation likely mean that our field will most probably study these phenomena and others to assess how they could contribute to sustainability.

Finally, we asked our author sets what they would recommend to future scholars studying and writing about their respective topics. Interestingly, our authors collectively provided a variety of philosophical and psychological recommendations. Among these, they proposed the need for future scholars to develop personal qualities of leadership and inspiration (advocated by Monika Winn, in Winn, 1995) and the need for societal qualities such as “. . . putting sustainable strategic management at the forefront of economic thought and action . . .” (promoted by Ed and Jean Stead, in Stead & Stead, 1995). Another suggestion was to examine emerging topics, such as how shared mental models of sustainability management using complexity theory can be developed (as Ann Feyerherm advanced in Feyerherm, 1995). Judy Clair, John Milliman, and Ian Mitroff (in Clair, Milliman, & Mitroff, 1995), encouraged future scholars to adopt more global perspectives than those common in the mid-1990s, since “. . . globalization has increased exponentially and it has become ever clearer that sustainability is a worldwide issue that must be dealt with at that level, as well as at the local level.”

All told, we hope this brief highlighting of both the RCSPP articles and their authors’ “retro-prospectives” helps refocus attention on the many important sustainability management issues
they researched and provides some perspective on how these topics have changed and might be addressed in the future. It is also important to note that at the time of publication, many of the authors were assistant professors (as were this collaborative guest editorial’s writers) and two (Marie-France Turcotte and Monika Winn) were doctoral students. They, and the several tenured authors, were moving in the direction of making business and the natural environment one of their main areas of future research. Along with the authors’ own maturation and development, one could say that societies and organizations (and many individuals in each) experienced at least partial sustainability transformations during the past 20 years.

On the positive side, more societies and organizations than ever are paying increasing attention to both environmental and socioeconomic sustainability. Most countries around the world have participated in several sustainability summits since the 1995 volume. Also, some of the largest businesses on the planet have developed sustainability oriented programs, including and especially sustainability reporting, and nonprofit organizations (or civil society) have never been as numerous and involved in attempting to advance one or more sustainability cultures.

Unfortunately, the positive side of two decades of sustainability change has been countered by a steep downside of continuing, and, in many cases, worsening, environmental and socioeconomic sustainability conditions. From climate disruption through mass biodiversity extinction to ever-worsening inequality and human exploitation, these and other maladies are either at or are approaching catastrophic levels. While a number of sustainability conditions fall somewhere between these two extremes, 20 years does provide a mentally convenient timing device for an assessment of where we have been and where we may (or even should) be headed in helping our species move toward long-term quality-of-life goals.

In addition to coediting and managing the reviewing process for the 1995 RCSPP volume, each of the collaborative guest editorial writers authored articles for the volume, so each of us has a 20-year “retro-prospective” on those pieces, as well. Briefly, in Mark’s chapter, titled “Research on Organizations and the Natural Environment: Some Paths We Have Traveled, the ‘Field’ Ahead” (Starik, 1995), an attempt was made to summarize, categorize, and initially assess 140 academic papers, presentations, articles, and books, mostly authored between 1990 and 1995, using a popular management model at the time (the McKinsey “7S” approach). Though many of this study’s research topic recommendations have been addressed in the ensuing two decades, the one that appears to remain nearly untouched is business, human population growth, and sustainability. Since the 1995 volume appeared, the world human population has grown from 5.7 billion to 7.2 billion, or more than 25%, and is projected to grow to more than 8.7 billion in the next 20 years, with most of that increase occurring in some of the poorest countries in the world. Clearly, questions on this topic in the referenced chapter posed 20 years ago are at least as salient now as they were then, and those could be summed up as “what have businesses done, with what effect, and what can businesses do worldwide, to help reduce the global population-related environmental and socioeconomic challenge?”

In Denis’ introduction (Collins, 1995a), he noted that at the time of the 1995 volume O&ES, founded in 1987, was one of the few peer-reviewed academic journals dedicated to publishing research on the interaction between businesses and the natural environment. Twenty years later, at the time of this writing, Wikipedia listed 48 environmental social science journals, and these do not include energy journals, environmental law journals, environmental humanities journals, and environmental science journals, among others. We have come a very long way in researching the interface between nature and organizations, yet a very long way still needs to be traveled. In Denis’ concluding chapter (Collins, 1995b), he ended with an anecdote about the terrible rotten egg smells (a hydrogen sulfide odor) seeping out of the dirty skies surrounding oil refineries along the New Jersey Turnpike, particularly in the Elizabeth/Newark area. Thanks a great deal to federal and state government regulations, key air quality indicators for carbon monoxide, suspended particulates, and sulfur dioxide in that region have all significantly improved. The sky is indeed clearer and one can now only occasionally smell a mild odor.
In summary, at least one conclusion can be drawn from this brief “retro-prospective”—numerous management scholars have done excellent research on a wide variety of sustainability management topics and many more will continue the important task of analyzing, evaluating, and writing on these and other related topics in the future. All of the topics of the authors in the 1995 *RCSPP* volume are as salient as ever, so other researchers might consider adding one or more of these to their respective sustainability management research portfolios, perhaps sooner rather than later. What also appears to be necessary is not only more research on these and related topics but also research on how these and other sustainability management topics can urgently be leveraged by multiple decision makers, both in and outside of business, to actually slow and even reverse their negative impacts and increase the scale in both breadth and depth of their positive impacts. While this solution is much easier to state than to accomplish, we, the writers of this collaborative guest editorial, invite all our colleagues, both those who were involved with our 1995 volume and those who were not, to consider making that commitment, to do so sooner rather than later, and to communicate our collaborative success to both current and future generations of sustainability management researchers. For, as a widely reported recent American politically bipartisan report notes, sustainability challenges, such as climate-related ecosystem and economic damage, are no longer projections about future threats but have already occurred and are likely worsening, at the same time as this editorial’s words are being written (Risky Business Project, 2014).

**References**


