

# What's Next?

## *The small stories that are shaping a new sustainable narrative*

### Rosemary Cairns



[A whale in the sky \(Starling roost at Otmoor UK\)](#) Photo by [James Wainscoat](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The new sustainable future that is emerging all around us is not easy to see because it is made up of thousands of small stories that emerge from the grassroots even as our societal narrative seems to be stuck in a much different, and older, big story.

[Seawater greenhouses](#)? Shared [energy grids](#)? Paper from discarded [agricultural straw](#)? Water from the [air](#)? Making [glass figurines](#) from discarded pop bottles? [Kangaroo care](#) for babies? [Plumpy'Nut](#) treatment for starving children? [Mobile money](#)? [Plastic roads](#)? Buildings that [cool](#) themselves? [Doughnut economies](#)? [Barefoot solar engineers](#)? The list is long. For many people, they are nice 'one off' stories that make them feel better about what seems like an unrelenting flow of negative news. I look for them because for me, they reveal the shape of what's next - a new narrative of sustainable growth and living.

Other people seem to be doing the same thing. Robinson Meyer suggested recently that while we argue the 'big picture', people and companies are adopting climate action as simply good practice and are thus achieving the grand goals set by governments - he calls it the [green vortex](#); Stephen Cohen, former director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, [says](#) a climate action economy is simply a modern economy.

## The 'two loops' model

These ideas seemed similar to where I had arrived as I pondered why good news stories don't seem to get traction in the public imagination. I had turned to the ['two loops model'](#) of system change developed by the Berkana Institute as a way of understanding why.



Graphic by [The Outside](#). Used with permission.

In essence, the dominant system – our idea of how the world works – shapes our collective thinking, until it begins – like every natural system – to break down and eventually collapse. As that loop begins to run down, a whole range of experiments develop, and one or more of them will eventually form a new system to replace the old one that is dying.

Thinking about how to describe this, I thought of the dramatic opening ceremony of the London Olympics, in which Danny Boyle [choreographed](#) the journey from England's 'green and pleasant land', when most people lived an agricultural life on the land, to the pandemonium of the Industrial Revolution. Somehow, it made the societal paradigm shift so clear. The gentle rural scene was dramatically and violently disrupted, as smokestacks and factories sprouted from the ground. But then I realized that when Abraham Darby used coke to smelt iron in a blast furnace in 1709, he was not part of the then dominant agricultural model – his was a small emerging and unusual story. Through many small stories, he and his ilk collectively changed the world's paradigm from rural and agricultural, to urban and industrial, and shaped our idea of the world as a machine rather than an ecosystem of relationships. Now as that industrial system runs down, solar energy, wind power, biomass and biogas are the equivalent of Darby's smelted iron as we move towards a world that will be powered, much more sustainably, by renewable energy. What is it going to look like? We don't really know, because people build on change and keep experimenting to find ever newer ways to do things. In 1709, who could have predicted today's world from all those many small experiments?



[Group of longhorn cattle at Knepp Wildland](#). Photo by [Julie Mac](#). [Wikimedia Commons](#) and [Flickr](#)

## The outline of a sustainable future

It seems to me that is the promise, and value, of all the small stories that don't seem to fit into today's dominant narrative. They provide hints of what's next:

- We will value nature's ecosystem services, not the ability to extract minerals and substance from the earth and the ocean.
- We are much more likely to have a much more individualized approach to power generation, via renewable sources.
- Animals' ability to shape our land and water will be valued and recognized, and together we will co-create landscapes that are more wild than domesticated.
- We will repair damage to the land by restoring the full water cycle and thus recharge aquifers below the surface, and remove many dams that have disrupted many natural systems.
- We will use natural systems to protect our coasts from storm damage rather than building ever higher sea walls, and we will recognize the value of 'blue forests' as much as trees in capturing carbon.
- We will use indigenous strategies like 'cool burning' as tools to manage forests sustainably.
- We will reuse many things we now discard and replace the slaughter of animals with laboratory created meat, fish, and chicken.

Recognizing that there is a sweet spot (Kate Raworth calls it the 'doughnut') between ensuring everyone has what they need, and exploiting natural systems beyond their tipping point, we will reshape our societies in

terms of governance, corporate ownership, relationships between north and south, and our idea of the global and local commons.

But because this is happening below that collapsing dominant narrative, we don't see all those small stories as the weft and woof of a new narrative. I see at least five reasons:

- We think the power is at the top
- We operate from a 'deficit' mindset
- We prefer the 'single story'
- The power of the machine metaphor
- We don't see the emerging narrative.

### **We think the power is at the top**

While we pay lip service to grassroots bottom-up action, many of us still behave as if the power is at the top of the system. When we think about addressing climate change, we focus on the top of the system - governments, and corporations - rather than the grassroots or community level. Thus our focus is on Paris Accords, government commitments, court decisions, and corporate pledges of change, rather than the community and the city. And we tend to think that participatory activities such as peoples' assemblies are 'new' phenomena rather than how we used to organize ourselves before we privileged individual land ownership, extractive technologies, and a focus on individual profits and not societal costs.

[Michelle Nijhuis](#) argues in a recent essay called *The Miracle of the Commons*, that despite the claim that the 'commons' was dead, commons management principles actually underlie hundreds of conservation efforts worldwide which - unlike top-driven conservation activities - reduce costs and deliver significant benefits to people and nature.

"Many have revived and adapted conservation practices developed centuries ago, developing new rules suited to current circumstances," she says. "Their creators cooperate in the management of coral reefs in Fiji, highland forests in Cameroon, fisheries in Bangladesh, oyster farms in Brazil, community gardens in Germany, elephants in Cambodia, and wetlands in Madagascar. They operate in thinly populated deserts, crowded river valleys, and abandoned urban spaces."

Basil Davidson argues that many African religious beliefs were actually conservation principles framed so they could be easily grasped by widely-scattered peoples, and that perspective helps us see principles of indigenous conservation as practical strategies wrapped in story, not myth. [Cool burning](#), for example, now is used extensively in northern Australia in concert with 'modern' fire management strategies. Scientists have found that forests managed by their indigenous residents are managed at least as [sustainably](#) - if not more so - than forests managed by foresters and governments. [Human-wildlife interaction](#) is managed much more effectively when rural communities help develop and manage such strategies in relationship and as part of an



ecosystem - think chilli peppers and bee hives rather than electric fences. Finally, when [peoples' assemblies](#) are used to discuss climate change, participants often choose much more dramatic strategies than governments. Once people grasp the situation holistically and in context, they are willing to make choices and tradeoffs that governments find difficult.

### **We operate from a 'deficit' mindset**

Decades ago, management consultant [David Cooperrider](#) dramatically changed how we examine systems. Rather than seeing it as a machine that needed to be 'fixed', he began looking for what gave life to a system. And that required asking quite different questions (Appreciative Inquiry).

Yet the deficit model is a powerful one. It is easier to look for what doesn't work than to look for what is working. When I worked in community development internationally, I would divide a flipchart in two columns - "What works" and "What could be done differently" - and then ask project staff to share what they saw. Invariably, people wanted to start with 'what didn't work'. But also invariably, once the 'what works' ideas finally started, ideas for what could be done differently burst forward in the narrative context of what was working.

When we argue that the public must hear a dire story of climate change, we are not starting from 'what works'. If we start from the narrative of nature as a living system whose ecosystem services make it possible for us to live sustainably and still make a living, we would have a quite different picture, and make different decisions.



[Reef sharks momentarily mirroring each other](#). Photo by [David Clode](#) on [Unsplash](#)

If we see a shark as a [million dollar resource](#) for our country's tourism, for example, we become willing to spend money to find livelihood alternatives for fishers, because it is in everyone's long term interests to let the shark keep attracting tourists. Or if we think of an elephant as providing ecosystem [services](#) worth \$1.75 million per animal, we treat poaching differently.

Similarly, financing 'blue carbon' projects is simpler if we compare the value of how [mangroves](#) protect coasts from erosion naturally with the cost of building artificial sea walls and raising houses high on stilts.

Such conversations generate inventive new possibilities. When conservation organizations in California looked at how to [restore bird migration](#) in the context of the whole system, they came up with a 'win-win-win' solution. When rice farmers began flooding harvested fields rather than burning stubble, birders noticed that migrating birds began to land in the flooded fields which mimicked what existed before the state channelled mountain water to agricultural fields. Drawing on the ideas that created Uber and Airbnb, conservation groups researched exactly when and where the land was needed and paid farmers to keep the fields flooded for that time period, at rates the farmers bid. The birds started to come back, the farmers' bottom line benefitted, and the conservation project was affordable and practical. (Additionally, salmon for which rivers are now too warm can feed on the stubble as they grow.)

Changing our thinking from 'deficit' to 'appreciative' also means we can see waste of all kinds as a resource and not as a problem. Human and [animal waste](#) is used to generate electricity via biogas, for example. Human waste is reprofiled as '[toilet resources](#)' by industry, which sees huge opportunities in new ways to treat sanitation - including mining minerals from human waste. Paper is generated from [agricultural waste](#), saving trees. Plastic waste is shredded and added to the [asphalt for roads](#), improving road surfaces and reducing carbon emissions.

### **We prefer the 'single story'**

We don't like complexity even though it is a characteristic of what Amanda Ripley describes as 'good conflict' vs. 'high conflict'. We prefer the 'single story', despite its misleading nature, because it is simple.

'Solutions journalism' grew out of the idea that in their desire to reflect 'both sides', many journalists were heightening conflict by simplifying stories that were much more complex. Ripley, whose powerful questions inspired this new approach, has just written a [book](#) that examines what she calls 'high conflict' and 'good conflict'.

High conflict is binary, argumentative, and largely performative because it shuts down our curiosity about others. Good conflict, by contrast, happens when we are curious about other peoples' views and ask questions without assuming we know the answers, thus helping to generate solutions we cannot see when we are stuck in the 'tunnel vision' of high conflict. Nigerian writer [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) talks about the 'danger of a single story', which is in many ways the same thing. And as [James C. Scott](#) says in *Seeing Like A State*, the map is not the territory. It is easier, and simpler, to tell that single story as if it is *the* truth. This simplicity/complexity dichotomy makes it more difficult to put all the 'small stories' together into a new narrative.

International development activities are particularly prone to categorizing issues in silos and seeing development as a vertical 'expert to novice' process rather than a 'neighbour to neighbour' one, despite much evidence to the contrary.

[Ngwenya Glass](#) in Swaziland, now known as Eswatini, began with a South African family who collected small glass figurines that had been made in a factory established with Swedish aid. When the supply dried up, they discovered the factory had shut down, and bought it. The project now covers so much that many international organizations see in separate silos - job creation, community economic development, recycling glass, environmental conservation, and tourism - but which make complete sense from a holistic community-level perspective.



[Elephant](#). Photo by [Ngwenya Glass](#) – [Wikimedia Commons](#).

A school principal in Lesotho whose idea to use school land to grow crops to feed her students influenced an entire region, without international funding, because people heard about it from others and decided to copy it - an example of what the South African NGO [CDRA](#) calls 'horizontal development' because it spreads organically from neighbour to neighbour.

### **The power of the machine metaphor**

Our narrative is still driven powerfully by the idea that humans, and society, are machines or engines with parts that can be interchanged, rather than natural systems which have their own order and ability to heal.

I hadn't fully grasped how powerful the machine metaphor has been in shaping our image of ourselves and our world until I read [Norman Doidge](#)'s books. He was telling stories about the work of neuroplasticity researchers and their revelations about the brain's capacity to learn, change and adapt. Parts of a damaged brain could take over for other parts, for example, and people who suffered strokes could return to full functioning. It seemed miraculous. But I was even more astounded by the reluctance of the medical research establishment to give up its attachment to the old idea of the brain as machine.

Most indigenous science is rooted in an understanding of the world and nature as a living, self-organizing entity that we can communicate with, and learn from. We are learning that the earth can heal itself if we understand the principles of its organization. Indigenous Australian techniques of fire management, for example, use fire in specific ways, and at specific times, to reduce wildfire damage, support natural growth, and manage land.

Nature has a great ability to heal itself if we let it, as we know from [Chernobyl](#), the [Demilitarized Zone](#) between the two Koreas, and the Green Line in Cyprus. Local communities around the globe are using such self-healing capacities to heal the [water cycle](#) and recharge underground water aquifers, regrow tropical [forests](#) and make the land [fertile](#) again.

It is the natural equivalent of what researchers call 'post-traumatic growth' - the idea that traumas can help us learn and grow in ways we would not achieve without those experiences.

### **We don't see the emerging narrative**

The consequence is that we think of small stories of achievement, no matter how substantial, as anomalous blips in the existing narrative rather than an emerging new narrative. When our story is a single and deficit-based one, rather than an appreciative one full of complexity, we struggle to fit all those stories of individual achievement - if they're known at all - into that deficit view.

Yet this is not how we humans actually behave in real life. We are moved by individual stories, as [Kiva.org](#) discovered when its founders began exploring how to create a lending platform that would allow North Americans to lend small amounts of money to Africans who were trying to make better lives. It was the stories that motivated the lenders, they learned.

Marine scientist [Nancy Knowlton](#), who created the [OceanOptimism](#) hashtag, did so because offering students a dire picture of the ocean [depressed](#) them, and also because many scientists [did not know](#) stories of achievement even in their own field. Her work inspired the Earth Optimism summit in Washington and as she noted in [2020](#), that was the first time participants had been at a meeting where the entire focus was on 'what works'.

This larger perspective is vital, because our view of what is working in the ocean, for example, becomes different if it is linked directly with what is happening on land and in community livelihoods. Recent research on the [tourism value of surfing](#) to Mexican communities, for example, shows that protecting the ocean from pollution or waste is an investment in keeping those tourists and their money coming.



## The emerging new 'meta-narratives'

The challenge is recognizing the new overall narrative which those stories are shaping - and that is the value of the '[doughnut economy](#)', the '[circular economy](#)', '[biomimicry](#)' (design from nature), the '[ecosystem services](#)' perspective, and now, the '[green vortex](#)'. These meta narratives create frameworks that allow the small stories of achievement to be seen as building blocks, rather than as blips, and situate the 'what doesn't work' side of the ledger in a more holistic context. While some are critical of putting a dollar value on ecosystem services, many conservation scientists say it allows them to sit at the table with [bankers and financiers](#) and ensure that decisions are made in a more accurate and holistic financial context. People and corporations come to conservation from many perspectives. Walmart, the world's largest retailer, has become [very green](#) because its business model depends on a reliable supply chain. It started with fish. When Walmart notified its suppliers that it would in future only stock canned fish that was certified as coming from sustainably-managed fisheries, the marine community took notice. Recently it has taken a similar approach to investing in and supporting [regenerative agriculture](#).

[Rewilding projects](#) in Britain are restoring apex predators which shape the land naturally to landscapes whose soil fertility has been damaged by intensive cultivation, recreating an older narrative of farming that is both ecologically and economically healthier.

Projects to [re-green deserts](#) and land damaged by [disruption of the water cycle](#) have begun to show strong and viable results, with work done locally and in a participatory way. One village in India, for example, rebuilt its soil and its economy when it changed how it managed water and made collective decisions about which crops to grow. The [miracle water village](#) now has many wealthy people whereas before, it had lost many people to the city and those left behind were barely surviving.

The Berkana two loops model offers us a way to work within the collapsing and emerging paradigms - by offering hospice to the dying industrial system, connecting the many emerging experiments, and deliberately building a bridge for conversations about the transition from the old to the new. And that means seeing and sharing the small stories of sustainable achievement as guideposts for the future rather than temporary respites from a bleak picture.

## About Rosemary

Rosemary maintains the [Hopebuilding](#) blog, keeping track of the 'small stories' she shares here. She has a gift for seeing patterns - and she draws on a wide range of experience to do so, having been a journalist, information officer, community worker, board member, evaluator, and observer of elections in faraway places.

E: [rx102@gmail.com](mailto:rx102@gmail.com).



## A note about AMED

*Sadly, so far, nobody has expressed a willingness to take over from the outgoing AMED Council. So in the circumstances, the EGM on 26 May is likely to confirm that AMED will finally cease to operate as an educational charity by the end of 2022 at the latest.*



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk). We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

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