

Eco-Affect and Stories of Everyday Sustainability

Geoffrey Craig

For many people, the quest to live in a more environmentally friendly manner is driven by the emotional appeal of such an existence as well as a rational recognition of the climate crisis. This desire for sustainability is understood here as “eco-affect” and, in accord with general understandings of the concept of affect, it captures feelings and emotion and also more profoundly the driving force that compels people to act. Affect is understood, then, as an integral feature of transformations in environment and society and a necessary corollary to rational arguments about responses to the climate crisis. Stories of sustainability occur in mass media but also importantly in personal life narratives of individuals, families, and communities that ordinarily exist below the threshold of broader public attention.

This project explores this latter form of narrative, expressed through communicative forms such as testimonials, eco-home visits, and the social media sites of local community organizations. Such narratives provide information, contributing to knowledge about green living, and they are also eco-affect-producing mechanisms, generating accounts of inspiration, experimentation, struggle, pleasure, failure and success. The telling and sharing of such stories also produce and maintain networks of empathy and solidarity and facilitate the local community formations that are integral to the practice of sustainability. Put simply, then, this study explores how people make sense of sustainability in their everyday lives. Everyday life has long been recognized as a crucial site in the production of identity and subject to differing evaluations, as a means of generating capitalist reproduction and alienation and also the sphere where greater levels of autonomy and authenticity can exist. Everyday life is a grounded phenomenon, defined by certain spaces and times, but it is also a product of mediation given the way the world enters our everyday lives as we consume media and use media to communicate with others. Everyday sustainable living, then, is profoundly produced through our engagements with the stories and discourses of sustainability.

The project is also informed by understandings of the indeterminacy of sustainability, and I argue that the stories and images of sustainable living are vehicles through which sustainability is given shape and meaning. Sustainability is an elusive phenomenon because it has no necessary content: current practices must always be flexible and dynamic given that they respond to particular natural environments and social contexts, and are informed by projections of their possible future ramifications, anticipating environmental and social upheaval. The normative status of sustainability—prompting ongoing debate about *how* sustainability *should be* implemented—is emphasized here. I will use the Carson Writing Fellowship to research and write two articles: one will investigate the concept of affect and outline my understanding of the idea of eco-affect that I have introduced here; and a second will investigate the different types of stories of everyday sustainability and analyze their roles in the development of everyday sustainable identities.