Changing the Narrative of Nature: Towards Sustainability

Zmiana narracji wobec natury: w kierunku zrównoważoności

Atreyee Mukherjee

Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad, India
*E-mail: atreyee@iitism.ac.in, ORCID: 0000-0003-4728-973X

Abstract

Nature, an ontologically dynamic entity, has been the object of different types of conceptualizations. In recent types, it has been metaphorically conceptualized as a resource. This conceptualization is problematic such that it reduces the dynamic interdependent nature to a mere store-house for materials. This leads to the conceptualization that humans can use nature up until stock lasts. On top of that, our hunting-gathering instincts have made us reckless consumers and hoarders of things we think are necessary. This non-sustainable behavior is detrimental to our nature which holds us, nurtures us, and provides for us. To change the narrative of nature in the world of sustainability, sustainable development and sustainable practices, we must change our conceptualization of nature. In the present work, we present the problematic conceptualization of nature as a resource. We also discuss certain conceptualizations and their impact in the discussions on sustainability. And finally, we provide a linguistic alternative to the metaphoric conceptualization of nature that has the potential to alter the non-sustainable practices and take society towards sustainability.

Key words: nature, narrative of nature, conceptualization of nature, sustainable development

Streszczenie

Natura, byt ontologicznie dynamiczny, była przedmiotem różnych typów konceptualizacji. W ostatnich opracowaniach została metaforycznie pojmowana jako zasób. Ta konceptualizacja jest problematyczna, ponieważ redukuje dynamiczną, współzależną naturę do zwykłego magazynu materiałów. Prowadzi to do konceptualizacji, że ludzie mogą korzystać z przyrody do wyczerpania zapasów. Co więcej, nasze instynkty łowiecko-zbierackie uczyniły nas lekkomyślnymi konsumentami i zbieraczami rzeczy, które naszym zdaniem są niezbędne. To niezrównoważone zachowanie jest szkodliwe dla naszej natury, która nas pielęgnuje i zaopatruje. Aby zmienić narrację natury w świecie zrównoważoności, zrównoważonego rozwoju i zrównoważonych praktyk, musimy zmienić naszą konceptualizację natury. W niniejszej pracy przedstawiamy problematyczną konceptualizację natury jako zasobu. Omawiamy również pewne konceptualizacje i ich wpływ na dyskusję na temat zrównoważonego rozwoju. Wreszcie, przedstawiamy lingwistyczną alternatywę dla metaforycznej konceptualizacji natury, która może zmienić niezrównoważone praktyki i skierować społeczeństwo w stronę zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: natura, narracja wobec natury, konceptualizacja natury, zrównoważony rozwój

1. Introduction

The notion of sustainability revolves around the idea: unlimited and unrestrained consumption of natural resources lead to irreparable environmental damage, which, in turn, leads to lack of resources for the future generations to use. Because of the unregulated rapacity of mankind, sustainability emerges even as a policy concept which deals with the dialectics between a better-life for mankind and limitations of nature. One may note that the conceptualization of sustainability is not straightforward and nature and use of nature for the benefit of mankind is often conceptualized in terms of metaphors. These metaphors allow us to conceptualize nature as a resource which is for mankind to use. In the present work, we will examine and highlight the narrative and conceptualization of

sustainability and nature and the metaphors involved. We will explore the issues with such metaphorical conceptualizations and provide linguistic solutions that would allow reconceptualization of nature and carry us forward toward a sustainable future.

2.   Nature as a Resource: A Linguistic Fallacy

Language is a vehicle, a tool and a trigger for conceptualization. It is used to disseminate ideas from an individual to many. Language is a trigger that prompts and influences conceptualization. The Theory of Linguistic Relativity, propounded by Sapir (1929) and further developed by Whorf, claims that language also influences the way we think. It influences how we conceptualize the world. This hypothesis has further been tested by Levinson (1997, 2003), Wolff and Holmes (2011), among others. These researchers, in their work, empirically validate that language not only determines the way we conceptualize the world but also determines behavior patterns of the users. For instance, language has been observed to determine how an individual conceptualizes space and how these language users behave in relation to space. This implies that linguistic priming has the potential to regulate human behavior. This has been further confirmed in many research studies in the domain of bilingualism, psychology, cognitive studies, etc. (Gaillet et al., 2013; Meade et al., 2022, etc.). Based on the effects of language on conceptualization, I claim in this paper that the conceptualization of nature as a metaphorical resource is problematic and that it is one of the primary reinforcements of non-sustainable practices. In what follows, we discuss the issue with nature being identified as a resource.

Nature, in the present times, has been conceptualized as a resource. The term *resource* emerges from the Latin word *surgere*, *to rise*. The term *surgere* was further adopted and modified to *resourdre*, *rise again/recover*, which further became *resource* in the early 17th century. Presently, the word *resource* denotes *a stock or supply of materials that can be used to function effectively*. The conceptualization of nature as a resource indicates that it can be used-up by mankind to function until it is available in stock. However, such conceptualization reduces nature to a mere storage unit. The notion of nature as a storehouse indicates that nature holds raw materials until stock lasts. This conceptualization may seem unimportant. However, this conceptualization is detrimental to our journey towards sustainability because nature is not a mere stock of *resources* but an entity that requires time and tending to re-surge and replenish.

The fallacy behind the conceptualization of nature as a resource can be understood in consequence to mankind's hunter-gatherer trait. Mankind, since its origin, has been hunters and gatherers. Our hominid predecessors survived the-then nature through a hunting-gathering approach to tackle the availability of food (a necessity), or the lack thereof. They would hunt, consume a part of the hunt and store some for future use. During this period, individuals or the society did not start viewing nature as a resource. Instead, nature was viewed as contextual possibilities, where individuals would prepare for a long period of contextual unavailability of food and hunt during the contextual abundance of food.

Although we have come a long way from being hunters and gatherers, we have not been able to let go of the hunting-gathering tendencies. At the moment, when everything in the world has become accessible to a huge population, the necessities of mankind have increased and multiplied exponentially. People over-use and over-consume which is as a result of accessibility and globalization. Given the current condition, people over-consume and over-hoard commodities for future-consumption. There is no limit to this overuse or use-hoarding tendencies because we do not consider the natural cycle of availability and unavailability. The unrestrained over-use of commodities leads to the exponential depletion of nature that is used-up to create the commodities. This is a detriment to nature as it does not get enough time and tending to re-surge and replenish itself. Thus, nature and the raw materials sourced from nature see a steady decline as the human tendencies of over-consumption and over-hoarding surge.

The conceptualization of nature and raw materials obtained from nature as metaphorical *resources* allows mankind to think of nature as a storage of elements to be utilized by mankind until the end of stock. This conceptualization of nature is reductive and strips the focus of a fully functioning morphological unit that thrives off of balance between availability-unavailability and use-non use. The present conceptualization reduces the ecological makeup of nature and withdraws attention and profiling from the fact that nature is bountiful if and when it grows and flourishes over time which is only possible if it goes through a period of non-use.

Conceptualization of nature as a natural resource reduces it to a mere store-house of materials. Due to this conceptualization, individuals do not focus on the cycle of growth and development of nature and only focus on the consumption and storage of commodities. Consider a comparison of the ecological patterns of the global meat industry versus sustainable patterns of animal farming where the same nature and raw materials are used by mankind. In the former, the more non-sustainable pattern of meat production and consumption, there is no conscious attention to where the meat comes from and how the animals and the surrounding environment are treated to procure the enormous amount of meat. Also, the cumulative effect of global meat production and consumption do not mimic the patterns of availability and unavailability like the old times. The global meat industry warrants no time for nature to recuperate the environmental cost of one round of meat production. On the contrary, patterns of

sustainable farming and sustainable meat consumption follow the patterns of the natural cycle of availability and unavailability. In such practices, animals that are reared for meat consumption are raised well with sustainable ethics in mind. The procurement and consumption of such meat are limited to the cycle of availability and unavailability. In contrast to the global meat industry, where nature is a resource for meat production and consumption, sustainable meat production not only considers the natural ecology involved in meat production but also operates in accordance with it. In such patterns of consumption nature is not considered as a resource but as a contextual availability which is dynamic in time. This pattern of consumption is not limited to the meat industry but to every commodity and service available in the market. The unrestricted consumption of commodities and services result from commodification due to globalization and accessibility. The commodification of nature leads to the understanding that nature is a resource which can be bought from the market till stock lasts. This yields to a vicious cycle of consumption behavior that is not sustainable and leads to the depletion of nature and natural materials.

3. Metaphorization towards Sustainability: TENDING TO NATURE IS BAKING BREAD

In the previous section, the framework for conceptualizing nature as a resource and its consequences have been discussed. In this section, I attempt to provide a fresh perspective on different metaphorical conceptualizations of nature. Metaphors are not just flourishes of a given language but metaphors dictate on how humans see the world and behave in it. We use metaphors to define how we want to categorize the world in our system of knowledge. As established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are a means of structuring our conceptual system which regulates the nature and patterns of activities we perform.

The linguistic approach toward sustainability allows us to look at the linguistic aspects of understanding and promoting sustainability or sustainable consumption. The age-old narrative involves the metaphors idealizing nature as a *resource* which must be *conserved* due to the onset of its *depletion*. Sustainability is talked about as *green*. However, as rightly put by Princen (2010), the approach to understand and promote sustainability is to get the language right and speak in tandem with the *imperative of living with ecological constraint*. It is true that changing the narrative alone will not immediately change reality. But changes in our conceptualization of nature from a reductionist storehouse to a cyclic organic constrained being will shift the worldview from over-consumption and over-hoarding to a more compatible ecologically balanced consumerism which is most imperative. And as eloquently put by Princen (2010) *The planet's life-support system is changing, fundamentally. For that, fundamental cultural change is needed, urgently. One ingredient is new language. Indeed, we need to speak, and act, differently.* Now, having established the necessities of new metaphors and metaphorical conceptualizations of nature, I present to you some metaphors in works that are a step up from NATURE IS A RESOURCE metaphor. These include conceptualization of SPACESHIP EARTH, which is the life support system of all species in and of itself; PLANET EARTH which has its own limits in the matters of growth; NATURE AS A NETWORK, where human-nature interactions are complex and symbiotic; NATURE AS A TIDE, where nature is cyclic, ever renewing, ever changing and punctuated by extreme events; NATURE AS A SCALE where human-nature interactions are in balance and of the right size, etc. provided by Princen (2010). There are other metaphors such as CIVILIZATION AS AN AIRPLANE and MODERNITY AS RUNWAY. These metaphorical conceptualizations lead to the scene of sustainability that is accounted for by an extreme plunge into a *scarcity space* and operating in the form of a small-scale economy based on the norms of minimalism (Karlsson, 2016). Although these are more effective conceptualizations of nature, these are also ill-fit for the purposes of sustainability. Each of the conceptualizations involves different issues that are to be discussed in sequence.

The metaphor involving the conceptualization of SPACESHIP EARTH does take into account the dependencies of nature and each and every species and their progenies on each other. However, the semantic components of SPACESHIP EARTH do not include capitalism and consumerism. The use of the metaphor in the green-discussion ignores the fact that language is contextual and is the most effective when embedded in context. Thus, the use of this metaphor, although useful as an initiator, will not be effective to alter the sustainability narrative. This is because it ignores the present capitalist and consumerist conglomerate we call society. The concept and in turn the linguistic unit only work effectively to establish a transition from the present state to a more sustainable pattern of consumption if and only if the conceptualization is contextually relevant. And, because this metaphor relies only on the dependencies of nature, it would fail to divert attention from the present nature of consumerism. Similarly, the metaphor - the all-inclusive PLANET EARTH, which indicates that it is the only source of resource, fails to address the fact that we are exploring other homesteads as options and therefore does not impact individuals or the society. NATURE AS NETWORK highlights the dependencies of nature but does not highlight the ability of resurge with time and tending. Language is dynamic and not entirely perfect. However, we can conjure certain frames that can be used more effectively. This leads to the formation of an effective metaphor that can function as an alternate narrative. This metaphorical conceptualization must include the following factors:

1. The present capitalist and consumerist situation
2. Nature as dependencies
3. Nature as NOT a resource but a necessity

4. Nature as a quasi-renewable entity
5. Requires time and tending
6. Dynamic and Ever-changing
7. Unavailability of any other option
8. And other pertinent conceptualizations

Now, language users have the ability to conceptualize a complex frame as given above for a more effective sustainability narrative. However, language use is limited and may not make one single metaphorical conceptualization available that addresses the essential factors required to alter the narrative of sustainability. Thus, it is of utmost importance to emerge with a complex conceptualization that accommodates the above-mentioned frames. A model conceptual frame that would accommodates the given conceptual framework is as follows:

Nature is a quasi-renewable interdependent entity that can only benefit mankind if treated as a cyclic entity. The quasi-renewable nature of the environment mandates limited and restrained consumption and use so that nature is able to recuperate and resurge for possible future uses. To reap the benefits of nature, we have to tend to nature. We have to ensure that nature flourishes to reap the fruits borne by it.

The above-given narrative provides a unique perspective of viewing nature. It is not extreme in either consumption or non-consumption. It provides an idea of balance. However, this conceptualization is limited in its impact on the masses as it is heavy and unrelatable. Let us consider a more appealing conceptualization that is more relatable and spontaneously understandable.

4. **The Metaphor: TENDING TO NATURE IS BAKING BREAD**

The metaphor TENDING TO NATURE IS BAKING BREAD is an interesting, catchy and appealing conceptualization that could not only grab attention but can also change the perspective of nature as a resource. This metaphor mandates the audience to conceptualize the process of baking in relation to tending to nature. If the process of baking is successfully finished, we get to eat baked goodies. But in order to eat them, we have to let them fully bake, especially when it is the most important or only source of food available to us. Similar to baking, to actually benefit from the fruits of nature, we must tend to nature, care for it and let it grow and flourish. Tending to nature and baking require time, patience and effort, both fulfill our necessities and both are required only as much as necessary. It may be noted that products of nature are conceptualized as a tangible food source which requires patience, time and effort to actually be ready to be eaten. This metaphor has potential because it is relatable and addresses all the frame-related aspects that have been highlighted earlier. For instance:

1. Flour, milk, etc. is to be procured to bake bread that indicates the capitalist and consumerist situation.
2. Food (bread) has dependencies and interdependencies.
3. Food is not a resource, instead it is a necessity
4. Food is only consumed as long as necessary.
5. Food: bread - is one of the staples, i.e. it is a need and not a want.
6. Food is quasi-renewable and requires time, patience, effort and tending to be ready for consumption.
7. Food is dynamic and ever-changing just like the environment. If it remains undercooked, it is inedible, similar to nature, as, if it doesn't flourish, we are at a disadvantage and cannot use it for our benefit.
8. Also, food is one object which we cannot do without. To have patience to have the food be cooked is the only possible option that we have so we can eat.

The conceptualization TENDING TO NATURE IS BAKING BREAD is a potent metaphor that has extensive potential to alter the general perspective on nature. It not only shifts the perspective of nature being a stock of materials but also highlights the fact that in order to benefit from nature, it is mandatory that we care for it and tend to it. It also highlights the fact that consumption is only limited to the necessities of living as food is only consumed as long as we are hungry. Once hunger is satiated, we do not require more food for a long time. In tandem, nature must be made use of as long as it is necessary and not beyond that. This metaphor also highlights the conceptualization of undercooked food that is inedible, indicating that we will not benefit from nature unless we let it flourish fully. This conceptualization draws attention to the cyclic trait of nature. Together, the cyclicity leads to the conceptualization of limited and cyclic consumption. It is not an extreme measure but a measure that could be sustainably executed by the global population.

5. **Conclusion**

In conclusion, language plays an important role not only while conveying things, but also while conceptualizing things. It is an important tool that has intensive potential to alter human behavior. In what we experience so far, nature has linguistically been equated with resources. This metaphorical equation does not do good as it reduces nature from a dynamic system that hosts life to a mere storehouse of raw materials. This withdraws attention from the cyclical aspect of nature that mandates limited consumption and use. Changing the narrative of nature ensures

that we, as consumers, pay attention to some of the conceptual frames such as the dynamicity of nature, the cyclicity of nature, limitations of nature and consume according to nature instead of making it act according to us. Similar psychological and philosophical solutions towards sustainability can be found in Mitra and Sameer (2022) and Biswas and Prakash (2022).

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