SOCIAL PROCESSES

AND

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

AN EXPERIENTIAL STUDY

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research.

(Heather Lamont)
In memory of my mother,
a community enthusiast who loved nature.
This thesis is both a record of a personal journey and a social science treatise. It is set in the context of rising public awareness that we live on a finite planet facing potentially devastating environmental problems. The need for widespread changes in Western lifestyles and the search for ways to achieve such change prompted the research.

The study is holistic in approach and uses the methodological device of the case study to focus on the issues. The ‘case’ – the Permaculture Association of Western Australia (PAWA) – is an organisation devoted to promoting lifestyles which care for the earth while at the same time caring for people. A statistical comparison of members of the Association with the general state population showed them to be fairly typical on a number of key demographic features.

As a focal point and a representative sample, members of the Association and their activities were studied using various methods. These included: participant observation (including experiential insights and a form of action research), responses from a survey of members, and documentary information from permaculture publications and general research literature.

Findings highlighted the comprehensive nature of the environmental problem, and the many factors involved in developing an ecologically
sustainable society. The importance of community interaction in promoting the level of change required, was emphasised, as was the effect of informal education in leading to changes in attitudes and values. New experiences with nature and natural processes and cooperative encounters with other people were shown to be crucial in developing new attitudes and satisfactions.

The changes required – and desired by people with new values – are set in the context of an economic system committed to continuous growth and an ever-rising standard of living. The dominance of the market economy affords limited opportunities for people to live simpler, less materialistic lives, and this points to the need for new economic institutions. In particular, it is argued that a revitalised reciprocal economy as a supplement to the market economy and the distributive economy, would greatly assist efforts to create a more sustainable society. Examples are given of various innovative economic endeavours pursued by members of the Association and related groups, including a detailed analysis of the Local Exchange and Trading System (LETS) initiated by PAWA members during the period of study.

The study concludes that the kind of changes required must emanate from individuals and non government organisations at the grass roots in the first instance, but that governing authorities could assist where required with enabling legislation or regulatory change.
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Preface

Referencing in this thesis generally follows the conventions of the Harvard method. However, in some sections footnotes are also used when references are too numerous or detailed to be included in the text.