

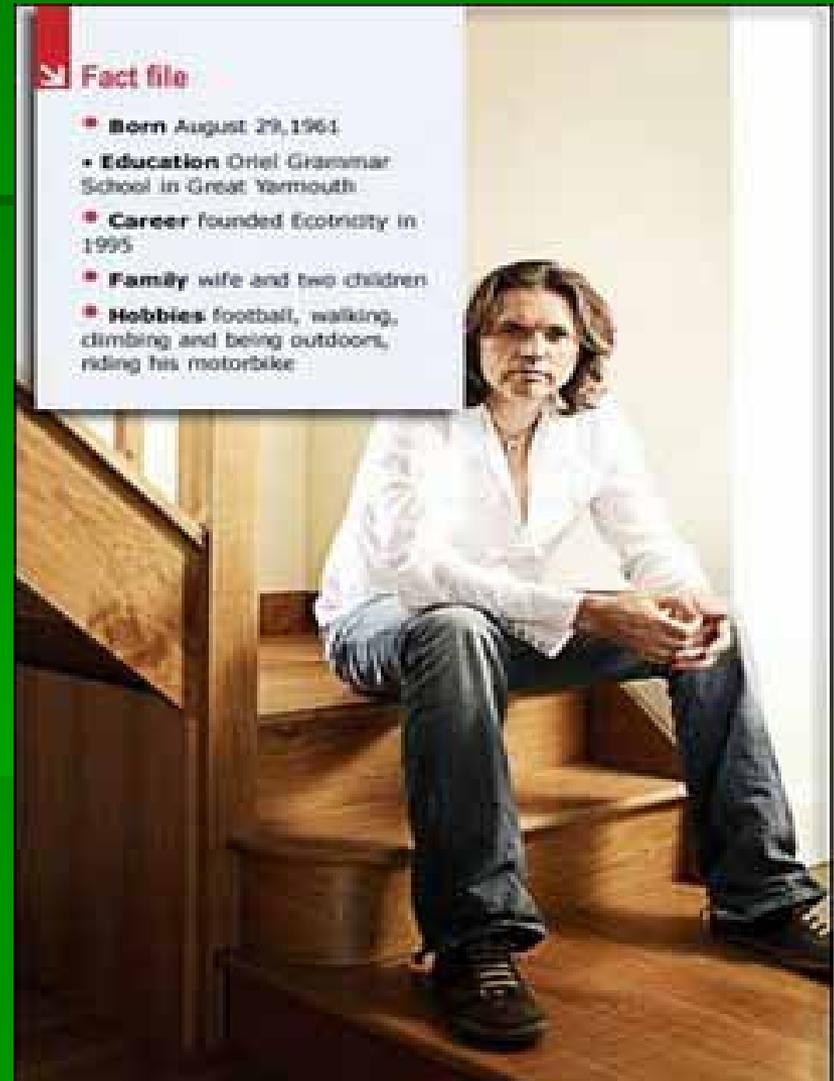
Prospects for an Environmental
Economic Geography: Transition
Management, Ecological
Modernisation and Ecopreneurs

EGRG Annual Symposium:
Economy, Nature, Space

David Gibbs
Department of Geography
University of Hull
d.c.gibbs@hull.ac.uk

Introduction

- Ecopreneurs - combining environmental awareness with business activities
- Part of a wider popular and academic discourse of ecological modernisation
- Opens up opportunities for ecopreneurial activity to become mainstream
- A 'new wave of creative destruction'?
- New forms of capitalism?



Ecological Modernisation

- A 'concrete utopianism'/'utopianism of process?'
- 'Self-transforming present, not an ideal future'
- Progressive modernisation of the institutions of modern society
- "the current capitalist system is seen as having the capacity to develop sustainable solutions to environmental problems - that capitalism's drive for innovation can be harnessed to realize environmental improvements" (Beveridge and Guy, 2005: 666).
- Ecological modernisation into policy agendas, albeit in 'weak' forms
- Creates a space for business that can work across commercial and environmental spaces
- Driven by, and in turn gives opportunities for, ecopreneurs

Transition Management and Strategic Niches

- technological regimes - interconnected systems of artefacts, institutions, rules and norms
- alternative, sustainable technological niches - nurture socio-technical configurations, which grow and displace incumbent regime activities
- Niches may transform technological regimes
- Resolving tensions in the wider socio-technical landscape (such as climate change, low carbon economy etc.)
- Tensions create space for ecopreneurs
- Little sense of power relations in transition management literature

Transition Management and Strategic Niches

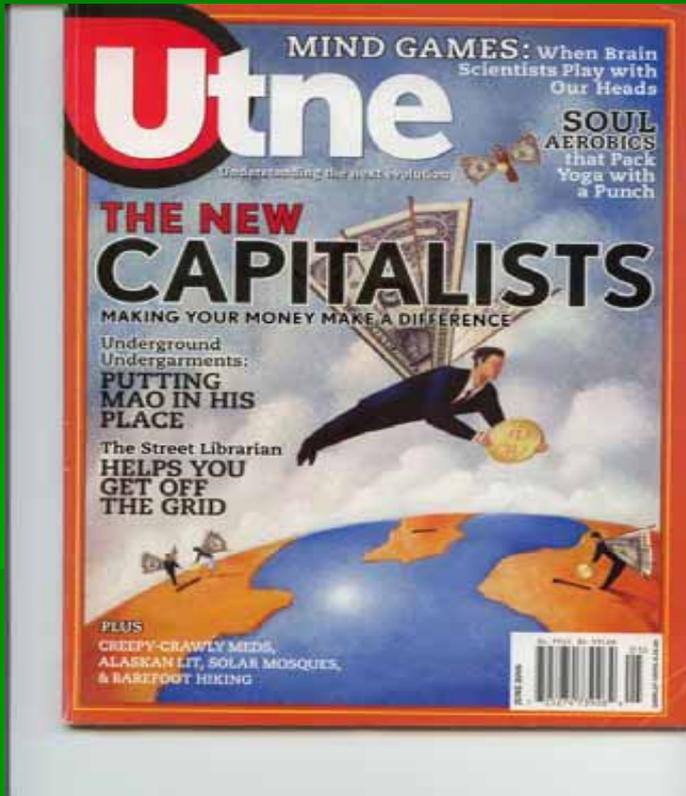
- Transition not inevitable, result of struggle, agency and power relations
- Niches important, but “adaptation process is confined by structures within the existing, mainstream regime” (Smith, 2006: 453)
- Existing socio-technical context may close down ecopreneurial opportunities?
- Valuable because of stress not just on individual actions (the lone entrepreneurial hero), but also on the networks and support structures that have built up to help these alternative forms of sustainable practice
- Connecting ecopreneurs to wider economic and social structures

Ecopreneurs: Ecological Modernisation in Action?

- Green-green business
- Schumpeter and creative destruction
- Ecopreneurs - new products, processes and working methods
- Innovative and overturning conventional methods
- Ecopreneurs as a major force in the transition to more sustainable business paradigm



Ecopreneurs: Ecological Modernisation in Action?



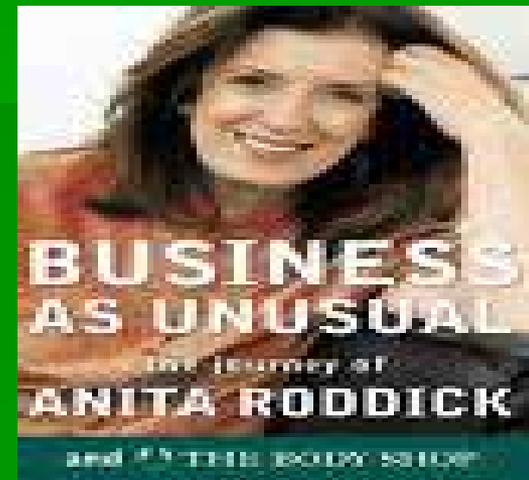
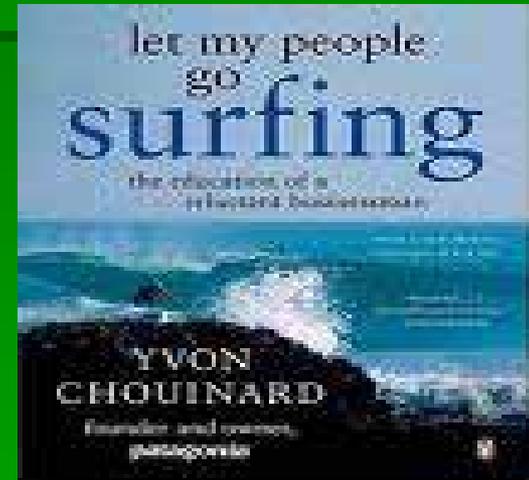
- Major focus on the role of the individual who shapes the character and strategy of the company
- Mixed motivations of ecopreneurs
- Rejection of entrepreneurial label?
- Interplay between individual motivations and wider economic and social structures
- Need for supportive socio-economic environment
- Development of typologies based on this interplay between individual motivations and broader contexts

Ecopreneurial Research: A Critique and Some Research Questions

- Typologies: heavy on speculation, light on empirical evidence. Anecdotal evidence. How relevant and useful are ecopreneurial typologies?
- Static nature of descriptions. How do ecopreneurs and their businesses shift and develop over time?
- Little understanding of interaction between internal and external dimensions. How do ecopreneurs impose their worldview on others? How do external factors influence ecopreneurs?
- How do ecopreneurs make sense of their business for themselves and others?

Ecopreneurial Research: A Critique and Some Research Questions

- High profile ecopreneurs
- Individuals as change agents
- The 'natural leaders of the new capitalism'
- Mirrors work on conventional entrepreneurship - the 'entrepreneurial hero'
- Why, when and where are opportunities exploited?
- Role of differing socio-economic contexts?
- Local and national contexts and differences?



Ecopreneurial Research: A Critique and Some Research Questions

- Ecopreneurs as agents of change and renewal
- A new business paradigm
- Does ecopreneurship represent an exemplar of a shift to a new business paradigm or the exploitation of niche markets that will remain small?
- Do ecopreneurs manage their firms in different ways to conventional firms in the same sectors?

Conclusions

- Transition management literature may be useful as a means to situate actions of individual ecopreneurs within wider political, economic and social context
- Ecopreneurs as a struggle for ‘discursive hegemony’ over future forms of economic development?
- Ecopreneurs as solution or temporary ‘sustainability fix’?
- Niche elements a first step towards “mildly more sustainable forms” (Smith, 2006: 455)?
- Role for policy to encourage ecopreneurial activity in start-ups and encourage sustainability orientation in other start-ups?