

CHAPTER

# 5

# Further shapers in society



**The previous** chapter examined the environmental dimensions of education for sustainability in New Zealand today. It is also important to look at some less formal influences on learning in society. People learn throughout their lives, so the process of learning “is not a single still photograph; it is an epic motion picture with a ‘cast of thousands’ spanning numerous scenes and settings”.<sup>1</sup> This chapter provides ‘snapshots’ of some major shapers in society that affect the ways people think, feel and act in the world around them. It also considers how these influences can help or hinder efforts to promote sustainability.

## 5.1 Families and peers

Families and whanau play an important part in nurturing and protecting people and providing them with emotional and material support. They also shape children and young people as they develop:

*...for the vast majority of children the family is the first and most important context for physical and psychological growth ... The family is thus the basic unit within which the child is introduced to social living.<sup>2</sup>*

Family figures, especially parents and caregivers, are important educators. They often aim to develop desirable values in children. They also help to establish acceptable norms of behaviour for young people to fit into the society and the environment they live in.<sup>3</sup> This is often a deliberate process. For example, parents with strong values, such as respect for the environment and a concern for social justice, often aim to cultivate these values in their own children. However, parents and caregivers also pass on (transmit) many values and cultural norms without really realising it. Family figures are usually important role models for young people. If they behave in ways that threaten sustainability, such as wasting a lot of resources, their children may learn to adopt these practices for themselves.

If people know how to live in ways that promote sustainability, or if this is an intrinsic part of their culture, it is likely that they will pass on this knowledge to the young people that they care for. However, most New Zealanders have developed less and less sustainable lifestyles over the last century.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore likely that many family figures are unintentionally passing on unsustainable ways of living from one generation to the next. People who are aware of these issues also face a dilemma: how should they equip their youngsters to fit into a society that is fundamentally unsustainable?



Learning within families is not simply a one-way

process from adults to children. Young people educate other family members and influence their actions as well. For example, there was a lot of anecdotal evidence in this investigation about the flow-on effects of environmental education in schools. Although there is a lack of research in this area, it is very likely that students who are exposed to education for sustainability will share the knowledge that they gain with families and other people in their community. Overseas research has also shown how children can be very effective at influencing their parents or caregivers in their role as consumers. Young people develop sophisticated techniques including:

- (1) **bargaining strategies, including reasoning and offers to pay for part of a purchase;**
- (2) **persuasion strategies, including expressions of opinions, persistent requesting, and begging;**
- (3) **request strategies, including straightforward requests and expressions of needs and wants; and**
- (4) **emotional strategies, including anger, pouting, guilt trips and sweet talk.**<sup>5</sup>

Children learn to adapt and use different strategies that work well in different contexts. Although parents and caregivers are often aware of children using these sorts of techniques, it usually takes a lot of willpower to resist the persuasive and emotional manoeuvring of a cute and precious loved one. This is one of the reasons why many marketers target young people to sell brands and products (see section 5.4).

As a young person develops, their contact with people beyond their family increases. They establish relationships with peers, including friends, classmates, workmates, and members of clubs and associations. As more and more peers (in wider and wider circles) become part of a person's life, the influence of families as a source of day-to-day direction often diminishes.<sup>6</sup> This is especially so in adolescence, which is a critical stage for young people as they become more self-reflective and form their own identities. Peer groups often act as a reference point for defining values and acceptable norms of behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Some peers also act as influential role models for people as they form views on what a good and successful life requires.

Peers continue to influence people throughout their lives. There are strong pressures to conform to others' expectations and, in a New Zealand context, not to be a 'tall poppy' standing out from the crowd. It often takes a lot of courage to break out of the world that most people take for granted and to challenge the status quo. Most environmental and sustainability issues are currently out on the fringes of New Zealand society. People who speak out about these issues are therefore dismissed as 'greenies' or 'luddites' on a regular basis – even though sustainability is not just an environmental issue.

Nonetheless, for many people today it is also fashionable to be 'green' (albeit only up to a point). Although peer pressure is likely to hold back many changes that would support sustainability, peers can also be very influential in transforming others' behaviours. To give another example, smoking is generally considered a social taboo in much of New Zealand society today, and there are now enormous pressures not to smoke. Only a few decades ago it was a perfectly acceptable, and indeed fashionable, habit.

The actual influence of families and peers on people obviously differs between individuals. The impact of family figures usually depends on how much time and energy they put into the development of young people as they grow up. Peer pressure is also moderated by the degree of tolerance in a society. Some societies are more welcoming of different perspectives than others. As chapter 3 suggested, it is this sort of tolerance and sharing of knowledge that education for sustainability seeks to achieve.

## 5.2 Religions

Religions can be defined as systems of belief, faith, ritual and spiritual aspiration that are based "on an understanding of human beings as *other* or *more than simply* their purely social or physical identities".<sup>8</sup> They delve into the human spirit, promote some values over others, and establish moral frameworks that foster social norms. Religions have helped shape the contours of cultures for centuries. They also provide many people with a strong sense of meaning and can shape their sense of self. They:

**... help situate human beings in both the natural and the social worlds. The latter function is served by their moral teachings, the former by a combination of creation myths, narrative accounts of the origin of particular phenomena (for example, death), and norms governing our relation with our natural surroundings.**<sup>9</sup>

Christianity, in many different forms, is the major religion in New Zealand. Slightly more than half of all New Zealanders identify themselves as Christian, although many people are not actively involved with the Church. Almost four out of ten people do not have any religious affiliation, and this proportion is growing.<sup>10</sup> Younger people are also much less likely than older people to identify with a religion. This contrasts with a century ago when only one in 30 people did not have a religious affiliation and over 90 percent of people were Christians.<sup>11</sup> While Christianity has been on the decline in New Zealand, increasing ethnic diversity in the population has been accompanied by a rise in religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.<sup>12</sup>

Different religions portray the relationship between humans and their environment in vastly different ways. This can influence how people learn to connect,

or distance, their sense of self from their environment. As noted above, these relationships are often grounded in narratives that make meaning from the chaos of the world. The creation story in the Bible, for example, suggests that God created humans in his own image and then said to them:

**Be fruitful and multiply; and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth.**<sup>13</sup>



Many people have critiqued this view of creation, and many other parts of the Bible, from an environmental perspective.<sup>14</sup> A literal reading suggests that humans are somehow separate from, and should be dominant over, the rest of the natural world. This view was particularly strong in Western Europe during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries when most people assumed that God had created the world and every creature in it purely to serve some human purpose.<sup>15</sup> Other religions do not tend to take such a human-centred perspective on life.<sup>16</sup> Research in the 1980s suggested that the more ‘Christian’ (or Biblically oriented) people were, the less likely that they would be concerned about the environment.<sup>17</sup> Yet many theologians and influential leaders in Christianity have interpreted other passages in the Bible – especially over the last three decades, as environmental concerns have increased – to suggest that Christians do have a responsibility to take good care of the Earth.<sup>18</sup> Many of these people have connected environmental issues with Christian concerns for social justice, like the need to share limited resources.<sup>19</sup> A lot of people now take a less literal reading of the Bible as well. They stress that it was not actually written by God, but by human followers with limited knowledge who were writing in a specific place and time.

A Christian view of creation contrasts remarkably with the explanation for the origins of the universe contained in a traditional Maori worldview.<sup>20</sup> This is based on the narrative of Ranginui (‘Sky father’) and Papatuanuku (‘Earth mother’) and their offspring who act as guardians for various phenomena in the world (such as Tane, god of the forests, and Tangaroa, god of the seas). Everything in the universe has its own whakapapa (genealogy) that goes back to Ranginui and Papatuanuku. Many Maori continue to embrace this view, which creates an unbreakable link between humans and the rest of the animate and inanimate world.<sup>21</sup>

To my mind, the Maori explanation of creation and evolution teaches me all I need to know to understand my role in life and attitude towards nature. My heritage teaches me about concepts such as the integrity and interdependency of living things. It makes me quite comfortable with the notion that as a human being I am but one part of a whole and that my generation is also simply one strand in the rope of humanity. It pre-determines that the relationship I have with nature is based on kinship and respect and that in order for me to survive in a culturally rich way, I depend on the survival of others, not just other humans, but also plants and animals in the sea as well as on the land. It clarifies that both male and female elements are necessary to create and sustain life, be it human, plant or animal.<sup>22</sup>

– Aroha Mead

The rise in cultural and religious diversity in New Zealand may encourage people to question the purpose of different religions and the insights they may have to offer. Although religions and belief systems are grounded in tradition, they are constantly being re-interpreted by people as they develop new understandings and try to make sense of their lives in an ever-changing world. Nevertheless, New Zealand society has become increasingly secular. Religions play a less significant role for most young people today than they did for previous generations. Yet the past continues to influence the present. Even in an increasingly secular era, people still derive many of their ideas of right and wrong, either directly or indirectly, from one religion or another. The dominant culture in New Zealand has been shaped by Christian values and beliefs that arrived with missionaries and colonists from Europe. It is usually possible to make some strong links between the values of different religions and the importance of sustainability, but many people do not have a sense of self that is strongly linked to their environment.

### 5.3 The media

**I find television very educational. The minute somebody turns it on, I go to the library and read a good book.<sup>23</sup>**

– Groucho Marx

The media consists of technologies for communicating information and ideas. Modern forms of mass media include print media (such as newspapers and magazines) and broadcast media (such as radio and television). The media are often labelled the 'fourth estate' – referring to their desired role as defenders of democracy and the public interest.<sup>24</sup> Yet the main function of most media organisations today is to make money. This can usually be accomplished by keeping people entertained. As a local journalist suggests:

**My understanding of the media is that it is driven to a great extent by the three C's – celebrity, confrontation and crime – in service of the big E – entertainment. To a large extent information in the mainstream media is a subset of entertainment or at least must be presented in an entertaining fashion or the news won't sell. So you will find that alarmist views – on the environment, for instance, or the disintegration of society – will generally get more extensive treatment than sober assessments or more optimistic outlooks. That's a sort of rule of thumb.<sup>25</sup>**

The mass media have a huge potential to help people learn about sustainability issues. They can communicate ideas to many people over long distances in a short space of time. They also play a role in putting issues on the agenda for public debate. The media have been very influential in raising awareness about



environmental issues. But because the media thrive on controversy and conflict they do not usually provide a good forum for debate about complex issues such as sustainability. News, especially on television, is also broken down into bite-sized chunks for easy consumption. Journalists seldom have the opportunity to explain the underlying causes of problems that are difficult to understand. It is even more difficult to offer potential solutions.

Information is not just transmitted through the media. It is shaped by media agencies and transformed by the technologies they use (see section 5.7). The most pervasive form of media in New Zealand today is television. New Zealanders currently spend an average of 20 hours per week watching their television screens.<sup>26</sup> Many people rely on this medium for learning a lot about the world around them. The nightly news is always a top rating programme – although an hour of ‘news’ may contain only ten minutes of actual news coverage after the sport, weather, human interest stories, casual banter between presenters, and ads are taken into account. Even the short snippets of news have become more and more ‘soft’ in New Zealand over the last two decades, with almost no in-depth analysis.<sup>27</sup> Stories are now carefully crafted to make the most of visual imagery and short, sharp sound bites (such as voice-overs) provide very little opportunity for learning.

For most broadcasters (those that are commercially oriented) news is just like any other programme. It either rates well or it is replaced. Commercial media agencies make money by selling audiences to advertisers. They can maximise their profits by developing large audiences or by targeting very valuable ones.<sup>28</sup> The news is usually packaged to appeal to a wide audience. To remain a top seller it usually drifts towards entertainment. Current affairs programmes and documentaries on television may look at issues in more depth. Yet they are also affected by constant pressures to keep people captivated by relying heavily on moving images and emotive techniques.

Given the choice between an insightful series on sustainability issues in New Zealand (that ten percent of the population may wish to see) and another dose of ‘reality TV’ (that 11 percent will watch) a commercial broadcaster will nearly always opt for the latter. They may even screen a programme that fewer people will watch if the viewers are very valuable to advertisers, such as people with a high disposable income. It could be claimed that this is simply a democratic expression of tastes by viewers. Yet commercial television often squeezes out minority perspectives that get no voice at all. ‘Hard’ news and in-depth analysis also tends to become diluted as it drifts into ‘infotainment’. The problem is not that commercial television presents people with entertaining subject matter. The problem is that *all* subject matter tends to be presented as entertaining.<sup>29</sup> In fact, several people during our research suggested that New Zealand had “led the way in dumbing down television during the last two decades”.<sup>30</sup> They also commented that sustainability issues are not as available on television in



this country as they are overseas.

Programming in a commercial setting is also shaped by advertising. Businesses do not wish to advertise to audiences that are not interested in purchasing their products or services. Broadcasters therefore adapt their programming to develop profitable audiences for advertisers. They may also decide not to screen some programmes if they are controversial, or if there is a risk that they will upset the most valuable advertisers or sponsors.

The government recognised tensions with commercial broadcasting in New Zealand by implementing the Television New Zealand (TVNZ) Charter in 2003.<sup>31</sup> This followed restructuring by a previous government in the 1980s (as part of wide-ranging reforms that were driven by neo-liberal ideologies of the day), that had moved TVNZ away from its role as a public broadcaster to become more commercially driven. The charter now encourages TVNZ to inform, entertain and educate New Zealand audiences. It requires them to maintain a balance between programmes of general appeal and programmes of interest to smaller audiences. It also requires TVNZ to stimulate critical thinking and to feature programmes about New Zealand's environment. In theory, this should provide more of an opportunity to get coverage of sustainability issues on television – although doubts remain about how effective the charter will actually be. Radio New Zealand is the other major public broadcaster in this country. It has managed to resist pressures to become more commercially driven and it also has a charter that promotes high standards of broadcasting. Most forms of print media, which are not in public ownership, remain commercially driven.

What implications do these issues have for people learning about sustainability through the media? First, messages need to be adapted to work well in different forms of media. It is important to be 'media savvy' to get issues on to the public agenda and to communicate key messages. The print media may provide a platform for some in-depth discussion, but it is more difficult to develop understanding of sustainability issues through broadcast media (particularly television) that tend to be more influential. The Internet also provides a very useful medium for communicating a mix of simple messages and complex information. Sustainability issues are always complex, so there are always trade-offs in choosing how to communicate them to a wider audience. It is also vital to encourage understanding of how the media actually operate.

To get media attention there are also pressures to adapt messages to make them more entertaining, or to play on the media's appetite for conflict and controversy. People often resort to alarmist tactics to get media coverage. Unfortunately this often damages their credibility in the eyes of the public. Environmental issues often look 'fringe' because the media uses existing stereotypes about environmentalists to sell their stories in an entertaining and

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## Real Stories

I was born into one of the most beautiful situations you can imagine in today's frantic world. I was brought up on an idyllic coastal property covered in native bush, with a supportive and happy family. We grew a lot of our own vegetables, cooked our own food and brewed our own beer – as you have to do when your parents' combined incomes struggle to break \$20,000 a year. We had no TV as my parents didn't think much of them – something I hated at the time but in retrospect was great, as we went and played outside instead!

I also spent most of my life dressed in hand-me-downs. I always envied my peers with their new clothes, TVs, microwaves, fast food, overseas holidays and all that gumf. However I now realise just how lucky I actually was, and how much happier we were than the average family today. Now I can also see how sustainable that model was. But there has been another life in between to get to this realisation. Let me fill you in.

Life has been a race almost ever since I hit the workforce. After university I headed off to the fast-moving world of London finance. I worked as a broker on the biggest market in the world. As I described it to some of my peers at the time, "The best brokers here are earning marginally less than God". It was a crazy period of material excess, with monopoly money to spend and the untempered pizzazz of youth to fritter it away with. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't love it (at least for a while), living like the rockstars I'd always dreamed of being.

However before long a hollow feeling started to eat at me, as I realised there was something a little pointless with my existence. I left to return to NZ, intending to find a more 'real' existence. I didn't do a very good job at first, launching straight into senior management of a multinational software company riding high on the peak of the IT boom. I worked day and night to keep up with the rigours of this job, and I'm sure I took years off my life with the stress of it all. Once again, life was 'good' appearance wise, but inside the system was starting to break down. Strike two and I was out.

One day the dam burst and I just couldn't do it any more. It wasn't so much that I mind hard work, but when I realised I didn't believe in what I was creating with all that blood, sweat and tears I just couldn't go on. It was time to focus my energy on bettering the world I lived in, not tearing it apart for the love of money and an outdated concept of progress. So about two years ago I jumped ship and started to focus solely on two things – the progress of environmental technology and ideas to better the world. It's been a hard and twisting road, and I wouldn't say that it's been easy. But I swear there's no way I could go back to what I had. And it is worth it. All the other stuff was a fun distraction, but was pretty unfulfilling. At the moment there are many people from alternative sides of life pushing for change, but we need people from all sides – from business, government, the community, and from the old to the young to make a difference. We need people from all walks of life to make lasting changes happen.

Rob Rogers

easily understood form. It is therefore important to avoid and challenge these sorts of stereotypes while gaining media coverage in creative ways.

Because it is difficult to 'sell' solutions, the media is also disempowering for many people. People continuously witness environmental degradation in the world through the media. Yet connections are hardly ever made between those problems and people's everyday lives. This is one of the most fundamental challenges that need to be overcome.

Commercial pressures in the media also need to be addressed. If programmes about environmental and sustainability issues do not pull in a valuable enough audience, broadcasters are unlikely to screen them. Commercial broadcasters are unlikely to encourage learning about sustainability issues unless there is a strong enough 'market' for these issues. They are also unlikely to develop those markets on their own. To maintain a voice on minority issues in the media it is therefore essential for some broadcasters to remain free from purely commercial demands. This does not necessarily mean that media agencies should never be commercially driven. It merely highlights the dangers of allowing *all* media agencies to be based around fully commercial models. It is also important to be aware of how commercial media outlets are swamping the screens and air-waves with advertisements that influence how people think, feel and act.

#### 5.4 Marketing and advertising

Marketing explicitly aims to influence people. It involves planning the conception, pricing, promotion and spread of goods, services and ideas. It is often used by businesses to create awareness of, and desire for, their brands and products. However, marketing techniques are also used by many non-commercial organisations and government agencies to sell their messages to the public. Tools of marketing include market research, advertising and public relations.



Market research is used to understand the needs, wants, desires and values of people. Marketers often claim that they are merely finding out what people want and matching this with what they have to offer. This is because most marketing is based on the assumption that it exists "(1) to discover the needs and wants of prospective customers and (2) to satisfy them".<sup>32</sup> In reality, many organisations also begin with what they want to sell and try to develop a market to suit.

A major part of marketing is advertising. Advertisements come in many different forms, "from the tiniest classified newspaper advertisement to a TV spot, from a small leaflet to a massive outdoor sign, from a message on the Internet to a letter delivered to one's door, or a sponsored cultural or sporting event".<sup>33</sup>

Advertisers assert that they are providing information to consumers to enable them to make informed decisions. Simple forms of advertising, such as classifieds, may meet this goal. But the most pervasive forms of modern advertising, especially those used on television, aim to influence and persuade people instead of informing them. Advertisers often play on people's emotions to build connections between products, brands and people (see also section 6.5). As Hamilton suggests:

**Advertising long ago discarded the practice of selling a product on the merits of its useful features. Modern marketing builds symbolic associations between the product and the psychological states of potential consumers, sometimes targeting known feelings ... and sometimes creating a sense of inadequacy in order to remedy it with the product.<sup>34</sup>**

Advertisements do not *make* people buy things, but they are incredibly influential in shaping human behaviour. Marketers use techniques that they have learned from psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology to shape consumer preferences.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, they often help to socialise people as willing and wanting consumers. As an example, think about the marketing of four wheel drive 'sports utility vehicles' (SUVs) in New Zealand. These vehicles were initially used almost exclusively by farmers and commercial operators such as builders. Marketing has been used to successfully sell them as 'urban safari vehicles', playing on symbolic associations that have been fostered and developed in people. It is not their useful features that are marketed. Who wants to buy a vehicle that is generally more dangerous, polluting, difficult to park, and more expensive to run than the average car? It is their image as masculine and adventurous off-roading objects of desire that is marketed, even though they seldom leave the sanctuary of urban streets. The irony is that the beauty of New Zealand's environment is often used to market these vehicles. There are countless shots on television screens and in the print media of SUVs doing damage to dunes, streams and riverbeds.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, images of New Zealand's 'clean and green' environment are often used by many businesses to brand and sell their products to the world.

Increasingly, advertisers are targeting children to shape consumption preferences early in life and to take advantage of the growing amount of money that people are spending on children.<sup>37</sup> For example, American children between four and 12 years old spend over \$24 billion in direct purchases and influence another \$188 billion in family household purchases.<sup>38</sup> An average ten-year old in America has now been socialised to learn 300-400 different brands.<sup>39</sup> In Britain, characters from a Japanese card trading game called Pokemon are far more recognisable to the average eight-year-old than animals and plants.<sup>40</sup> There are therefore growing concerns about the impacts of advertising and marketing on children.

**Societies need to consider the powerful impact of advertising on young children, for whom all information has an educational and formative impact. Children constitute an important market for consumer products, but society has a responsibility to educate them, not exploit them.<sup>41</sup>**

**– United Nations Development Programme**

To reduce children's exposure to marketing, countries such as Denmark, Greece and Belgium restrict advertising to children. Sweden and Norway totally ban it.<sup>42</sup> The Swedish government believes that "children have the right to safe zones" and that advertising can compromise their safety and well-being.<sup>43</sup> This sentiment is strongly supported by the majority of people in Sweden, as well as by their national association for advertising agencies.

Marketing and advertising to children is permitted in New Zealand, although there are voluntary codes of practice in the advertising industry to moderate some of its effects. While there is little research on this issue, a recent survey suggests that there are major concerns among New Zealand parents about the levels of advertising to children on television. Among those surveyed, there were strong feelings that television encourages children to want products they do not need.<sup>44</sup> There was also a strong sentiment that advertising should not be regulated by the same people who sell products to children.

The current framework for advertising in New Zealand is mostly based on self-regulation by industry. This framework, and how it relates to the environment, is examined in a background paper to this report.<sup>45</sup> There is a code of practice for product claims related to the environment, but there is no code for how the environment is portrayed in advertisements. There is also a lack of consideration given to the effects that saturation advertising can have on people. This is despite the fact that advertising expenditure in New Zealand, as a proportion of GDP, is one of the highest in the world. New Zealand ranked third in the world

for advertising expenditure in 1996<sup>46</sup>, and the amount of money spent on advertising has steadily increased since then. In 2002 it reached \$1.5 billion per year and in 2003 it was predicted to exceed \$1.7 billion.<sup>47</sup> What sort of culture is all this advertising helping to create?

As noted above, advertising is just one tool of marketing. Marketers use a variety of techniques, such as product placements in movies and using celebrities and role models to shape consumer desires. Public relations skills are also used by businesses, government agencies and non-governmental organisations to 'spin' their stories and manage their images in the media. Public relations usually involves intensifying (playing up) some messages and downplaying others that could be detrimental to an organisation's reputation. There is a growing awareness among the public about the 'greenwashing' that many organisations use to shape their environmental image. This may undermine the effectiveness of some public relations skills, while contributing to a fundamental lack of trust in big business and government to be open and honest about sustainability.

It is important to keep in mind that marketing techniques are not just used by commercial enterprises. For example, government is showing a growing willingness to use social marketing to achieve outcomes related to sustainability (see section 4.1). It has also been suggested that 'demarketing' can be used to encourage people to reduce their consumption of some goods or services.<sup>48</sup> There is a major potential to market the messages of sustainability, although it is important to consider that social marketing is very expensive.<sup>49</sup> It is also important to question how effective government agencies can be at getting their messages across when people are already swamped by so many other marketing messages in the commercial media. In some areas, such as road safety, there is good evidence that social marketing can be very effective. However, social marketing campaigns need to be carefully researched, planned and organised as well as well-financed to capture people's attention, and to avoid switching people off.

## 5.5 Art, literature and narratives

What are the mountains on high  
 But the crystallised waves of the sea,  
 And what is the white-topped wave  
 But a mountain that liquidly weaves?  
 The water belongs to the mountain.  
 Belongs to the deep;  
 The mountain beneath the water  
 Suckles oceans in sleep.<sup>50</sup> – Dennis Glover

As long as people have lived in New Zealand they have tried to capture and communicate the sensations and the significance of living in this land. This is reflected in art, music, poetry and the oral and written narratives that permeate the cultures of this country. Artists, orators and writers have also shaped the ways that people see the world around them. Art often challenges people and provokes or inspires them to think and feel in different ways. Stories frequently include important messages and more complex narratives can provide people with a frame to see the world. The landscapes of New Zealand, and the flora and fauna within them, have often had a strong presence in these works.

Well before the first Europeans arrived, the plants and animals of Aotearoa and all the elements of the world infused the art and culture of tangata whenua. From the delicate curves of fern fronds (reflected in carving and weaving) to the towering peaks of mountains (personified as important ancestors) people connected with their environments to explain and sustain their place in the world. Skilled orators used highly developed narratives to pass on accumulated knowledge and understanding. These often embodied important ecological messages that helped to forge a strong spiritual connection between people and the world around them (see also section 5.2).<sup>51</sup>

The landscapes of New Zealand have also been a dominant theme in contemporary art and literature in this country.<sup>52</sup> The same landscapes have been feared, admired, romanticised and cherished at various points in time according to different artists and writers (who have been influenced by the cultures they draw on and the society they interact with). Many New Zealand writers and poets have expressed their sense of awe and wonder about the world around them and helped to instil those feelings in others.

Over the last few decades the environment has often been portrayed in a more sympathetic way, reflecting and fostering a concern about the fragile state of the environment and the impact of human developments.<sup>53</sup> Artists have also challenged and politicised environmental issues, such as a series by Ralph Hotere that protested against a proposed aluminium smelter at Aramoana in the 1980s. In children's literature, New Zealand writers also began to focus more on

environmental issues from the 1980s onwards.<sup>54</sup> In realistic and fantasy novels alike, writers have helped to heighten awareness about damage done by humans to their environments.

Collectively, many people have therefore helped to infuse their environments with meaning and to communicate key messages in their work. Art and literature can help to foster identification between people and their environments, although they can also break them apart. They can encourage people to value different things, depending on how the story is told. More complex narratives that are intimately connected to the knowledge and culture of a society can also have a fundamental influence on the way people see the world.

## 5.6 Other major influences

This report cannot even attempt to identify all the influences on learning in society, but a few further ones that are very influential are listed here as well.

### Language

Languages are at the core of every culture. People are born into a world of words that they absorb and gradually inherit. Languages are not just used as a simple tool for communication – they help to structure human thought. They provide people with words infused with meanings that shape their view of the world. For example:

**Naming a thing creates an identity; names establish values and functions, give something life, a separate existence. We are our names in ways we cannot describe ... Language weaves worlds of being and meaning; but this is a double-edged sword. Calling a forest “timber”, fish “resources”, the wilderness “raw material” licenses the treatment of them accordingly.<sup>55</sup>**

People often take for granted the language that they use. Yet some words have contributed to major shifts in understanding. One of the most hotly debated words in the English language is ‘nature’. People often use this word to refer to pristine ‘wilderness’ areas and species other than humans that they wish to preserve. Yet there was no word to convey this sort of meaning before the Enlightenment (a period of major philosophical changes that occurred in Europe during the eighteenth century).<sup>56</sup> Many cultures do not have a similar word that creates a split between humans and their physical environment. Nonetheless, many people also refer to humans as ‘part of nature’ and not completely separate from it.





Cross-cultural communication is also challenging at times because of vast differences in language. It is very difficult to try and understand the worldview of one culture while using the language of another. For example, many people have highlighted problems with understanding Maori environmental concepts without having an understanding of te reo Maori.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the word 'sustainability' may be less significant for many Maori than terms like kaitiakitanga, which may have similar meanings attached.

Within a language like English, there are also many specialist languages such as the 'language of business' or the 'language of ecology' that refer to particular ways of thinking.<sup>58</sup> People learn these languages too. Unfortunately they sometimes get caught up in a particular way of thinking. They cannot recognise the limits of any language to explain everything about the world. Yet languages are not completely fixed. Changes in languages often play an important part in wider social and cultural changes.<sup>59</sup> For example, one business person has argued that:

**... business needs a new language, a new role, a new way of seeing itself within the larger environment. Business parlance is a specific, rarefied, and, for most of us, borrowed language. It is useful when it describes the mechanics of commerce, but fails when we try to connect it with biology, society, or feeling, yet this specialised dialect has established itself as the planetary *lingua franca* ...<sup>60</sup>**

Words are also used in very political ways. Subtle shifts in language can conceal more fundamental shifts in meaning and understanding. Thus, people often argue over the word 'sustainability' because it can mean many different things to different people, depending on how it is used. Although diversity in thinking is valuable, it is also important for people to be very clear about what they are trying to sustain and why (see chapter 3). It is also important to consider the importance of adapting communication to suit different audiences. For example, referring to the environment as 'natural capital' may be very effective for communicating messages about the value of the environment to business people and economists. It may not be as useful for talking with people who have a close spiritual affinity with the environment in which they live.

## Technology

**Only those who know nothing of the history of technology believe that a technology is entirely neutral ... Each technology has an agenda of its own.<sup>61</sup> – Neil Postman**

Changes in technology can have a major impact on the way people think, feel and act. For example the invention of the printing press in the sixteenth century has had a profound effect on cultures. The printing press enabled books to be mass produced for the first time. Whereas the knowledge in these texts was once controlled by a few privileged elites, they soon became more accessible to

a wider audience. More people became empowered to learn and critique this knowledge, and to challenge established doctrines. Societies that used to pass on their accumulated knowledge through oral traditions (often through songs, narratives and art) also began to use writing much more as a medium for communication.

The invention of the television also contributed to a major shift in communication and learning in society. Television is able to combine moving pictures and sounds from around the globe into a potent set of images. The medium of television is good at communicating some messages very well, especially those that are emotive or consist of short, sharp 'sound bites'. It is also immensely amusing to watch (see section 5.3). Compared with the written word, however, it is difficult (although definitely not impossible) for television to be used to communicate complex information. There is a constant pressure for broadcasters to capture and keep the attention of viewers by flicking rapidly from frame to frame. Is it any coincidence that the average attention span for many people today (seven minutes) is the same amount of time that is usually found between commercial breaks?

More recent technologies like the Internet are also having an impact on communication patterns and ways of thinking. The Internet combines words, images and sounds and has provided a platform for many independent media organisations to find a greater voice in society. It is also being used by many advertisers to develop new marketing strategies (see section 6.5). The Internet is part of a global communications system that has been accelerating in its breadth and speed in recent years.

## **Globalisation**

Globalisation has many different elements. It is partly an economic process, but it is also an influential social and cultural process that has been unfolding with increasing momentum over the last five decades. World markets, connected with technologies that enable rapid communication and movements of people, products, services and capital, are becoming more and more integrated over large distances.<sup>62</sup> Local and national boundaries are becoming less significant for many businesses as they spread their activities around the globe. Yet globalisation is also a social and cultural process. It often places pressures on different cultures, connected via global media networks, to become more similar. This is not a simple two-way process. For example, programmes made in the United States often dominate New Zealand television, while only a few of those produced in New Zealand feature beyond this country. There are also pressures on consumer tastes and fashions to become more homogenised. Large corporations often seek to develop new markets for their products that are standardised for global consumption.

Globalisation can have all sorts of impacts on the way people think, feel and act. Values and attitudes may start to shift among some people as they are influenced by other cultures. Yet local and national identities, based on differences between groups of people, can also become more important. This is especially likely to occur if people feel threatened, or if they sense a loss of control over issues that affect them.

Globalisation has many implications for environmental sustainability that have been identified elsewhere.<sup>63</sup> Three major impacts that it could be having on New Zealand culture are:

- Programmes made overseas dominate New Zealand television and could be influencing values and attitudes.
- There are pressures for consumer tastes and preferences to become more similar to the tastes of people elsewhere in the world.
- While globalisation can help to erode national identities, some New Zealanders may be resisting these pressures and placing more emphasis on their national identity to maintain a sense of difference. As noted in chapter 2, New Zealand's national identity is often closely linked to the unique environment in this country, so this could be having all sorts of effects.

## 5.7 Summary and key points

This chapter has traversed a vast terrain of different influences that shape the ways people learn throughout their lives. For example:

- Families and whanau help to develop desirable values in young people and establish norms for them to fit into the society and the environment they live in. Young people often educate other family members and influence their actions as well.
- Peer groups often act as a reference point for defining values and norms. Peers can also be influential role models for people as they form views on what a good and successful life requires. Peer pressure may hold back many changes, but peers can also be very influential in transforming others' behaviours.
- Religions provide many people with a strong sense of meaning and can shape their sense of self. New Zealand society has become increasingly secular, but many people still derive many of their ideas of right or wrong (either directly or indirectly) from one religion or another.
- The mass media has a huge potential to help people learn about sustainability issues. But because the media thrive on controversy and conflict they do not usually provide a good forum for debate. In particular,

commercial media agencies are much more focused on entertainment.

- Marketing, which is usually conducted through the mass media, explicitly aims to influence the way people think, feel and act. Advertising expenditure in New Zealand, as a proportion of GDP, is one of the highest in the world. Modern marketing often plays on people's emotions to build symbolic associations between products, brands and people. Marketers often target young people in particular.
- Artists, orators, writers and musicians often provoke or inspire people to think and feel in different ways as well. They have helped to infuse New Zealand's environments with meaning and to communicate key messages in their work.
- Other major influences include language (which structures human thought), technology (which can shift communication and learning patterns) and globalisation (which is having all sorts of consequences for cultures).

How influential are these 'shapers' relative to each other? It is difficult to generalise, as they impact on all individuals and communities in very different ways. But thinking back over the last century, what have some of the major trends been? Families will always play an important role in bringing up young people. However, many parents and caregivers now spend more time in paid employment than they used to, which suggests that they may be putting less time and energy into young family members. In fact, Americans now spend nearly seven times as much time shopping as they do playing with their children<sup>64</sup> (unfortunately, no data exists for New Zealand).

Since the advent of commercial television in the 1950s, this form of mass media has also become much more influential in shaping learning. While religions have declined in influence, modern marketing techniques have become more dominant. This has mirrored the trend in many Western countries. For example, it is suggested that:

**For the first time in human history, children are getting most of their information from entities whose goal is to sell them something, rather than from family, school or religion. The average 12-year-old in the United States spends 48 hours a week exposed to commercial messages. The same child spends only about one-and-a-half hours per week in significant conversation with his or her parents.<sup>65</sup>**

It is debatable how much this comment could apply in a New Zealand context. Some of these issues are raised in the following chapter, which looks at waste and the rise of a consumer society in New Zealand.