Narratives and sustainable change in New Zealand farming

Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research

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Background

To halt environmental decline and meet New Zealand's (NZ's) environmental goals, *most* farmers land managers *must* improve their environmental performance. The current approach of researchers, industry, and government simply providing them with information, has not produced the necessary scale of change. Instead, many farmers and land managers are overwhelmed by information overload, and the complexity of the multiple systems and pressures they face.
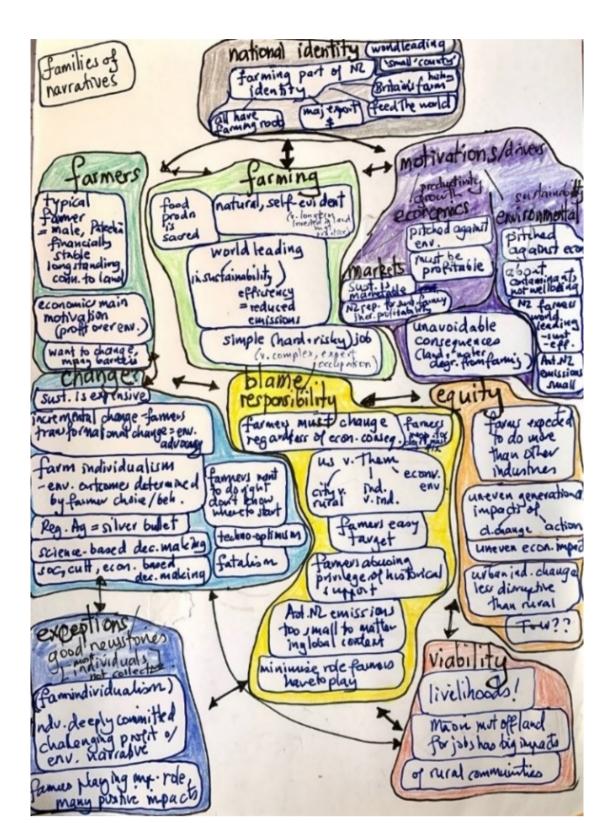

Fig 1. New Zealand narrative families.

Narratives

For the first time in NZ, we jointly explore the scientific, professional, and personal narratives shaping the systems that affect farmers and land managers. Narratives – stories told by individuals/organisations to portray an event/character/sentiment – are important leverage points because they strongly influence an individual's decisions and actions.

We collated existing and historical rural and farming narrative families (Figure 1) in NZ (from a wide-ranging survey of literature, media, online media, social media, industry bodies, and other sources) – these are summarised in Figure 1.

Touchpoints (Fig. 4) These are ways, places, or concepts/ideas that can open up conversations about change and allow reframed narratives to be introduced.
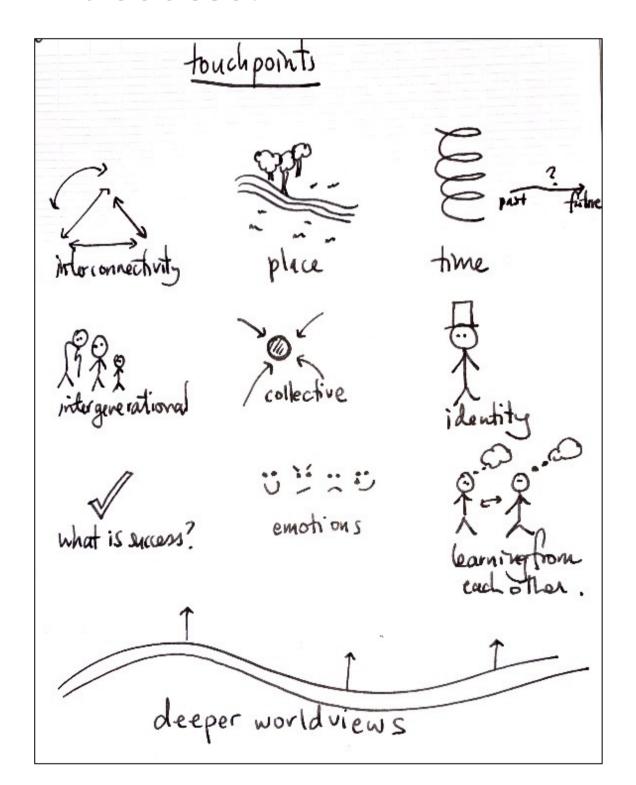

Fig 4. Touchpoints are ways, places, or concepts/ ideas that can open up conversations about change and allow reframed narratives to be introduced.

Fig 5. Serious game created by the author team to provoke self-reframing of narratives by land managers It has opened up spaces for discussion about practices, and will continue to be shared with policy-makers, farmers, and land managers around New Zealand.

Key Messages

1. Narratives are powerful elements that can change farmers' and land managers' practices and worldviews.
2. There is more buy-in when farmers and land managers reflect on new narratives and change their thinking and/or practices rather than being told to change and what to change to.
3. Even if farmers start from quite different places in terms of practices (due to their worldviews), they aren't necessarily far apart from each other in many ways.
4. We need to create storylines that connect – e.g. a farmer or land manager who cares for land aligns with thinking about the future of that land.
5. To improve their environmental practices, farmers and land managers all have a journey to take; each with different steps, where each step is meaningful for crossing the void from poor to better farming practices.

Methods and viewpoints

Using Q Method, we consolidated the dominant narratives into six viewpoints, which are assemblages of narratives that can be strongly linked together.
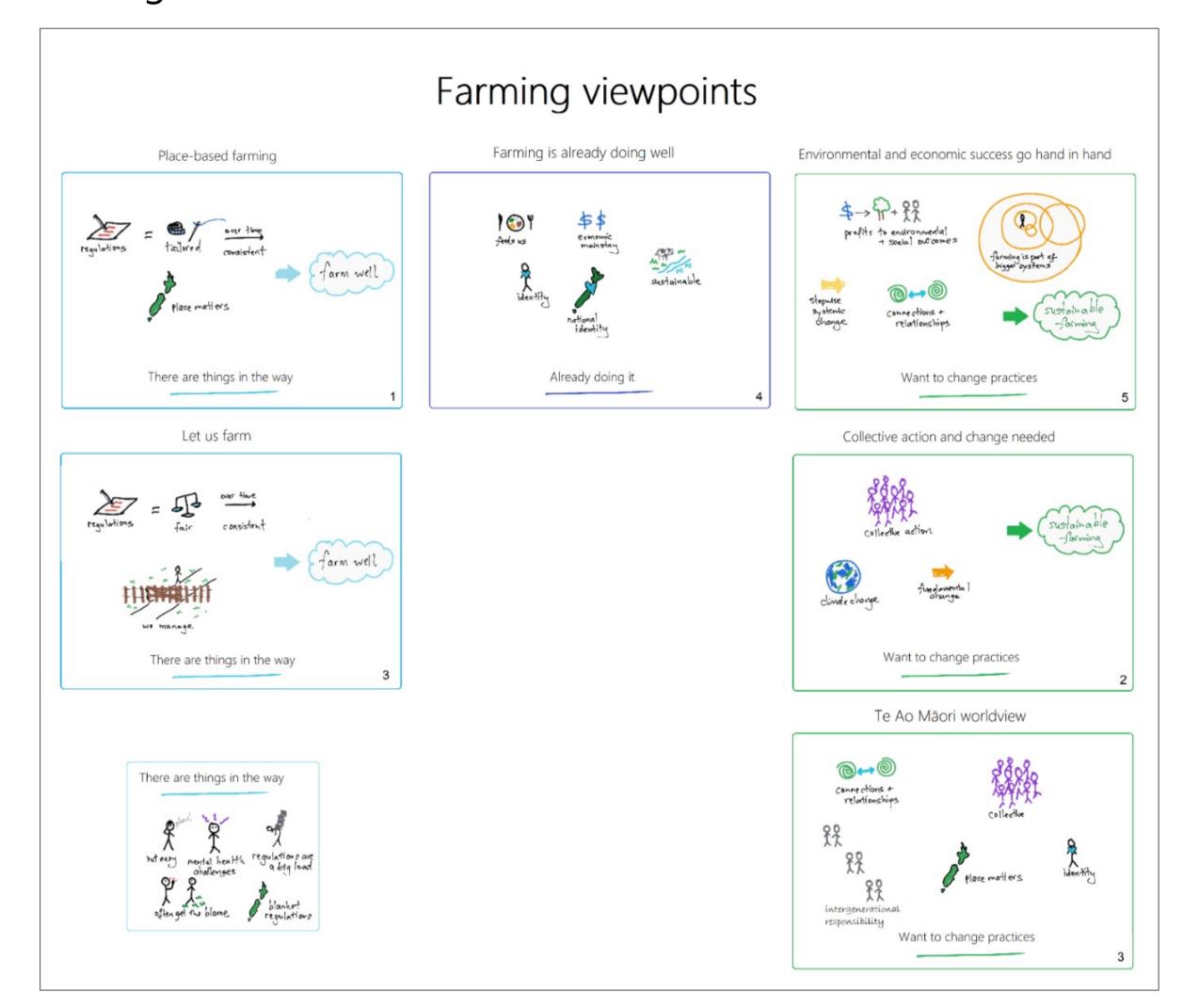

Fig 2. Visualisation of the viewpoints and factors that can affect them.

The power of narratives

Figure 3 shows that narratives can be powerful stories that can shape positive changes for the future.

Through participating in the Q Method activity, we have already spurred many participants (farmers and land managers) to reflect and think differently about the issues raised (Figures 1–2).

We have done the same with more than 20 agriculture and farm management faculty at Lincoln University, NZ. These faculty are passing on reframed farming narratives (to emphasise positive changes to practices and worldviews for better environmental outcomes) to the next generation of farmers and land managers.
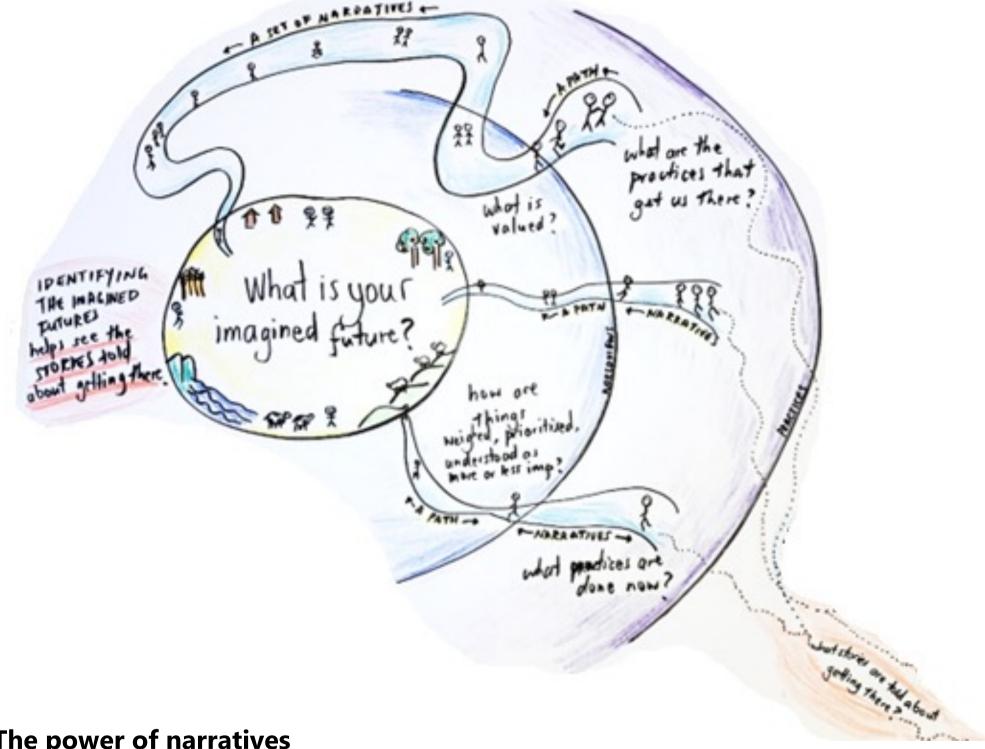

Fig 3. The power of narratives

Acknowledgements

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