

The Environmental Concerns of Food Ecopreneurs

Joacim Rosenlund 

Department of Biology and Environmental Science, Linnaeus University, 391 82 Kalmar, Sweden; joacim.rosenlund@lnu.se

Abstract: This short communication highlights ecopreneurship as a distinct form of entrepreneurship. Excerpts from interviews with ecopreneurs were analyzed using the literature of ecopreneurship and passion. Ecopreneurs want to solve environmental issues that are large scale and often impossible to solve. The passion for the environment helps them through the everyday entrepreneurial struggles and keeps them on their existential odysseys. This empirical research shows a way forward for studies of entrepreneurship-based environmental concerns.

Keywords: ecopreneurship; passion; sustainability; entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Human activities have had a tremendous impact on the natural environment on a planetary scale [1]. Companies that provide goods and services are partly responsible for this current state. At the same time, entrepreneurship has been noted as a solution to environmental issues. The uncertainty of environmental issues also makes room for opportunities that entrepreneurs can seize. There is room here for entrepreneurship based on sustainable innovation [2]. Entrepreneurship can create environmentally friendly alternatives leading to a creative destruction of existing industries which currently contribute to environmental degradation [3]. Environmental issues as such are also entrepreneurial opportunities:

Environmental issues represent a tremendous entrepreneurial opportunity. The time appears right for the creative destruction of unsustainable businesses and paradigms [3] (p. 460).

Entrepreneurship can, therefore, be a solution to the environmental challenges we are facing and it has the potential to envision and create alternative futures. In more recent research, the role of environmental entrepreneurship has been studied, showing how this can be motivated by both economic and ecological logics [4]. One particular type of entrepreneur is the ecopreneur who performs entrepreneurial activities benefiting the environment motivated by solving environmental issues. The ecopreneur is characterized by the belief in the betterment of the environment [5] and as a visionary embarking on an existential and sometimes impossible journey [6].

Ecopreneurs are trying new ways of creating value while setting high goals, such as zero waste. These ecopreneurs are part of the forefront of the sustainability movement. At the same time, while a sustainable society is an important aim, it might also be an impossible aim for the individual ecopreneur.

The aim of this short communication is to ask if entrepreneurship can be based on mainly ecological motivations and how this is reflected by personal stories of entrepreneurs. Further, the aim is to highlight stories from food entrepreneurs in Sweden and Austria that are motivated by environmental value creation and also reflect upon the scale of the environmental issues they face.

Previous research has shown how these ecopreneurs manage the balance between environmental motivation and economic reality and the difficulty of maintaining such a balance. By definition, the ecopreneurs have a green intentionality but previous re-



Citation: Rosenlund, J. The Environmental Concerns of Food Ecopreneurs. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 6211. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116211>

Academic Editors: Sebastian Kot and Beata Ślusarczyk

Received: 22 April 2021

Accepted: 28 May 2021

Published: 31 May 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

search has shown that this can vary. This study focuses on ecopreneurs that have strong environmental values in their entrepreneurial endeavors by answering the question:

How do ecopreneurs maintain their green intentionality?

2. Theoretical Background

Sustainable entrepreneurs, environmental entrepreneurs, green entrepreneurs, and ecopreneurs have similar definitions and research often cuts across both of these terms [7]. Different researchers use different terms but can still mean the same phenomenon. One way to distinguish these entrepreneurial types is by considering the ecological, economic and social parts of sustainability. Entrepreneurship with all three parts can be defined as sustainable entrepreneurship. While social entrepreneurship focuses on societal improvement and economy, ecopreneurship focuses on ecology and economy [8]. Ecopreneurs also need to reach out to the wider market while changing consumption and production patterns with the aim of decreasing the negative environmental impact [9,10].

Further, definitions of ecopreneurship usually include different means of founding businesses based on the principles of sustainability [11] and that the environmental improvement is key to the business model [12]. The eco part of ecopreneurship means a consideration for ecology, meaning the interactions between organisms and their environment. While all entrepreneurs, and people overall, interact with the natural world, the ecopreneurs are aware of their role in the ecosystem and act upon this knowledge. This short communication will use the comprehensive definition of ecopreneurship as: “An entrepreneurial activity that benefits the environment” [13,14].

A literature review on ecopreneurship distinguishes three distinct approaches for ecopreneurship: as implementing innovations, as a strategic tool or as a tool for transforming society [15]. The term ecopreneurship has also gained renown beyond academia to define some entrepreneurs [16]. Another key theme in the literature on ecopreneurship is the balance between environmental concerns and business goals. While a start-up is motivated by ethical considerations, management and growth can become challenging when the economic logic needs to coexist with environmental goals. At the same time, such ecopreneurs often find different ways out of the established market structures. In doing so they perform entrepreneurial activities that drive the green economy [17].

A survey of ecopreneurs found that job satisfaction and self-reliance were the most important motivations. The survey found that ecopreneurs run their business similar to entrepreneurs in general and the results showed that the respondents did not challenge the established economic system. Still it was the environmental motivation that set them apart from other entrepreneurial activities [11]. Other research showed that ecopreneurs did not describe themselves as radically environmentally aware or true capitalist endeavors, but often somewhere in between [18].

Entrepreneurship and the environment coexist for the ecopreneur, which is partly achieved by means of new business models [19]. It is also the environmental gains that can contribute to the competitiveness of the business [20]. Further, education or income were not significant determinants for such environmental orientations of the business, it has a wide range of determinants that are different from traditional entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship [21].

An overview of the field suggests further research to investigate the motivations, obstacles and opportunities for ecopreneurs [22]. To summarize, the ecopreneurs have a personal interest and belief in this betterment of the environment which has been called a green intentionality [5]. All ecopreneurs have a relation to sustainability and many have a personal commitment and interest in the betterment of the environment. It is also important to understand this green intentionality and its relation to the entrepreneurial ventures that channel this commitment.

3. Understanding Green Intentionality through Motivation and Passion

Previously identified motivations for micro level ecopreneurship include passion, motivation, ethics and proactive engagement in tackling ecological issues [23]. The main motivations in the start-up phase include independence and innovation, which were found to be more important than economic ones. Motivations based on social and ecological foundations are mentioned in the literature review but have received less attention. The role of passion is also mentioned as a possible important factor which can coexist with social or ecological motivations [24].

Passion has been used as a theoretical concept to understand entrepreneurship in general. Passion includes positive feelings and commitment toward certain interests. An entrepreneur can be passionate about entrepreneurship in itself or certain values that this entrepreneurship aims to fulfil [25,26]. Such values can be based on the betterment of the environment, for example. Passions can also coexist as a person can be passionate about entrepreneurship and other undertakings at the same time [27]. Passion can be part of the explanation of how an ecopreneur keeps their green intentionality in the face of struggles and the scale of the environmental issues they face.

Passion can be the long-term motivation for ecopreneurs to continue on their entrepreneurial journey. Such motivation can be driven by a commitment that motivates the ecopreneur to work long hours although they might never reach their goal during their existential odyssey of sustainability, as Robert Isaak expresses it [6]. The motivation of the ecopreneur in such cases is strongly tied to a mission and passion that gives their lives meaning. The idea that we can change the environment for the better and create a sustainable world might just be a constant odyssey without an end, an impossible endeavor, although this does not stop the ecopreneurs as it gives meaning to them [6].

Such passion for an existential commitment has been noted before in entrepreneurship studies. Such passion coexist with activities the individual find meaningful which can include an environmental or social mission [26]. There can also be other passions that coexist with the entrepreneurial venture [27] or even overshadows the entrepreneurial interest. Previous research has also asked whether or not passion pays off [23].

When considering the possible connection between passion, an existential odyssey and the green intentionality it is necessary to consider what gives meaning to the ecopreneur's everyday life and venture. Maintaining a green intentionality means continuing on existential odysseys motivated by the passion for the environment. It is the passion that helps the ecopreneur cope with the larger existential goals. This is especially apparent when they run into tough times in the face of economic insecurity and work–life balance.

4. Materials and Methods

The entrepreneurs were chosen based on their level of green intention, meaning that they expressed an interest for environmental improvement early on when contacted. Part of the sampling was done through the snowball method, meaning that interviewed entrepreneurs and other contacts provided new potential interviewees. In this ongoing research project, seven entrepreneurs were interviewed. For the purpose of this short communication, three interviewees are presented in depth as examples of ecopreneurs with a high level of green intentionality. These three also have in common a focus on a sustainable food system, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Three food ecopreneurs selected as in-depth examples.

Ecopreneur	Country	Description
A	Sweden	Food waste consulting
B	Austria	Innovating carrot based salmon
C	Sweden	Solutions for retail to reduce food waste

In depth interviews were done via Skype, lasting between 30–60 min. These were all recorded and transcribed. The interview guide followed a semi structured approach [28], leaving room for flexibility during the interviews while following the same structure in all interviews. The interview guide was based on the research question with a focus on two main themes: the business idea and the personal motivation, which formed two core categories as per grounded theory coding [29,30]. It was also deemed relevant to ask about the ongoing pandemic (spring 2020) at the end of the interview to assess the situation. The analysis was performed using a word processor. Thematic coding was used, and the theoretical themes guided the coding process.

5. Results

The journey from environmental ideals to a functional business model was challenging for the ecopreneurs. At the same time, they all continued with their start-ups motivated by the possibility of a more sustainable food system. The analysis below focuses on two main themes, namely: green intentionality and the existential odyssey.

5.1. Green Intentionality

The ecopreneurs wanted to do something good for the environment and that was the inspiration for their ventures. The ecopreneurs were asked about what motivated them. Starting with ecopreneur A, who argued that she would not start a business just for the sake of the business, and continued:

A: *I wanted to make a difference in the industry. Connected with more consultants and now we are four employees ready to work. I want companies to do something about this to a larger degree. Passionate about the question of food waste. Big and important questions but they are resource demanding.*

Similarly, Ecopreneur B also emphasized the importance of doing good every day, which makes it worth the while even with all the insecurities of the start-up phase. She talked about the idea of doing something real that resonated with her inner motivation and green intentionality:

B: *Now I am doing something good every day instead of working forty hours a week for a corporation and being unhappy—although it has security and pay. Knew I would end up as an entrepreneur but it happened sooner than expected. I was not able to commit to other companies that were not holistic and sustainable. Some only had organic fruits in the office. I was trying to build something sustainable: how the website is hosted, which transportation is used, bank accounts—making all the bits and pieces sustainable. That was the motivation but it takes time and is exhausting. At the same time, other companies do not operate with an inner motivation, as I would like it.*

Similarly, ecopreneur C also mentioned many companies that did not do much for the environment and that she never would have worked for such a company. As entrepreneurs, she and her team wanted to contribute by solving environmental issues:

C: *We only put effort in ideas that have environmental benefits and will never bet on anything that does not have an environmental benefit. It is the core of our operation. Selling dirty T-shirts from other countries is something for other companies. We need to feel that we contribute with something good, otherwise someone else can do it. We want to create an economically sustainable model. Now when we have children we have responsibility but we not at an environmental cost. What we do must have an environmental benefit.*

All three ecopreneurs had a strong green intentionality as a motivation and this was the main rationale for their start-ups. They also contrasted this to other business operations that they saw as unsustainable and unfulfilling.

5.2. The Existential Odyssey

Having a green intentionality also meant that the ecopreneurs needed to cope with the scale of environmental issues, which can be overwhelming. This coping occurred while

being part of small start-ups and being part of the world in general. While the scale of the issues were huge, they retained their green intentionality throughout their odyssey.

A: *There is a vision for zero food waste. It is hard to reach zero but there is a big potential to improve this at least [. . .] Many people cannot afford to buy healthy food. There is a need to get food to the table regardless of how it is financed. It is so frustrating that edible food is thrown away when there are people that cannot afford food. This is about charity and food justice!*

Ecopreneur B also recognized the scale of the issue, but this did not deter her. While not being able to change the world alone, she saw herself as part of a movement:

B: *Not as one person but somebody has to start and there are many small companies starting. There is a community and more options. It is not a pain anymore to act sustainable. It is easier as there are lot of committed citizens making something of their time, knowledge and skills. Not with focus on personal gain or getting rich, but rather focus on making the existing better. [. . .] Takes many people like raindrops.*

Setting high goals was actually part of their motivation although there was a strong element of an impossible existential odyssey in this. Ecopreneur C saw the difficulty of reaching a sustainable food system but also saw room for change:

C: *I think we can contribute with reducing food loss and make a big difference. That environmental benefit is huge with many possibilities. Concerning food production there is still a long way to go and many food security aspects. A hundred percent sustainable food system might be difficult but we can do a lot about food loss. I do not think we can reach zero, but we can make a big difference.*

Considering this as an existential odyssey, they needed to resolve the possibility that a sustainable world is impossible but convincing themselves that journey was worth it.

5.3. Continuing the Odyssey

The potential environmental benefit gave meaning to the lives of these three ecopreneurs, which for them made it worth the effort. However, similar to an odyssey it was also a constant struggle. To manage this the ecopreneurs needed to merge the everyday struggles with the bigger picture of environmental issues:

A: *Been enduring since 2016 without a salary. I have two kids and want them to eat well and live a good life. Our [humanity] way of living does not create that as we have a responsibility for the next generation. Money is good to have but you cannot eat it. Depleted soils and water sources will not do it. It is fun to work with food, as it is tasty and it is life.*

The financial struggles of the start-up phase was a constant factor. Ecopreneur B returned to the importance of being part of a movement and being passionate about what you do:

B: *Ups and downs, the start-up scene is not as glamorous as it seems from the outside. Were days I had the feeling of: 'I will start to apply for positions again. I am out. I want security and income. I want to sleep at night'. My brain does not stop and I am always on the run. Again, there are benefits like meeting with people that have the same vision and like what you are doing.*

Ecopreneur C also acknowledged the difficult balance between values that she was passionate about and the economic reality. While she wanted to keep the value-driven approach, it was also necessary to acknowledge the business side of things:

C: *I feel it would have been good to have more knowledge about running a business. [. . .] We were very value driven in the beginning. We have learned that we cannot create work for us or for others if we are extremely value driven. Have to find a balance between the market and the important questions.*

Ecopreneur C admitted the importance of economic knowledge as a means to tackle the important questions. The ongoing pandemic was also an ongoing struggle for all the ecopreneurs. In addition, the learning curve for entrepreneurship was a common denominator.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Previous research has stressed the importance of green intentionality among ecopreneurs [5]. The three ecopreneurs presented in this paper viewed green intentionality as

an important part of their business and their life. In a way, they embarked on a form of existential odyssey to solve environmental issues that might be unsolvable [6]. The continuation of this odyssey among the ecopreneurs can be partly explained by their passion [26]. In the case of the ecopreneurs, the passion was strongly tied to the possibility of a better environment or, more specifically, a sustainable food system. For these ecopreneurs, the betterment of the environment was the mission which gave meaning to their lives.

Their motivation for doing something good for the environment also meant that they never considered being part of ventures driven solely by an economic rationale. This corresponds to previous research defining one approach to ecopreneurship as transforming society [15]. At the same time, they faced the economic issues and everyday struggles that are common for entrepreneurship in general. Here, they found resolve in their green intentionality and their passion, which motivated them to continue on their odyssey. This meant that they could deal with the scale of the environmental issues by making a difference or at least trying.

These three ecopreneurs serve as empirical examples that can spark an interest in further examining the interrelation between the concepts of green intentionality, existential odyssey and passion. This can help formulate further qualitative and quantitative research studies focusing on ecopreneurship and the role of an existential commitment and how the ecopreneurs maintain this commitment. The stories that the ecopreneurs provide also have a role as inspiration for a sustainable transition within and outside of entrepreneurial ventures.

Suggestion for policy and business support organizations include support in the early start up phases. The ecopreneurs found themselves struggling, especially in the beginning, with the entrepreneurial part, as they already were knowledgeable about the environmental and sustainability parts. For practice, these ecopreneurs can provide an insight into the everyday struggles of ecopreneurs. These can be useful examples inspiring education, business support organizations and potential ecopreneurs.

Funding: This research was funded by Familjen Knut & Ragnvi Jacobssons stiftelse.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Lenton, T.M.; Rockström, J.; Gaffney, O.; Rahmstorf, S.; Richardson, K.; Steffen, W.; Schellnhuber, H.J. *Climate Tipping Points—Too Risky to Bet Against*; Nature Publishing Group: London, UK, 2019.
- Larson, A.L. Sustainable innovation through an entrepreneurship lens. *Bus. Strat. Environ.* **2000**, *9*, 304–317. [[CrossRef](#)]
- York, J.G.; Venkataraman, S. The entrepreneur–environment nexus: Uncertainty, innovation, and allocation. *J. Bus. Ventur.* **2010**, *25*, 449–463. [[CrossRef](#)]
- York, J.G.; O’Neil, I.; Sarasvathy, S.D. Exploring Environmental Entrepreneurship: Identity Coupling, Venture Goals, and Stakeholder Incentives. *J. Manag. Stud.* **2016**, *53*, 695–737. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schaper, M. *Making Ecopreneurs: Developing Sustainable Entrepreneurship*; Gower: Farnham, UK, 2010.
- Isaak, R. The Making of the Ecopreneur. *Greener Manag. Int.* **2002**, *38*, 81–91. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Muñoz, P.; Dimov, D. The call of the whole in understanding the development of sustainable ventures. *J. Bus. Ventur.* **2015**, *30*, 632–654. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Belz, F.M.; Binder, J.K. Sustainable Entrepreneurship: A Convergent Process Model. *Bus. Strat. Environ.* **2017**, *26*, 1–17. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schaltegger, S. A Framework for Ecopreneurship. *Greener Manag. Int.* **2002**, *38*, 45–58. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Shepherd, D.A.; Patzelt, H. The New Field of Sustainable Entrepreneurship: Studying Entrepreneurial Action Linking “What Is to Be Sustained” with “What Is to Be Developed”. *A Psychol. Approach Entrep.* **2014**, *35*, 45–71. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Kirkwood, J.; Walton, S. How green is green? Ecopreneurs balancing environmental concerns and business goals. *Australas. J. Environ. Manag.* **2014**, *21*, 37–51. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Kyrö, P. *Handbook of Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development Research*; Edward Elgar Publishing: Gloucestershire, UK, 2015.
- Uhlaner Hendrickson, L.; Tuttle, D.B. Dynamic management of the environmental enterprise: A qualitative analysis. *J. Organ. Chang. Manag.* **1997**, *10*, 363–382. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schaper, M. *Making Ecopreneurs: Developing Sustainable Entrepreneurship*; CRC Press: Boca raton, FL, USA, 2016.
- Rodríguez-García, M.; Guijarro-García, M.; Carrilero-Castillo, A. An Overview of Ecopreneurship, Eco-Innovation, and the Ecological Sector. *Sustainability* **2019**, *11*, 2909. [[CrossRef](#)]

16. Santini, C. Ecopreneurship and ecopreneurs: Limits, trends and characteristics. *Sustainability* **2017**, *9*, 492. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Affolderbach, J.; Krueger, R. “Just” ecopreneurs: Re-conceptualising green transitions and entrepreneurship. *Local Environ.* **2017**, *22*, 410–423. [[CrossRef](#)]
18. O’Neill, K.; Gibbs, D. Rethinking green entrepreneurship—Fluid narratives of the green economy. *Environ. Plan. A Econ. Space* **2016**, *48*, 1727–1749. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Dixon, S.E.; Clifford, A. Ecopreneurship—A new approach to managing the triple bottom line. *J. Organ. Chang. Manag.* **2007**, *20*, 326–345. [[CrossRef](#)]
20. Walley, E.; Opportunists, T.D.; Champion, M. A Typology of Green Entrepreneurs. *Greener Manag. Int.* **2002**, *38*, 31–43. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Hörisch, J.; Kollat, J.; Brieger, S.A. What influences environmental entrepreneurship? A multilevel analysis of the determinants of entrepreneurs’ environmental orientation. *Small Bus. Econ.* **2016**, *48*, 47–69. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Galkina, T.; Hultman, M. Ecopreneurship—Assessing the field and outlining the research potential. *Small Enterp. Res.* **2016**, *23*, 58–72. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Gast, J.; Gundolf, K.; Cesinger, B. Doing business in a green way: A systematic review of the ecological sustainability entrepreneurship literature and future research directions. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2017**, *147*, 44–56. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Murnieks, C.Y.; Klotz, A.C.; Shepherd, D.A. Entrepreneurial motivation: A review of the literature and an agenda for future research. *J. Organ. Behav.* **2020**, *41*, 115–143. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Cardon, M.; Wincent, J.; Singh, J.; Drnovsek, M. The Nature and Experience of Entrepreneurial Passion. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* **2009**, *34*, 511–532. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Cardon, M.S.; Glauser, M.; Murnieks, C. Passion for what? Expanding the domains of entrepreneurial passion. *J. Bus. Ventur. Insights.* **2017**, *8*, 24–32. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Huyghe, A.; Knockaert, M.; Obschonka, M. Unraveling the “passion orchestra” in academia. *J. Bus. Ventur.* **2016**, *31*, 344–364. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Brinkmann, S.; Kvale, S. *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*; Sage Publications: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2015.
29. Mattley, C.; Strauss, A.; Corbin, J. Grounded Theory in Practice. *Contemp. Sociol. A J. Rev.* **1999**, *28*, 489. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Ozanne, J.; Strauss, A.; Corbin, J. Basics of Qualitative Research. *J. Mark. Res.* **1992**, *29*, 382. [[CrossRef](#)]