



**University
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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**“Strategic Shifts Toward Regenerative Sustainability:
The Pivotal Role of Ecological Knowledge”**

Peter B. Gustavson School of Business

Friday, November 15, 2019
10:00 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B017

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Monika Winn, Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Matt Murphy, Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, UVic (Member)
Dr. Simon Pek, Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, UVic (Member)
Dr. Stefano Pogutz, Department of Management and Technology, Bocconi University (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Dror Etzion, Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Thomas Tiedje, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

Increasingly, firms like Patagonia, IKEA, General Mills, or Barilla actively seek to understand their interdependence with nature, build innovative capabilities, and generate more radical shifts toward sustainability. This creates exciting opportunities to investigate exactly how these companies obtain knowledge about ecosystem dynamics and processes and how they use it both to cope with climate change or declining ecosystem resilience and contribute to maintain or even strengthen ecosystems. Despite the considerable potential to advance research on organizational strategy and corporate sustainability, the notion of 'ecological knowledge' has yet to enter the scholarly work of management and business organization in a substantive manner. At present, we know almost nothing about the processes, mechanisms, and routines that enable an organization to, first, recognize the value of such knowledge and to, then, systematically access, co-create, integrate and utilize such knowledge into its broader knowledge and resource base. My dissertation attempts to fill this gap and opens up new directions for research on the role of ecological knowledge in corporate sustainability management. More specifically, I ask: *What are the processes through which organizations can effectively access, co-create, integrate and utilize ecological knowledge with current organizational knowledge and strategies?*

I link strategic and organization-focused concepts of knowledge and the perspective of absorptive capacity with the notion of ecological knowledge from modern ecology, especially from the social-ecological systems literature, to shed light on the processes through which organizations can effectively access, co-create, integrate and utilize new ecological knowledge into their operational and strategic decision making. I adopt a qualitative, emergent, and inductive strategy drawing on a grounded research approach to gain an in-depth, cross-validated, and processual understanding of the mechanisms through which organizations can promote and enhance ecosystem health including biodiversity. I undertook my study on the organic agriculture sector, a sub-sector of the modern agriculture and agri-food industry. I collected data from 23 agriculture and agri-food organizations based in British Columbia (BC), the westernmost province of Canada, using multiple data sources including in-depth interviews, observations, company documents, reports, newspaper articles and field reports. Based on my analysis, I develop a grounded theory about the processes through which organizations can successfully deepen their ecological knowledge and then utilize this knowledge to more

sustainably manage their relationships with nature and contribute to protecting or even strengthening ecosystem functionality.

With my dissertation, I address the call from scholars in Organization and the Natural Environment (ONE), Business and the Natural Environment (BNE) and Corporate Sustainability for more transdisciplinary cross-fertilization as an essential approach to building compelling new theory and models in the field. First, my analysis offers a more fine-grained understanding of the types, components, dimensions, and characteristics of ecological knowledge. Second, my analysis uncovers a micro-level account of the processes by which individuals as critical actors identify, evaluate and make sense of the organization-environment interrelationships across various scales of time and space. I also identify the multiple cognitive and emotional characteristics of individual actors that influence these processes in various stages and circumstances. Third, my study offers insights into the factors that can strengthen an organization's relational capacity to build mutual trust and collaboration with holders of ecological knowledge. Fourth, it sheds light on how firms engage with and motivate multiple community stakeholders in building a collaborative process of mutual learning, knowledge sharing, and knowledge co-creation to build joint capacity for coping successfully with many complex challenges of sustainability, thus contributing to the wellbeing of the entire social-ecological system. Collectively, these contributions provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of the processes of acquiring and co-creating ecological knowledge that can allow an organization to transition successfully towards greater ecological sustainability. My dissertation also offers numerous practically relevant insights for businesses facing the challenges of economic, social and environmental sustainability, as well as specific guidance on how companies can protect or enhance their supply of natural capital and contribute toward greater stability of the broader human-nature systems in which they are embedded.