



# Navigating the currents of coastal narratives in search of sustainable futures

Shona K. Paterson<sup>1,3</sup> · Ilan Chabay<sup>2,3</sup>

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## Abstract

In the face of rapid, consequential changes in coastal conditions, coastal communities and regions must make decisions to address these changes and negotiate pathways towards more sustainable futures. Making just and equitable decisions requires engaging the affected population and influential stakeholders in the process. These processes can be improved by considering and engaging with shared narratives present across both time and location. This paper reviews exemplary instances in which narratives have been employed in facilitating decisions in coastal regions, in particular, future-facing-narratives that reflect the social landscape and dynamics operating in parallel with environmental and geographical conditions. Recognizing and learning from these narratives deepens and facilitates making informed, meaningful decisions on complex, contested, value-laden issues facing coastal communities. This paper argues that decisions at scales from local-to-national can be improved by considering shared narratives of sustainability and social identity as central pillars of the negotiation around both governance processes and desirable outcomes.

**Keywords** Narratives · Coastal communities · Coastal zones · Future visions · Social identities

## 1 Introduction

Humanity faces complex critical challenges that require finding and implementing pathways to equitable emergent cultures of sustainability in every part of the world. Wide-ranging and compounding global impacts are predicted to intensify and become increasingly urgent over time (World Economic Forum 2020) with significant effects posing increasing risks to vulnerable populations, social and physical infrastructures, and planetary security (Biermann & Kim 2020; Lade et al. 2020; Steffen et al. 2015, 2018). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

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✉ Shona K. Paterson  
shonakoren.paterson@brunel.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, Brunel University London, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, UK

<sup>2</sup> School for Global Futures, Arizona State University, Washington, USA

<sup>3</sup> KLASICA, the Knowledge, Learning, and Societal Change International Research Alliance, Washington, USA

Change (IPCC) AR6 and associated special reports provide strong evidence of transformative effects on both planetary and socio-ecological systems continually occurring now (IPCC 2018, 2019, 2023; Lenton et al. 2019). These effects are associated not only with intractable challenges to planetary resilience but also potential tipping points in societal functioning (Winkelmann et al. 2020), which could create new inequalities, injustices and inequities and/or further lock-in existing ones through intended or unintended actions (Adger et al. 2018; Thomas et al. 2019; Thomas & Warner 2019). Increased social action rhetoric around injustice at multiple scales now bridges socio-economic, -technological and -ecological realms leading to an increased visibility of multiple fault lines in traditional governance architecture. Challenges that have historically been routinely dismissed within political discourse as issues that can be put off for long-term consideration, have been brought to an amplified level of social consciousness with increased exigence. Humanity, therefore, faces immediate, persistent, and pervasive choices about how to reduce both identified and potential emergent challenges.

In the face of such changes and choices, many governments and communities are seeking to create and build on visions of more sustainable futures to guide policy creation and decision-making processes. This paper argues that decisions at scales from local-to-national can be improved by considering shared narratives of sustainability and social identity as sources of insights into group or community perceptions and concerns and as central pillars of dialogue and negotiation in governance processes and outcomes. The term “narrative” is used here to describe collective expressions of perceptions, expectations, values, and norms of citizens and stakeholders. Narratives are, therefore, culturally purposeful expressions of collective identity or shared visions of desirable or feared futures for the community in which it circulates and gains meaning (Chabay et al. 2019; Koch et al. 2022). They contain stories, characters, scenes from the local or regional context and are indeed in the framework of *homo narrans* (Niles 1999) with attention to personal narratives. In the context of collective identities and norms, narratives are more than the sum of these elements. They are selective syntheses of these elements that reflect collective perceptions, cultural values, visions, and sense of shared identity, all of which may evolve rapidly or persist unaltered over generations. Therefore, narratives have built, and can in the future enhance, community coherence and group identity recognition, thereby providing orientation and motivation for decisions and actions by societies at multiple scales (Malone et al. 2017; McElduff & Ritchie 2018).

This paper reviews exemplary instances in which narratives have been employed in facilitating decisions in coastal regions toward just and equitable sustainable futures and how those narratives may have shifted to align for or against community interests within a negotiated frame of reference. We argue that collective narratives of visions of a future condition juxtaposed with social identities grounded in coastal regions have played valuable roles in orienting and motivating citizens, organizations, and stakeholders in making and implementing decisions enabling them to navigate change toward sustainable futures. We find that recognizing and learning from these narratives deepens and facilitates making informed, meaningful decisions on complex, contested, value-laden issues facing coastal communities.

## 2 Narrative visions of complex futures

Understanding the narratives underpinning community vision and identity provides crucial insights on decision making around desired and potential future states. “Storylistening”, when used in inclusive and deliberative processes, provides insights to support adaptive engagement and a commitment to sustainable futures (Charles & Fowler-Watt 2022;

Craig & Dillion 2021; Dillion & Craig 2021). Identifying possible and desired futures often involves a synthesis of multiple types of narratives and different sources or forms of knowledge to build a shared knowledge base from which to envision both agenda-setting and implementation (Bennett 2019). This shared base relies on process legitimacy and accountability, as well as an understanding of both perceived benefits and power and agency dynamics. In this process, narratives may become hybridized, intertwined, substituted or marginalized over time (Vanderlinden et al. 2020) reinforcing the continuum of perceptions, beliefs, and values of individuals and collectives discussed previously, as well as reflecting the shifting nature of social profiles.

Individual narratives in general reflect the present social context and/or indicate (often conflicting) views of the available options for decisions and actions for sustainable futures. Aggregated narratives examined in a particular context give a sense of the scope of historical, present, and future-focused fears and hopes in that context or community. Narratives often reflect disjunctures and unconventional patterns of delivery (DeSilvey 2012) reflecting continuous change across cultures in a dynamic and often stochastic landscapes. This is especially relevant with respect to emerging versus dominant narratives over time (Bryson 2008). These narrative shifts result from changing perceptions, values, and knowledge, as well as shifts in physical and social conditions. This state of impermanence (Geismar et al. 2022) recognises that change often develops unnoticed in communities and social systems until a specific catalyst allows the shift to erupt into communal consciousness (Biehl and Locke 2017). After this emergence, the change can be recognized and acknowledged explicitly. The narrative landscape at any scale, therefore, engages with a state of continuous change, flux, unpredictability, and openness. In writing on emergence of narratives in open and closed categories, van der Leeuw writes that *“the emphasis on the codification of an existing worldview in the emergence of a narrative does ... not pay enough attention to the dynamic interaction between imagined futures and present, ongoing, experience that all human beings practice in creating their narratives.”* (van der Leeuw 2024, p. 25).

As an extension of this dynamic nature, narratives in local contexts can often be highly influenced by outside forces and actors. This is even more relevant with the expansion of the internet and social media. Navigating this social and perceptual landscape especially in the digital space is often compounded by rapid changes in narratives and can lead to fragmentation as group members follow different narratives. As Helgeson et al. (2022) state *“the digital space contains both individual and group-led initiatives, as well as allowing rapid dissemination of group communications – both top-down (one-to-many) and bottom-up (many-to-many) – that fundamentally serve as ‘worldmaking’ vehicles”* (Helgeson et al. 2022; Vervoort et al. 2015). Narrative expressions, potentially influenced by geographically distanced actors, therefore become not only informative of underlying patterns of cognition and affect but are also capable of directly influencing decisions and actions for the future (Gladwin 2020; Guske et al. 2019; Koch et al. 2021).

Additionally, Veland et al. (2018) discuss the concept that narratives are common socio-psychological ‘infrastructure’ (Paschen & Ison 2014) that constitute the basis for knowing how the world can be changed. The authors advocate for society to intentionally embrace diverse narrative forms in the face of climate change, since each narrative relates to a set of conditions for imagined and possible futures. The authors warn that *“a poverty of stories risks trapping us in surreptitious human-natural system dynamics”* (Veland et al. 2018). Enriching and stretching the full range of imagined futures is essential to avoid being trapped in linear extrapolations toward the future while the complexity of change in socio-ecological systems creates non-linear consequences of actions. The future necessarily either evolves incrementally or breaks away radically

from the past and present social alignments, norms, and dynamics in each location tied to its particular environmental and geo-bio-physical context.

### 3 Narratives seen through a coastal lens

Coastal regions comprise a huge variety of specific contexts yet share certain critical characteristics which are important to unpack in considering sustainable futures for such regions. Coasts represent recreational, aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual spaces, providing specific senses of place and well-being as well as diverse coastal lifestyles. These representations often manifest themselves in narratives associated with place-attachment (Acott et al. 2022; Burley et al. 2012), coastal stewardship (Silbernagel et al. 2015; Strand et al. 2022) and changing environmental conditions (Miller et al. 2018), as well as faith (Bertana 2020) and local or super-local history (Holzhausen & Grecksch 2021). The complexity of challenges that humanity faces are abundantly evident in urban and rural coastal regions due to the interdependence of such environmental, ecological, geo-physical, demographic, and social factors.

Natural processes and human development activities continuously drive cycles of change in both the bio-physical characteristics and socio-economic profiles of coastal zones. These changes vary in magnitude and temporality and can lead to minor alterations to ecosystems or drive systems into new ecosystem states (Ramesh et al. 2015). With much of the world's coast epitomising a ribbon of exposure to extreme events and slow onset or chronic hazards, the associated risks to interdependent earth and human systems result in complex, dynamic social-ecological-economic landscapes and governance requirements (Bennett 2019; Brodie Rudolph et al. 2020; Rölfer et al. 2022). Coasts are inherently linked to access to resources and to space for human activities. They have been the locus of the great changes in social-ecological systems over long time spans and also have often been characterised by pervasive unsustainable practices (Cooley et al. 2022; Lau et al. 2021). The physical and social landscape of coastal regions and their dynamics hinge on the definitional characteristic that they sit astride the boundary of land and sea. The boundary exists not only in the physical dimension, but equally significantly, in the social dimensions that human societies derive from land and sea, including livelihoods, supply chains interwoven across land and sea, and cultural associations (Galafassi et al. 2018; Schmidt et al. 2013). As such, a plethora of often conflicting narratives can be identified from a range of geographic and social landscapes within coastal zones.

Observing and learning from the social landscape and its dynamics provide crucial knowledge in support of making difficult policy and implementation decisions that entities, including coastal communities, must make in ways consistent with their own contexts, conditions, and cultures. Narratives reflect these social/cultural landscapes and dynamics (Ounanian et al. 2021), which are interdependent with the current and changing conditions in the environment, ecology, and geophysical context. Narratives in play in coastal regions can, therefore, be collected and interpreted to provide unique, valuable sources of insights into the specific socio-economic-ecological issues and perceptions that critically affect decision making in complex environments. In the following section, we draw upon several examples to highlight the role of narratives in decision making for sustainable futures in coastal regions.

## 4 Examples of the Interplay between narratives and decision making in coastal zones

In the following section, we draw upon several examples to highlight the role of narratives in decision making for sustainable futures in coastal regions. Whilst these examples provide different contexts from a variety of geographical locations, there is no attempt in this article to generalise across geographies or contexts. Instead, these exemplars are used to describe the types of locally salient narratives within different social settings that elucidate meaning and context within emergent systems of sustainability rather than a reliance on globalised, system-centred narratives and concepts. Engaging with these diverse and often conflicting narratives generate mutual learning opportunities that can potentially facilitate policy and implementation decisions toward sustainable futures in a way that is more consistent with local contexts and cultures. To organize and provide context for the following examples, three themes are useful:

### 4.1 Place-based identities

The role that place-based identities and cultures can play in decision-making in coastal spaces has been well recognised in coastal management (Measham et al. 2011; Osborne et al. 2021; Silbernagel et al. 2015; Vanderlinden et al. 2020). The inherent dynamism within coastal systems leads to a plurality of cultural norms, values and perceptions resulting in diverse and potentially fractured communities within urban and rural coastal regions (Dasgupta et al. 2022; Lincke and Hinkel 2021; Lahsen and Turnhout 2021; Vanderlinden et al. 2020). The demographic and conditional dynamics require a continual process of decision making to adapt, avoid, or mitigate change from both long-term communities as well as more transient groups and individuals. As Döring and Ratter state, “*coasts represent a relational livelihood through which individuals, communities, social groups, institutions, science and societies reproduce and experience themselves*” (Döring and Ratter 2021, p. 318).

Place-based identities often manifest as narratives that connect community and individuals to specific location(s), their relationship to the environment, or to valued cultural heritage sites, both historically and in present day. As narrations of personal experiences, they often provide a time-structured plot that gives meaning to the life of the narrator by embedding it in context, culture, and relationships with other actors (including institutions). As Paschen and Ison (2014) discuss, ‘*how a community ‘stories’ its past experiences and actions ultimately determines how it understands and practices future adaptation*’ (Paschen & Ison 2014). Historic narratives can greatly influence people’s perception of local-to-global challenges (Holzhausen & Grecksch 2021), whilst the literary evocation of the relationship to the idiosyncratic place and lifestyles (Ritson 2018) can repeatedly anchor communities in a collective identity. For instance, narrations associated with traditional frames of reference and local interpretation of changes can be dominant, be that a conservation narrative in the case of Barra, Outer Hebrides ((Brennan 2018) or a lifestyle maintenance one as in the North Frisian Islands, Wadden Sea (Döring & Ratter 2021). The same deep entwinement of social and cultural identities with very strong place-attachment is present as these remote and isolated communities attempt to make sense of changing institutional and natural environments. In the case of Barra, this revolves around marine spatial planning and protected area establishment (Brennan 2018) whereas Döring

& Ratter (2021) use narrative expression to explore ways of knowing and experiencing coastal spaces with a view to deepening understanding of social shoreline conflict in the North Frisian Wadden Sea. Both of these cases discuss the importance of advocacy narratives constructed by stakeholders or agents to persuade or question opposing views as communities within these locations attempt to maintain individuality within visions of place in a wider collective. Brennan, in particular, states that narrative ‘*engagement functions as a bridge, or meeting point, between different (and sometimes polarised) communities of interest*’ (Brennan 2018).

In contrast, some place-based identities are dominated by very strong cultural norms that can potentially create conflicting situations especially in places with highly heterogeneous or transient populations. In these situations, voices of advocacy and contestation often appear as individual narrations or as rallying calls in collective narratives in attempt to maintain identity and visions of futures that conflict with interests being expressed in wider geographies or larger communities (Walsh & Döring 2018). Luederitz et al. describe how narratives can address a specific problem (beginning), detail core objectives and a sequence of key actions (middle) and propose a solution (end). Narratives, in this context, represent key sustainability framings that “*differ according to the actor that articulates system boundaries, elements, dynamics and goals as well as the ways in which the system should be transformed to generate desired outcomes*” (Luederitz et al. 2017). The potential for powerful top-down narratives that are generated and disseminated by authorities or elders to dictate patterns of behaviour in the community that the authority favours. Examples from the construction of offshore energy wind farms such as Cape Wind in Massachusetts, USA, have generated narratives of federalism as local opposition to the project continues (Klain et al. 2017; Kimmell and Stalehoef 2011). As Adger et al. (2011, p2) argue “*policy underemphasizes, or more often ignores completely, the symbolic and psychological aspects of settlements, places, and risks to them,*” even though these places highlight the “*emotional, symbolic, spiritual, and widely perceived intrinsic values of the environment.*” (Adger et al. 2011).

## 4.2 Imagined futures and social identities

Place-based narrative highlight the need for a greater understanding of how the use of narratives can inform, for example, integrated management of land- and seascapes to enable a more socially inclusive approach to sustainability. As Plieninger et al. (2018) demonstrate in their Faroe Island case study, co-existing values, preferences, and identified conflicts, required spatial planning processes that promoted a cross-sectoral approach rather than focusing on one prevailing development challenge. In this case, narrative mapping was specifically undertaken to reveal spatial patterns and underlying narratives of landscape values and to elicit development preferences and the potential for land-use conflicts (Plieninger et al. 2018). This approach reinforces the concept that, as Luederitz et al (2017) state, “*narratives are not merely stories, but they function as justification for particular interventions, essentially creating pathways of change*” or sometimes functioning as justifications for inaction or stasis (Luederitz et al. 2017). As Rahman et al. discuss with relation to a policy-defining, nature-based coastal adaptation case study in Nova Scotia, Canada, the narratives developed by an individual stakeholder or policy actor/practitioner encompasses both their tacit (e.g., experiential, observational, non-coded) and explicit (e.g., coded, formal) knowledge (Rahman et al. 2021). This can result in conflicting and competing narratives based on differing norms, values, standards, and mandates. While institutional and psychological

barriers dominate this Nova Scotia case study, the authors discuss co-production of narratives to overcome these barriers.

However, whilst these examples illustrate how narratives that reflect co-produced, shared visions can bring coherence to divergent perspectives, it must be recognised that there are fundamental difficulties in implementing changes derived from adaptive governance decisions especially in coastal regions (O’Riordan et al. 2014; Walsh 2021). These difficulties are often linked to the inability to develop trust between stakeholders, social actors, community members and coastal designers. The lack of trust often makes it difficult for the communities to envisage how or why the coastline may have to change and what potential alterations could be engineered or implemented for better long-term safeguards (Day et al. 2015). The outcomes of these difficulties can sometimes result in the use of archetypal characters of heroes, villains, victims, and survivors narratives that include policy processes as plots and policy solutions as morals (Shanahan et al. 2019). Bailey et al. (2022) describe pro-project stakeholders using strategic narratives of heroes in 84% of their messages in the example of Deep Dredge Project in Port of Miami. In this case, the specific heroes included the project itself or Floridian government officials with opponents of the expansion being the villains. From the perspective of the pro-expansion lobby, *‘specific heroic acts consisted of generating economic growth, bringing jobs to the state, and successfully implementing mitigation efforts to ensure development did not harm coral reefs’* (Bailey et al. 2022). In contrast, for those opposing the expansion, the heroes were policy actors advocating for increased environmental protection. Given the potential for narratives messages to invoke opportunities for future change, acknowledging the power of various narrative mechanisms (e.g., character selection) to shape community perceptions of both process and outcome can be critical to facilitating decisions in a way that is consistent with local contexts and cultures (Schmidt et al. 2013).

Within this context, it is hard to underestimate the importance of narratives that bring coherence to divergent perspectives within a coastal sustainability context. In the case of coral reef management in Sulawesi, Indonesia, as Halik and Verweij (2018) describe, *“people’s norms, values and perceptions cannot be fully understood in isolation, as these only emerge within the context of more general worldviews.”* (Halik & Verweij 2018). Individuals and communities “perceive, evaluate and justify” the social, economic, and environmental elements of sustainability. Questions about what is right, what is wrong, what is equitable, and what is the most appropriate solution to a particular problem are repeatedly raised by different social actors in different contexts and often show plurality in people’s stances on possible futures (Bertoldo et al. 2021).

### 4.3 Navigation routes to just sustainability

As detailed in the introduction of this paper, the focus on collective narratives frames these as products of the beliefs, norms, and values of social groups. As Bontje and Slinger state, *“narratives ... are situated at the interface of the individual and their wider environment”* (Bontje & Slinger 2017). This environment, with both social and biophysical elements, is often dominated by the pursuit of justice especially in the face of constant change and persistent inequities. Narratives that address (in)justice and (in)equity, can greatly influence social behaviour, particularly in situations requiring collective actions, such as resource use or sustainability efforts (Lau et al. 2021). Bennett (2019) discusses the use of narratives as a mechanism for local communities to assert their rights over spaces and resources, as well as a means to support specific policies or actions. Bontje and Slinger argue that this is

particularly relevant when initiating and evaluating pilot projects that encourage or create the opportunities for actors and systems to interact in innovative ways. The example of the Dutch coastal pilot project, the Sand Engine, demonstrates how the inclusion of narrative elements from the community's own biography effectively bridged potential gaps between the project initiators and stakeholders (Bontje & Slinger 2017). This allowed the local sustainability culture to contribute positively to the project and its outcome. It also illustrates how narratives of social identity are powerfully linked with place to promote outcomes consistent with environmental values.

Lau et al. (2019) explore this link between narratives and valuation further in discussing ecosystems in three coastal communities in Papua New Guinea by stating that to “*ensure the wellbeing of coastal communities, policy-makers must know which coastal ecosystem services matter to whom, and why*” (Lau et al. 2019). They point out that the common economic valuation based solely on monetary values does not adequately capture the functional valuation of people in this region, especially where a cash economy is not primary. “*Non-monetary valuations can more inclusively reflect the cultural values and social norms of low-income countries (Folkersen et al. 2018), better capture plural values (Suarez et al. 2018), and are thus more appropriate in developing coastal communities*” (Lau et al. 2019). Lau et al. further point out that “*As in developed countries, in developing communities, plural values (especially relational) are embedded in people's narratives about why ecosystem services matter to them (Arias-Arévalo et al. 2017). This narrative form of eliciting values better captures the sorts of intangible cultural values, like bequest values and tradition, that are underpinned by relational values of respect and reciprocity*” (Lau et al. 2019, p. 227). The question of how this plurality of values expressed by the narratives can best be handled in finding solutions for the needs of coastal communities becomes a matter for negotiation.

## 5 Negotiated outcomes of sustainability narratives

Narratives reflect social/cultural landscape dynamics at local-to-global scales. While they contain stories, characters, scenes from the local or regional context, they are more than these elements in that they are distillations that link and reinforce culture, visions, and identity. The narratives presented here, including top-down, advocacy, archetypal character, place-based, and worldmaking examples, reflect the relevant contexts and cultures that help shape the orientation and priorities for co-design and co-production of just and equitable sustainable futures. The collective narratives of visions of a future condition juxtaposed with social identities in coastal regions have played valuable roles in orienting and motivating citizens, organizations, and stakeholders in making and implementing decisions to navigate change. Recognising and learning from these narratives deepens and facilitates making informed, meaningful decisions on complex, contested, value-laden issues facing a broad range of coastal communities. Three main themes can be drawn from these learnings.

### 5.1 Future-casting

The need to explicitly engage in a deliberate shift towards sustainability approaches that are socially driven at locally salient scale rather than broader system-centred ones is becoming more pertinent as the call for just transitions to sustainability and net-carbon



zero increase (Robinson & Shine 2018; Routledge et al. 2018). This need has created an urgency around active and deliberative negotiation of potential futures which can often be reflected in rapidly shifting narratives (Horcea-Milcu et al. 2019) due, in part, to the uncertainty associated with the idea future-casting by multiple social actors with different value and knowledge sets. The future is unknown in two senses. One is that we can extrapolate linearly from past and present toward the future with the serious limitation of path dependence in outcomes and our thinking. This possibly raises important questions around the fit-for-purpose nature of institutional arrangements as we enter the Anthropocene (Hoffman & Jennings 2018) and if pathways we are envisioning are viable as we cross epoch-lines. The second aspect is that the inherent non-linearity of social ecological system (SES) complexity opens the future reality to unanticipated, unknown consequences of present actions. In both these settings, it is important to recognise that narratives are not idealised states but instead grounded in context-specific relationships and deliberated across spatial scales. The relational process of negotiation between people with diverse needs, values, capacities, and aspirations, can drive how behaviours manifest. Behaviours of individuals and groups are affected by perceptions of risk associated with change which can be reduced or increased by uncertainty. The expressions of these perceptions, in the form of narratives, play on and often amplify the risks and fears of unknown, uncertain, or imagined futures (Kasperson et al. 2022; Renn et al. 1992).

## 5.2 Co-production and mutual learning

Participatory decision-making processes have often been described as an articulation between consensus-oriented cooperation and compromise-oriented negotiation (van den Hove 2006). As such, many decisions are often characterized by conflict and tension. However, as Celino & Concilio (2011) state “*Participation asks to be an action-oriented process and is described as a search process looking for negotiation opportunities enabling participatory decision-making transform into.*

*operational collaboration process.*” (Celino & Concilio 2011). This provides the opportunity to contrast negotiation as conflictual to mutual learning as *de-facto* collaborative and in which the focus is on issues, rather than proponents – a process which boundary objects often can facilitate. Mutual learning experiences/events in which negotiation per se is avoided has been valuable in group decision making (Stöhr & Chabay 2014). If the parties in the dialogue become aware of some common purpose in addressing the challenge facing all parties, mutual learning becomes a valuable basis for making decisions and formulating strategies despite major differences in opinions and values between the parties.

Equitable processes and meaningful, lasting changes that characterise emergent processes of pursuing innovative pathways toward sustainable futures require developing new ways to operationalize narratives and social identity, thereby making them responsive to current and potential changes. By giving voice to the range of values held in the coastal communities, the narratives express and reinforce the attributes that contribute to sustaining the culture of those communities. In that, they exemplify the importance of recognizing, learning from, and supporting narratives of vision and social identity to co-create and maintain just and equitable cultures of sustainability in coastal areas across the world. As Veland et al. write, “*In recognizing that global change narratives have an ontologically normative function, this is not just about respecting worldviews and cultural idiosyncrasies, but about finding transformative ways of sweeping the material world up in our narratives of causation*” (Veland et al. 2018, p. 45).

### 5.3 Barriers to negotiation

As the range of examples presented demonstrate, the sustainability and acceptability of potential future visions differ greatly depending on individual and group perceptions, resources, and capabilities. Different knowledge schemas, levels of social capital and resource accessibility, especially those related to the manifestation of adaptive capacity in the face of positive or negative outcomes (Erwin et al. 2021; MacGillivray 2018), will continue to shape narratives and collective responses to change (Anguelovski et al. 2016; Goyal & Howlett 2020). In reality, these factors continue to be tempered by a lack of representation and recognition in decision making coupled with power and resource disparities around both structural and procedural equity. This is especially pertinent in Indigenous contexts (Elfriede & Kempf 2018), among diversely positioned actors (Remling 2020) as well as at institutional scales (Paschen & Ison 2014).

## 6 Conclusions

With the multiple challenges of the complexity of issues faced, fundamental uncertainties, and an ever-increasing urgency to act, narratives are being recognised as key tools both in terms of tracking changes in knowledge and perceptions and in their function in maintaining social and cultural capital needed to inspire and harness collective potential (Uhrqvist et al. 2021). In increasingly unpredictable biophysical, social, economic, cultural landscapes, balancing opportunities for incremental systems change with the potential for radical transformation is anchored in local contexts.

By deliberately and reflexively considering the narratives of a coastal community or region, a co-creative and co-design process of mutual learning can be undertaken to facilitate the difficult and often conflicted policy and implementation decisions toward sustainable futures in a way that is consistent with local contexts and cultures. This perspective centered around experiences in coastal communities thereby contributes to the theme of this special issue on "Narratives of Vision and Social Identity in Emergence of Cultures of Sustainability at Multiple Scales." Our intent in this paper is to stimulate research into narratives in coastal regions that will further elucidate their influence on decision making and provide insights to facilitate positive outcomes. This will be important to support all manner of transitions to equitable, inclusive, and resilient sustainable future coasts worldwide.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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