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Connection to nature and sustainability in small- and medium-sized environmental organizations: A dynamic strategic thinking approach

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Abstract

Strategic thinking has evolved from a concept predominantly based on analysis, closely integrated with strategic planning, to a broader mindset, yet it remains strongly 'head based'. The aim of this paper is to explore a context where a broader, more holistic perspective exists, focused on the connection of small- and medium-sized environmental organizations with the natural world, why and how this relationship influences strategic thinking and how it enables organizations to leverage limited resources. The research methodology reflects the rationale that a holistic perspective of strategic thinking is best understood by adopting an interpretivist research philosophy, using an inductive, ethnographic approach, focused on interpreting deep, rich layers of meaning within participant data to inform new theory and existing practice. The triangulated multi-method approach, within an embedded case study setting, comprised 38 individual interviews and 4 workshops (group interviews, participant observation) drawn from 29 organizations across the United Kingdom. The findings indicate that the strategic thinking process is emergent, complex, interconnected, informal and is embedded within pivotal places alongside governance, strategic planning and other key processes. Participants are driven by a strong embodied personal connection with nature, extending well beyond the cognitive dimension (mind) to a diverse range of sensibilities (heart, body and spirit) and share an experiential process of connection that binds them together as purpose- and value-driven organizations. The implication is that a connection to nature underpins all aspects of the strategic processes within participant organizations and is fundamentally important to decision-making at all levels, both strategic and implementational.

KEYWORDS

connection to nature, environmental sector, praxis, purpose-driven organizations, small- and medium-sized organizations, stakeholder management, strategic thinking, sustainability

1 | INTRODUCTION

When the French philosopher Descartes (1596–1650) wrote his seminal works, *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), his belief in the separation of mind and matter, captured in his philosophical proposition, 'I think, therefore I am', had

a profound and deep impact on Western philosophy. This concept of separation is deeply embedded within our contemporary outlook on the world and the concept of strategic thinking has developed within this overriding and largely unconscious paradigm of separation. The terminology 'strategic thinking' is, in itself, a strong indication of the abiding dominance of the 'head-based' nature of the process and how it persists despite the increasingly complex and turbulent nature of the world around us, which calls for a more holistic or systemic approach (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001; Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Sanders, 1998; Senge, 1990; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

How can we move beyond this limitation? This paper is a direct response to this key question. It aims to explore the nature of strategic thinking from a wider perspective, moving beyond a Cartesian mindset (based primarily on intellect) to a more holistic approach. The underlying rationale is that there is a value in a connection to the natural world, which may impact significantly on the strategic thinking process and the ability of organizations to leverage limited resources. It is focused on small- and medium-sized environmental organizations, which have an explicit purpose linked to nature.

Environmental organizations include 'conservation, pollution control and prevention, environmental education and health, and animal protection' (International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations, Clifford et al., 2013, p. 244). In practice, they are diverse and there is a strong bifurcation within the environmental sector between small/medium-sized and larger organizations, with the distribution of income dominated by a few very large organizations (National Council for Voluntary Organizations [NCVO], UK Civil Almanac, 2019). There are also differences between the 'scope, market position, values and practices' even within small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Runhaar et al., 2008, p. 177).

To improve homogeneity in the research group (38 participants drawn from 29 organizations), the study is focused on small- and medium-sized not-for-profit organizations, principally charities, social and community enterprises. These organizations share a strong sense of underlying social purpose related to protecting, conserving, supporting and regenerating nature (flora, fauna, landscape, animal welfare, campaigning and advocacy). The research study is underpinned by three broad research questions:

1. How does a more relational approach to strategic thinking, based on a sense of connection, challenge our existing understanding of strategic thinking? (contextual).
2. How and why does a sense of connection with the natural world impact the ability of small- and medium-sized environmental organizations to think strategically? (theoretical).
3. How does this sense of connection contribute to the ability of these organizations to achieve key strategic and operational objectives with limited resources? (practical).

These research questions (contextual, theoretical and practical) explicitly address the link between a connection to nature and the strategic thinking process by looking closely at the participants' strategy in practice, which represents a significant knowledge gap in the existing literature, identified in the existing praxis literature (Goldman et al., 2015; Whittington, 1996; Whittington & Cailluet, 2008).

In general, there is a paucity of existing research on the nature of strategic thinking within small- and medium-sized environmental organizations, which extends to related areas including governance and the environmental sector as a whole (Clifford et al., 2013; Kendall & Knapp, 1996). It is a 'marginalized object of analysis' (Clifford et al., 2013, p. 243) despite the fact that nature-based challenges (climate change, loss of biodiversity and abundance, destruction of habitats and ecologies, food, land and marine issues) pose a significant threat to our life support system and these threats are escalating rapidly. This paper seeks to address this important conceptual gap.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Strategic thinking in environmental organizations

The focus of the literature review is to establish a broad understanding of the meaning and development of strategic thinking and what it means to be connected to the natural world. There is a clear pattern in the evolution of strategic thinking over the past 40 years from a concept predominantly based on analytical thinking (Ansoff, 1965; Porter, 1979, 1985), closely integrated with the strategic planning process, to a broader, more holistic or systemic, mindset (Bonn, 2001; Liedtka, 1998; Moon, 2012) but one that retains an analytical and cognitive dimension (Bonn, 2005).

There is no agreed definition of strategic thinking. It is, however, generally acknowledged as a *way* of thinking (Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1987a, 1994), one that reflects a connected perspective, one that is more holistic or systemic in orientation (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Goldman & Casey, 2010; Liedtka, 1998; Moon, 2012). This contrast with strategic planning, which is seen as an analytical process (Porter, 1991; Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011). Although strategic thinking and strategic planning are different in scope, they are 'distinct, but interrelated and complementary thought processes' (Heracleous, 1998, p. 482) and both are critical to organizational success (Graetz, 2002; Heracleous, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994; Whittington & Cailluet, 2008).

This paper takes a broad view of strategic thinking within the development of strategy as a whole. It provides an overview of the current and historical landscape of the literature, an overall sense of direction and the relationship to the broader organizational literature including the dominant analytical approach (Ansoff, 1965; Porter, 1979, 1985), strategic and organizational theory (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b, 1994; Mintzberg et al., 1998) and broader frameworks drawing from a diverse theoretical background including complexity theory (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003), systems theory (Senge, 1990), the natural sciences (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001; Sanders, 1998) and praxis (Goldman et al., 2015; Whittington, 1996; Whittington & Cailluet, 2008).

The resulting framework (Figure 1) illustrates the change in the locus of strategic attention and degree of connection over the past 40 years, moving from a competitive perspective (a high degree of
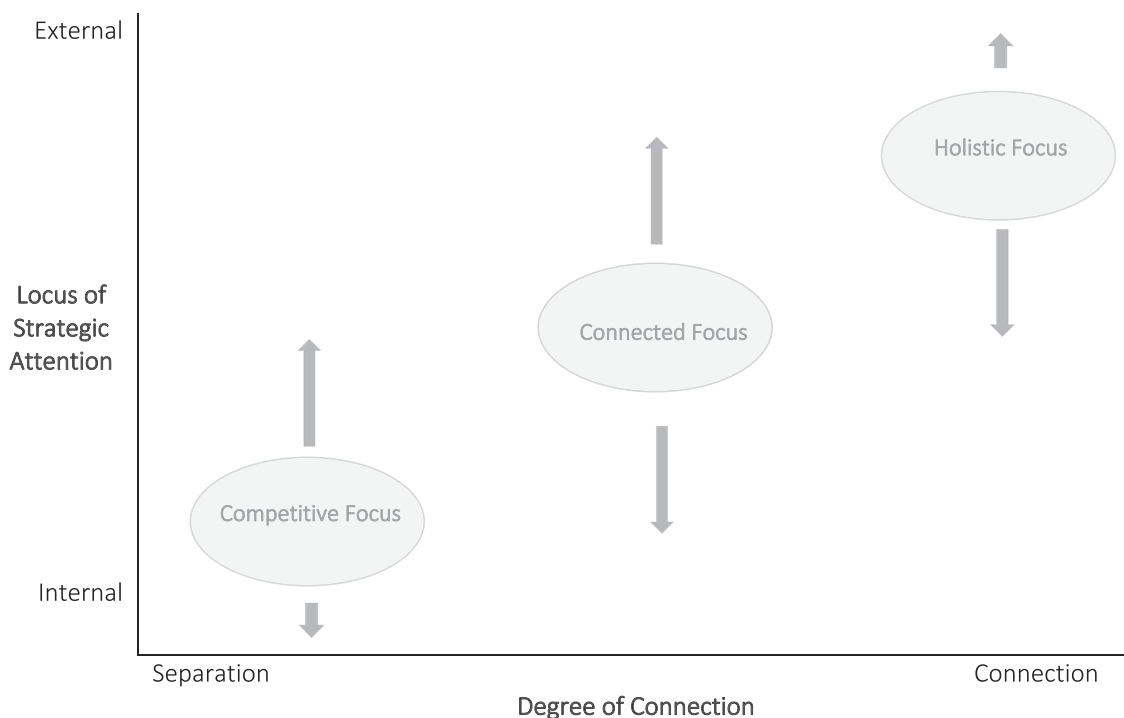
FIGURE 1 Strategic thinking: Locus and connection

separation and internal locus) to a holistic perspective (a high degree of connection and external focus). There is a significant degree of overlap between these dimensions at any one point of time and a great deal of diversity at both theoretical and practitioner levels within organizations.

This simplified framework can be extended to incorporate six different perspectives of strategy incorporating the key dimensions utilizing the key strategic questions; where are we now? (situation assessment or 'reality check'), where do we want to be? (strategic direction, vision and mission) and how do we get there? (execution and monitoring) to position the extant body of the strategic and organizational literature. In reality, the field is complex and interconnected and the framework is best seen as indicative (Figure 2).

The framework demonstrates an increasing holistic and interconnected dimension to strategy as it moves from competitive thinking, traditional analytical models and competitive advantage (Porter, 1979, 1985), resource-based strategy (Peteraf, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984) and transformational models based on disruption, renewal and co-opetition (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, 1996, 2005; Nalebuff & Brandenburger, 1997) to connected thinking, including internal models (the importance of values, culture and beliefs; Collins & Porras, 1996, 2005; Goldman & Casey, 2010; Schein, 1996, 2010; Tichy, 1982), external models incorporating complexity (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003), systems theory (Senge, 1990), frameworks drawing on science (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001; Iansiti & Levien, 2004; Sanders, 1998; Zahra & Nambisan, 2012), more holistic frameworks that address environmental and sustainability issues (Aragón-Correa, 1998; Hawken et al., 2005; Lovins et al., 2007; Stead &

Stead, 2000), broader societal issues (Vaara & Durand, 2012) and the not-for-profit sector (Drucker, 1989).

When we look at the broad scope of the extant literature as a whole, strategic thinking emerges as:

- A complex process that is often seen as a *way of thinking* that is complementary to strategic planning but is more holistic, fluid and interconnected.
- Vital to organizational sustainability and long-term viability.

What is arguably missing in the literature is a robust foundation in what actually happens in practice ('strategy as practice'), particularly in small- and medium-sized organizations. This is partially addressed by the praxis literature (Goldman et al., 2015; Whittington, 1996; Whittington & Cailluet, 2008), but the environmental sector is poorly addressed. This paper thus addresses an important knowledge gap in the literature.

2.2 | Connection to the natural world

There are many ways of defining a connection to nature, and it is complex. It includes cognitive, affective and behavioural components and the relational element often seen as dominant (Bragg et al., 2013; Nisbet et al., 2009; Schultz, 2002). Connection is an individual's 'affective, *experiential* connection to nature' (Mayer & Frantz, 2004, p. 504, author italics). It can be implicit, existing outside of conscious awareness (Schultz et al., 2004), express a sense of oneness

Key Dimensions (The Strategic Journey)	Key Perspectives					
	Competitive Thinking		Connected Thinking		Holistic Thinking	
	Competitive Advantage (Traditional)	Disruption and Renewal (Transformation)	Cultural (Internal)	Systemic (External)	Societal (Sector specific mutuality)	Unitive (Philosophical/ Spiritual)
Internal **Where are we now?** Internal strategy models Integration of strategic thinking within the strategic management system	Traditional competitive models (zero-sum or win-lose) Analytical frameworks based on independence and control Integration of strategic thinking and strategic planning processes Primarily convergent and deductive reasoning	Core competency and capability models Importance of transformational element of strategy (often top down) Competitive dynamic remains key Integration of convergent and divergent thinking	Emphasis on purpose, vision, mission and values (embedded in culture) Internal models (process, creative, cognitive, organizational, narrative/story, leadership) Entrepreneurial and other models Strategy as an emergent phenomenon	Emphasis changes from independence to a web of relationships with the outside world Systems theory, complexity models and other frameworks that stress connectivity and relationship Value of ecological and scientific frameworks founded on the whole ('web of life')	Social purpose as the key driver for charities, community and social enterprises Broader connectivity with extended stakeholders and communities (members and volunteers etc.) Alternative structures and practices including partnerships, co-operative ventures alliances etc.)	Integrated and holistic based on relationship to/ connection with the whole Elements of other perspectives used in context. Win-win scenarios based on synergy and connection Multiple sensibilities or intelligences (mind, heart, body, spirit) — hearts and minds
Unique Selling Proposition Matching internal and external factors	Focus on sustainable competitive advantage	USP created by disrupting existing status quo and renewal	USP embedded in organizational intent, purpose, vision and mission; expressed through culture	USP embedded in the complex web of relationships within the ecosystem	Success defined in terms of sector; purpose and goals	Purpose organizes around broad societal goals as well as organizational focus
External **Where do we want to be?** Strategic emphasis **How do we get there?** Strategic implementation and execution	Implementation and execution ('how') founded on analysis of current position ('why') and future destination ('where') Emphasis on analytical models, tools & techniques to understand external markets, environment and positioning	Shift from 'how' (implementation) to future destination ('where' and then 'how') Imagining new products, services and markets ('blue sky thinking') and 'leading' the customer to a new product and market definitions	Shift to reflection on internal motivation and intent ('why'), understanding the future in terms of current reality and potential ('now') Superior customer propositions and service based on shared values	Scientific perspective on connectivity - ecology, biology, complexity, quantum physics) Challenges conventional paradigms on independence, separation and control	Shift to fulfilling central purpose redefines success Web of internal and external stakeholders: (members, partners, volunteers, communities etc.) aligned around a shared sense of purpose	Reframing — seeing the world from the perspective of the whole ('metanoia') Insight and knowledge flow from an intimate connection with the world
Positioning in extant literature (indicative)	Ansoff, 1965; Bonn, 2001, 2005; Heracleous, 1998; Moon, 2012; Peteraf, 1993; Porter, 1979, 1985, 1991, 1996; Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011; Wernerfelt, 1984.	Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, 1996, 2005; Nalebuff & Brandenburger, 1997.	Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Bonn 2001, 2005; Calabrese & Costa, 2015; Collins & Porras 1996, 2005; Gardner & Laskin 2011; Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1993, 1997; Granovetter, 2005; Groves et al. 2011; Goldman & Casey, 2010; Graetz, 2002; Heracleous, 1998; Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1980, 1987a, 1987b, 1994; Rey et al., 2019; Schein, 2010; Tichy, 1982; Weeks, 2006.	Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001; Frame, 2008; Iansiti & Levien, 2004; Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Neugebauer et al., 2015; Sanders, 1998; Senge 1990; Snowden & Boone 2007; Zahra & Nambisan 2012.	Aragón-Correa 1998; Beng Geok, 2018; Bragg et al., 2003; Clayton, 2003; Drucker, 1989, 2004; Dutcher et al., 2007; Goldman et al., 2015; Hatten, 1982; Hawken et al., 2005, 2007; Husted, 2013; Kals et al., 1989; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Nisbet et al., 2009; Schultz, 2002; Schultz et al., 2004; Whittington, 1996; Whittington & Cailluet, 2008.	Gardner, 1993, 1995, 2003, 2011; Goleman, 1996, 2006; Heuer, 2012; Minocha & Stonehouse, 2007; Ndubisi et al., 2019; Robinson, 2011; Sanders, 1998; Shapiro, 2011, 2019; Stead & Stead 2000; Vaara & Durand 2012; Zohar & Marshall, 2001.
School of Strategy Schools - Mintzberg et al. (1998).	Design Planning Positioning	Configuration	Entrepreneurial Cognitive Learning Power Cultural	Environmental		Whole Beast (Holistic)

Core focus of perspective

FIGURE 2 Evolution of strategic thinking: Key perspectives over time

(Clayton, 2003; Kals et al., 1999), focus on practical engagement (Clayton, 2003) and involve the 'dissolution of boundaries and a sense of a shared or common essence between the self, nature, and others' (Dutcher et al., 2007, p. 474). This emphasis on a deep sense of connection outside the locus of the individual self is inherently holistic.

These key aspects of connection are reflected by nature writers including a strong emphasis on the importance of intrinsic as well as extrinsic value (Macfarlane, 2019a; McCarthy, 2009; Nicolson, 2013; Whyte, 2019), the complex and vital role of interconnectivity with nature (Macfarlane, 2019b) and links between a connection to nature and personal or cultural identity (Macdonald, 2014; Mitchell, 2002; Oliver, 2009; Schama, 1995). The emphasis on intrinsic or inherent value is also reflected in key threads within the academic literature (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Collins & Porras, 1996; Senge, 1990), although there is a stronger recognition of the extrinsic benefits of nature in the mainstream literature.

This paper looks at how and why a connection with nature contributes to the ability of participant organizations to move beyond a predominantly Cartesian mindset (based primarily on intellect) to a broader, more holistic perspective on strategic thinking, which incorporates a diverse range of sensibilities or multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993, 1995, 2003, 2011; Robinson, 2011), encompassing a diverse range of human capabilities of perceiving and understanding the world: mind (cognitive, analytical thinking; Ansoff, 1965; Porter, 1979, 1985), heart (feelings, emotional and relational; Goleman, 1996, 2004), body (senses, gut feeling and intuition; Minocha & Stonehouse, 2007; Shapiro, 2011, 2019), spirit (inner knowing, connection to the whole; Zohar & Marshall, 2001) or a mixture of cognitive and more intuitive thinking processes (Calabrese & Costa, 2015; Sanders, 1998).

3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology reflects the principle that a holistic perspective of strategic thinking is best understood by adopting an interpretivist research philosophy, using an inductive, ethnographic approach, focused on interpreting deep, rich layers of meaning within participant data to inform new theory and existing practice. Critically, this allows meaning to emerge by investigating the strategic thinking process from an *insider's* perspective, linking the research closely with strategy in practice and the praxis literature. A triangulated multi-method research approach was used, within an embedded case study setting (38 individual interviews drawn from 29 small- and medium-sized environmental organizations), four group interviews and participant observation (conducted within workshop events where six to eight participants came together as a community of shared interests and experience). This approach yielded deep, rich and multi-layered data that was grounded in the participants' practical day-to-day work experience.

Participants were encouraged to tell their stories, particularly at the workshops, including meaningful events in their lives, thus providing a narrative or storytelling element, which was helpful to tap into a deeper sense of meaning. The interplay between the participants' story and the *broad* theoretical context (including contextual knowledge gained at academic and industry forums, symposiums, conferences and annual general meetings [AGMs]) is a critical part of understanding the complex and interconnected story that has emerged, enabling the study to address the knowledge gap in the research field by focusing on link between a connection to nature and strategic thinking. The full research methodology and design is summarized in Figure 3.

Participants were selected to represent a diversity of organizations in terms of purpose (landscape, flora, fauna, animal welfare, campaigning and advocacy), structure (primarily charities and social and community enterprises but also a small number of land management and hybrid organizations), geographic location (Wales, Scotland and England) and a broad age and gender representation. Many organizations had an explicit remit that recognized *both* the conservation, restoration and protection of the natural world and enhancing the lives of people through a connection with the natural world. Nature *and* people, recognizing the interconnectivity between the two. The size of the organizations ranged from an annual income of under £10,000 to £4.3 million.

As the research is focused on relatively small organizations, all participants are actively involved in strategic decision-making, most often in a senior capacity: primarily founders, chief executives, the senior team (board members, senior managers, departmental heads, owner/proprietors) and a small number of supervisory and/or project-based roles to produce a broad representation of views. This allowed the research to capture those in informal as well as formal leadership positions (Gardner & Laskin, 2011).

As the focus of the research study is complex and the research questions are interconnected and holistic, the design of data collection methods was kept relatively open to allow the participants to speak freely on what is most important to them. Broad open questions were used, minimizing strategic terminology, to allow them to go deeper, particularly at the workshops (group interviews and participant observation). Data analysis was a highly iterative process with an overlap between data collection and analysis and the frequent need to move between transcripts, analytical memos and coding data (using the Quirkos CAQDAS package) to extract greater levels of meaning (and similarly between the participants' analytical story and the extant body of the literature to evaluate the findings in relation to existing knowledge).

The richness of the data was further enhanced by the triangulated multi-method approach as each data collection method yielded different, yet complementary, perspectives on the data. Participant observation at the workshop events, for example, captured participants' comments when they were not being recorded, which sometimes resulted in more open discussions. The researcher was able to observe the participants' body language more closely and a group dynamic sometimes encouraged participants to talk more openly and deeply about their values, beliefs, personal experiences and motivations, as well as express their feelings more openly. Similarly, some participants
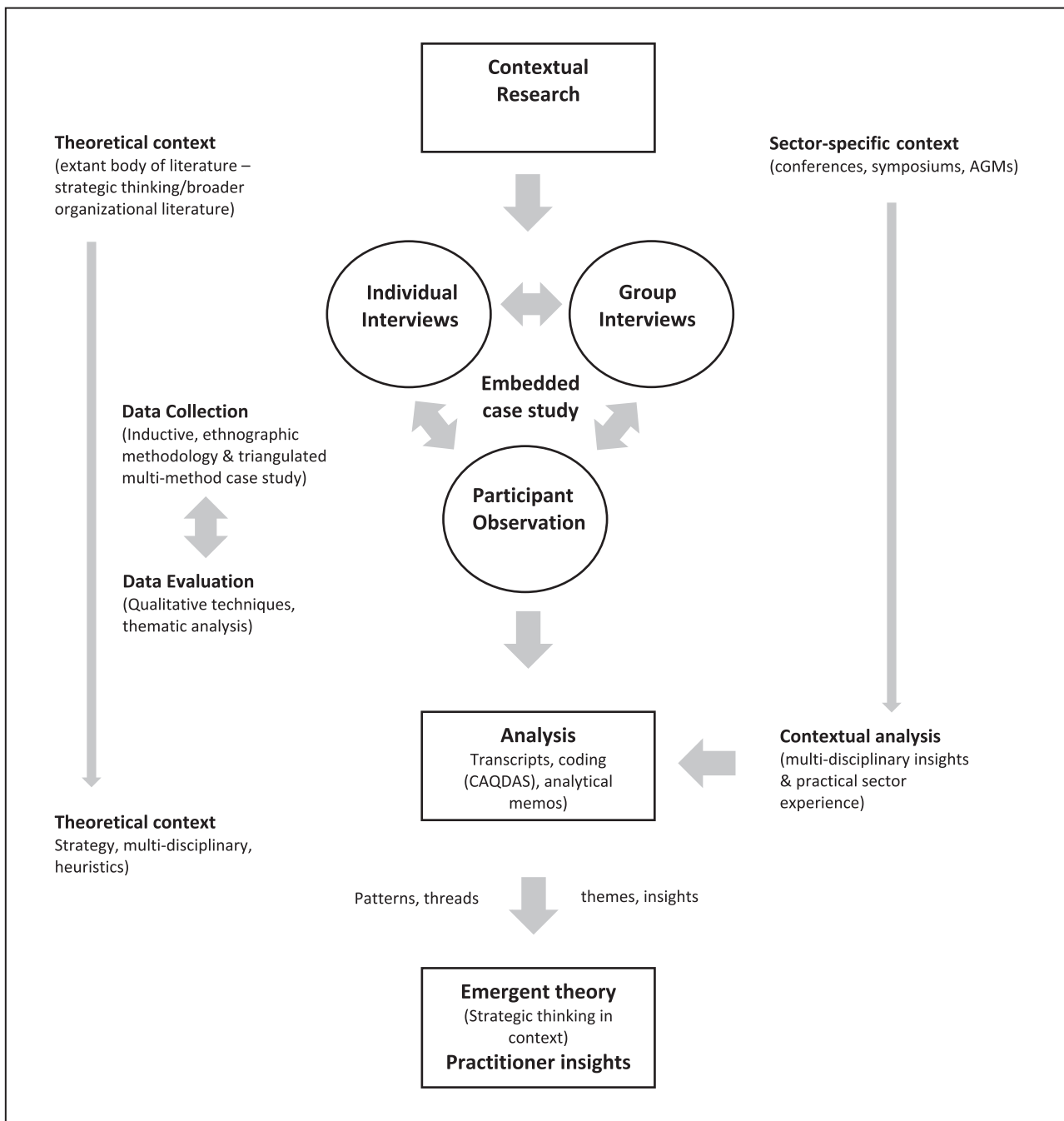
FIGURE 3   Research methodology and design

opened up more fully after the recorded individual interviews had finished when the recording device was switched off. In one workshop, for example, participants expressed feelings of profound sadness, loss and grief (several were on the verge of tears) over the accelerating destruction of the natural world and the potential consequences for both the Earth and the human race.

In practice, the inductive research process was, therefore, highly iterative and immersive. The participants' story emerged through increasing levels of analytical abstraction, supported by the thematic analysis, which provided considerable insight at practitioner level,

often in what appears at first to be the most prosaic data. Each theme tells a distinct and important story. At heart, ethnography involves 'telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story' (Fetterman, 1998, p. 1) by focusing on the meaning that people assign to phenomena. The story that has emerged both fits existing theory and offers significant insights beyond it. As with all qualitative research, the results of the study are not generalizable but they do provide generous scope for research opportunities to investigate whether findings can be replicated within the environmental sector and/or other not-for-profit sectors.

4 | THE FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Key findings include the importance and nature of the participants' connection to the natural world, the embodiment of this connection within the purpose-driven strategies of the participant organizations, the emergent and embedded nature of strategic thinking within these processes, the way in which the organizations manage different stakeholder needs and perspectives in order to leverage their limited resources and the fundamental importance of the relational nature of the overall strategic process. These are underpinned by a diverse range of human sensibilities of perceiving and understanding the world, which are reflected, often indirectly rather than directly, in a more holistic thinking process.

The findings of the research study are rich and insightful, reflecting the practice-based inductive methodology. This is best illustrated by telling the participants' analytical story first using a structure that best represents the data (Sections 4.1–4.3) before positioning the findings firmly within the body of the extant literature, using the specific research questions. Although an analytical framework has been adopted here, it is important to note that the thematic analysis has identified nine key themes underpinning the data (Figures 4–6), each

The Participants' Story

A purpose-driven relational view of strategy underpinned by the critical importance of a connection to nature, both as humanity's life support system (extrinsic value) and in of and by itself (intrinsic value). A matter of life and death

Research question

1
What, if any, is the link between a connection to nature and strategic thinking?

2
How does this link contribute to the ability of participant organizations to leverage resources?

3
How does this link contribute to a more relational approach to strategic thinking?

Key themes and questions

How do we manage our organizations?

Strategic thinking

6. We are purpose-driven organizations – we steer through fundamentals

How do we resolve key challenges, tensions and conflicts?

9. We have 'strong minds and big hearts' – we hold the tension between the opposing worldviews and perspectives of key stakeholders by speaking multiple languages

How do we manage our organizations?

Broader organizational process

7. We build extended communities of interest

8. We prioritise effective strategic and planning processes

Who are we?

Relational foundation

Who are we?

1. We are outsiders, motivated by a different way of seeing the world, connected not separated

What makes us what we are?

2. It's a matter of life and death ('something inside so strong'), and

3. It's both intensely personal, and yet universal

What do we do and why do we do it?

4. We are part of nature, not apart from it

How do we do what we do?

5 This is a collective endeavour, together we make a difference

Connected themes   7 and 8   5, 6 and 9

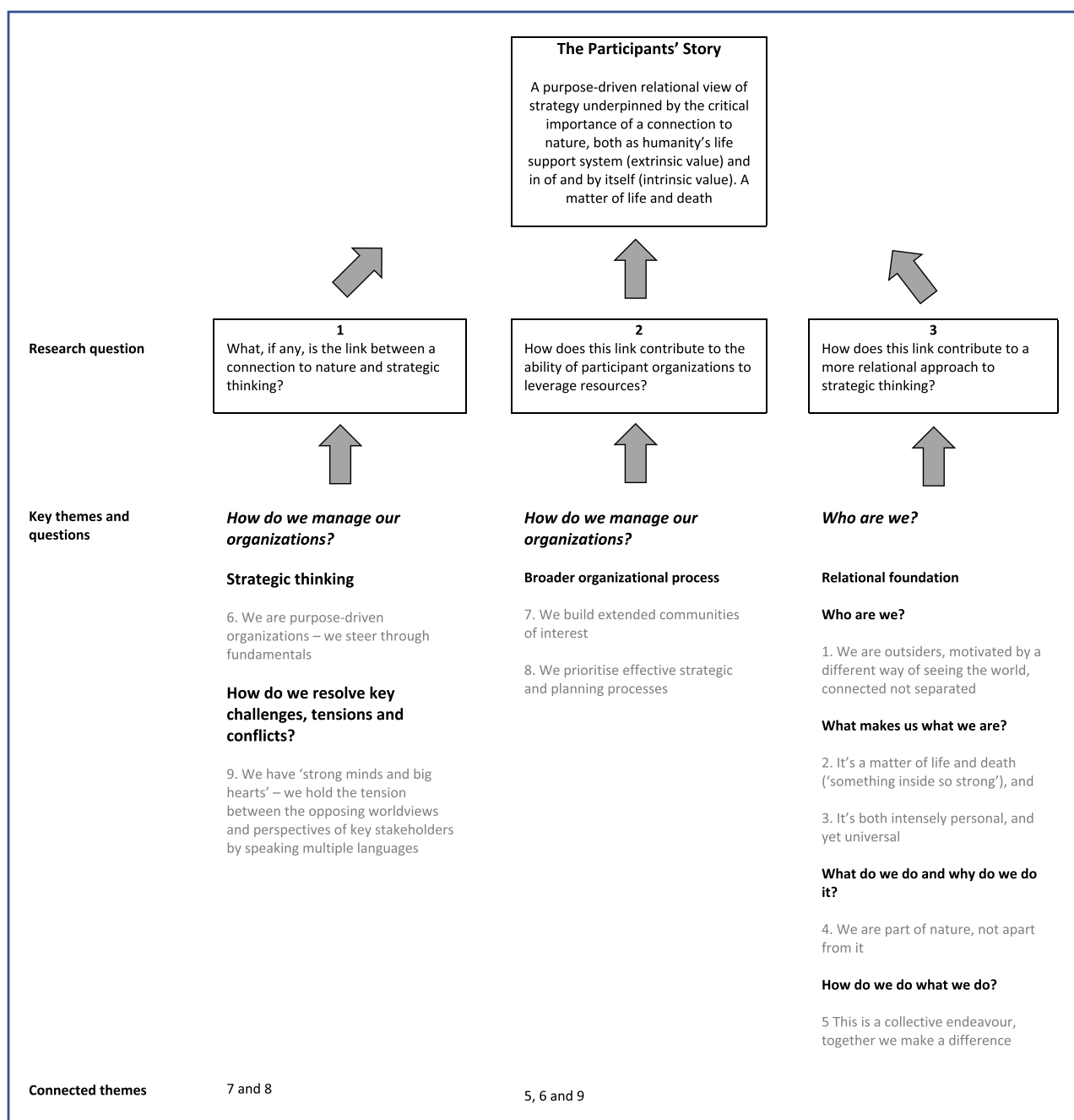**FIGURE 4**   Overview of the core narrative of participant organizations [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

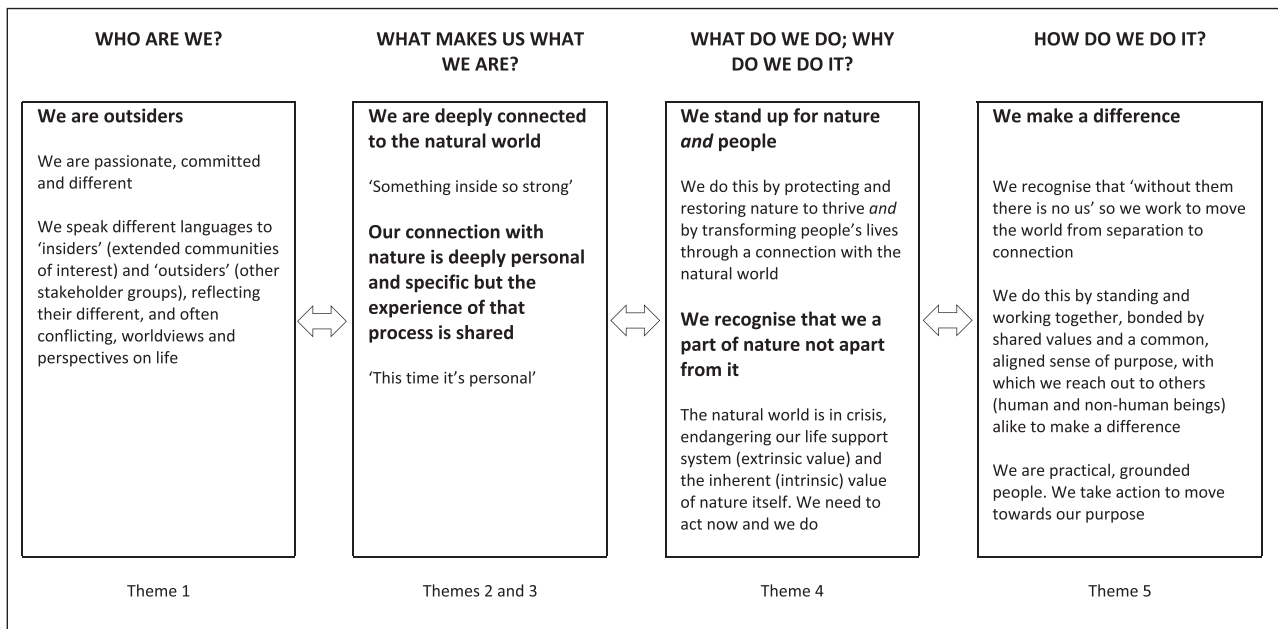| WHO ARE WE?	WHAT MAKES US WHAT WE ARE?	WHAT DO WE DO; WHY DO WE DO IT?	HOW DO WE DO IT?
We are outsiders	**We are deeply connected to the natural world**	**We stand up for nature *and* people**	**We make a difference**
We are passionate, committed and different	'Something inside so strong'	We do this by protecting and restoring nature to thrive *and* by transforming people's lives through a connection with the natural world	We recognise that 'without them there is no us' so we work to move the world from separation to connection
We speak different languages to 'insiders' (extended communities of interest) and 'outsiders' (other stakeholder groups), reflecting their different, and often conflicting, worldviews and perspectives on life	**Our connection with nature is deeply personal and specific but the experience of that process is shared**	**We recognise that we a part of nature not apart from it**	We do this by standing and working together, bonded by shared values and a common, aligned sense of purpose, with which we reach out to others (human and non-human beings) alike to make a difference
	'This time it's personal'	The natural world is in crisis, endangering our life support system (extrinsic value) and the inherent (intrinsic) value of nature itself. We need to act now and we do	We are practical, grounded people. We take action to move towards our purpose
Theme 1	Themes 2 and 3	Theme 4	Theme 5

FIGURE 5 Relational orientation of participant organizations: Overview of Themes 1 to 5

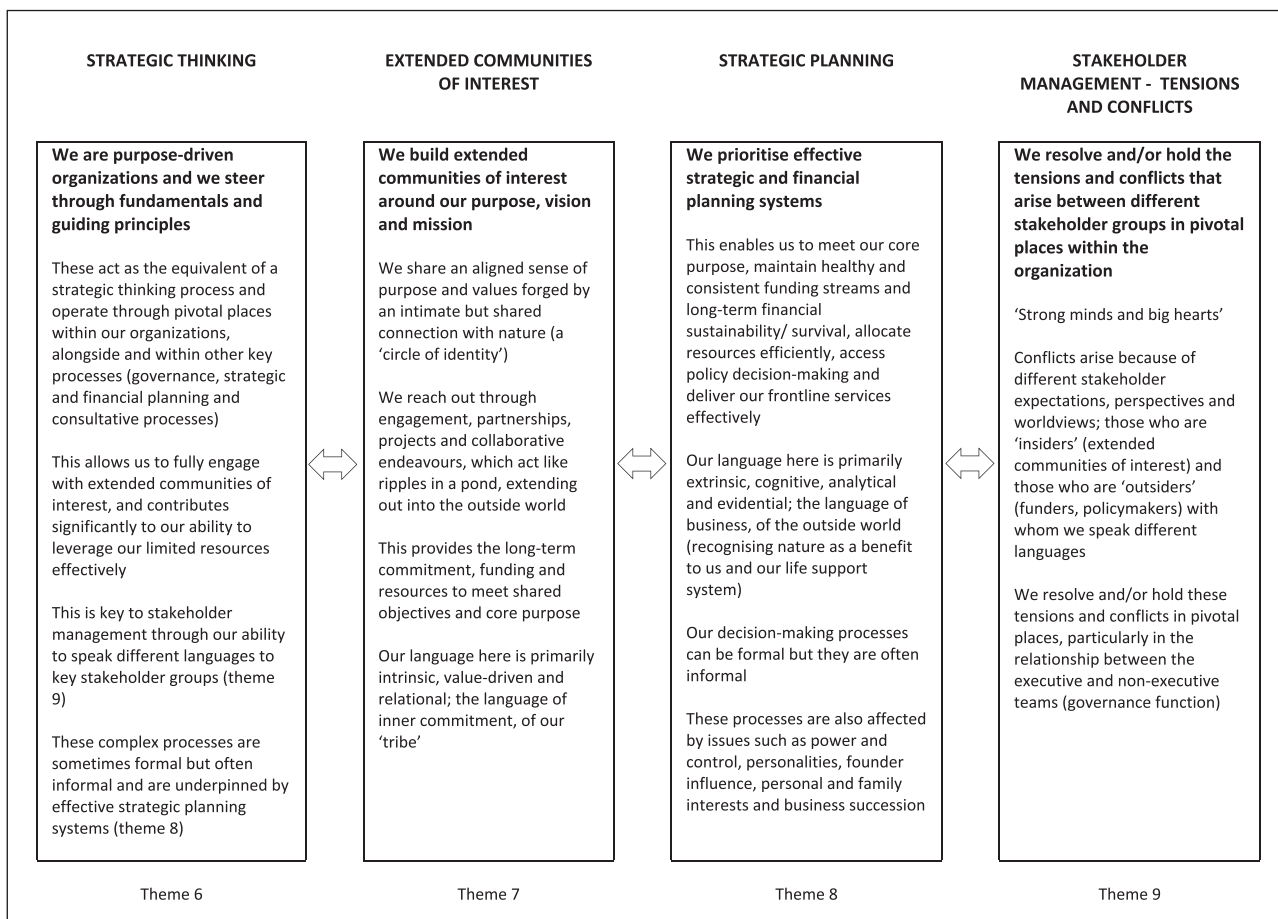| STRATEGIC THINKING	EXTENDED COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST	STRATEGIC PLANNING	STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT - TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS
We are purpose-driven organizations and we steer through fundamentals and guiding principles	**We build extended communities of interest around our purpose, vision and mission**	**We prioritise effective strategic and financial planning systems**	**We resolve and/or hold the tensions and conflicts that arise between different stakeholder groups in pivotal places within the organization**
These act as the equivalent of a strategic thinking process and operate through pivotal places within our organizations, alongside and within other key processes (governance, strategic and financial planning and consultative processes)	We share an aligned sense of purpose and values forged by an intimate but shared connection with nature (a 'circle of identity')	This enables us to meet our core purpose, maintain healthy and consistent funding streams and long-term financial sustainability/ survival, allocate resources efficiently, access policy decision-making and deliver our frontline services effectively	'Strong minds and big hearts'
This allows us to fully engage with extended communities of interest, and contributes significantly to our ability to leverage our limited resources effectively	We reach out through engagement, partnerships, projects and collaborative endeavours, which act like ripples in a pond, extending out into the outside world	Our language here is primarily extrinsic, cognitive, analytical and evidential; the language of business, of the outside world (recognising nature as a benefit to us and our life support system)	Conflicts arise because of different stakeholder expectations, perspectives and worldviews; those who are 'insiders' (extended communities of interest) and those who are 'outsiders' (funders, policymakers) with whom we speak different languages
This is key to stakeholder management through our ability to speak different languages to key stakeholder groups (theme 9)	This provides the long-term commitment, funding and resources to meet shared objectives and core purpose	Our decision-making processes can be formal but they are often informal	We resolve and/or hold these tensions and conflicts in pivotal places, particularly in the relationship between the executive and non-executive teams (governance function)
These complex processes are sometimes formal but often informal and are underpinned by effective strategic planning systems (theme 8)	Our language here is primarily intrinsic, value-driven and relational; the language of inner commitment, of our 'tribe'	These processes are also affected by issues such as power and control, personalities, founder influence, personal and family interests and business succession	
Theme 6	Theme 7	Theme 8	Theme 9

FIGURE 6 Managing strategic and operational processes within participating organizations: Overview of Themes 6 to 9

with its own distinct narrative, offering practical insights at the practitioner level.

4.1 | The participants' analytical story

The participants' story is complex, subtle, interconnected and multilayered. It is best understood *from the bottom up*; the strong connection with nature underpins what participant organizations do and drives their strategic processes. Strategic thinking is embedded within these emergent, practice-based processes, and much of the value of the research data is found in the detailed day-to-day practice of strategy by the participants. The story is built up through process of analytical abstraction, which clusters the themes into three key areas:

1. The relational nature of participant organizations (purpose driven where a connection to the natural world is fundamental).

2. The way in which the organizations manage themselves to fulfil their core purpose (the key strategic decision-making processes, including strategic thinking).

3. The way in which these factors contribute to the organizations' ability to leverage their limited resources.

A clear core narrative emerged through the process of analytical abstraction (Figure 4). Participant organizations are deeply relational, purpose driven, not profit oriented (Drucker, 1989). Core purpose and deeply held values, linked to a strong connection to the natural world, drive the strategic processes (Figure 4). Participant organizations steer their organizations through fundamentals or guiding principles, which act as a proxy for core purpose and are embedded within critical decision-making points within the organizations, acting as an equivalency to a strategic thinking process (Figure 6). These are found within or alongside other key processes including governance, strategic planning processes and, in some of the larger organizations, broad stakeholder consultative processes (Figure 7).
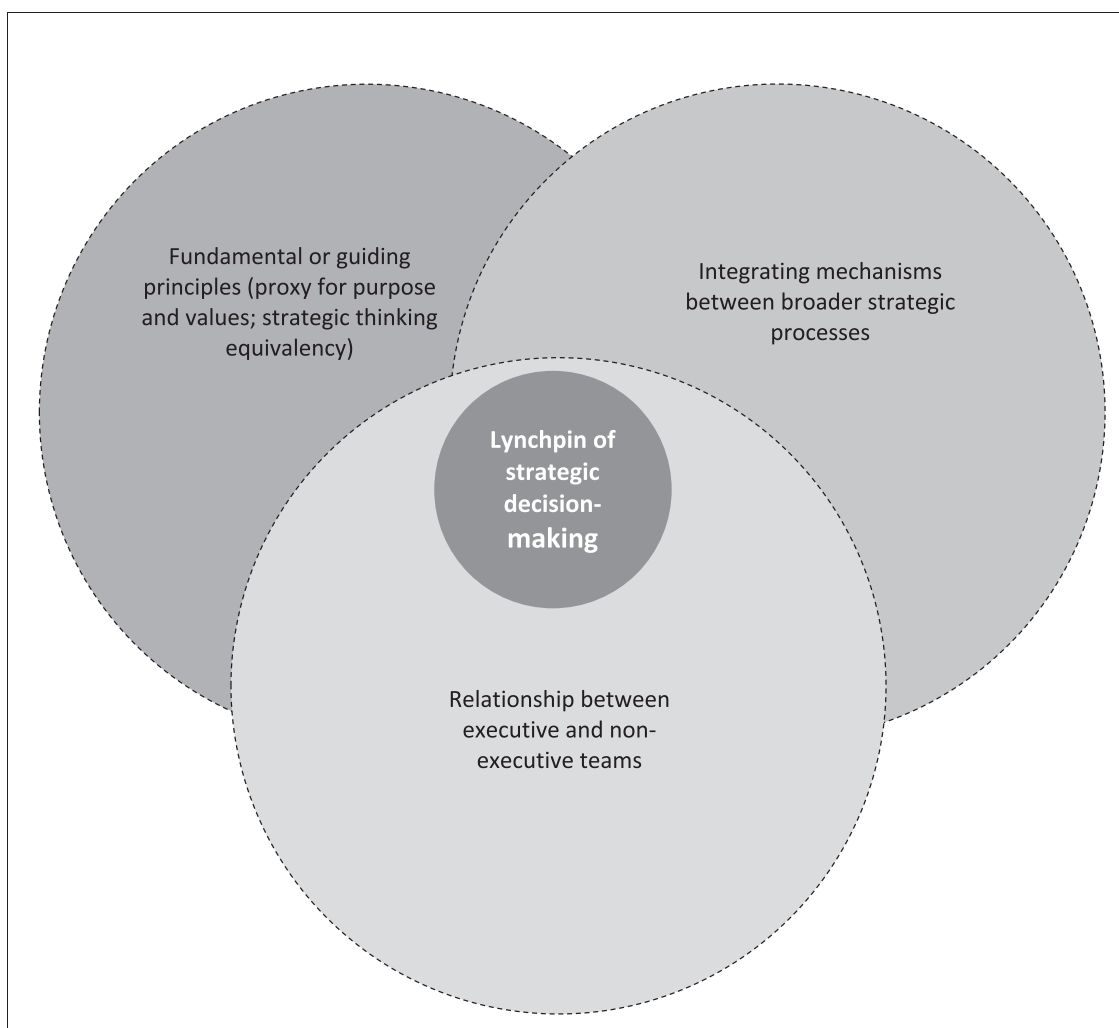
FIGURE 7 Strategic thinking: Embedded within pivotal places in the organizations

4.2 | The relational orientation of participant organizations

The relational nature of the participant organizations integrates key questions of organizational identity and culture including 'Who are we?' (Theme 1), 'What makes us what we are?' (Themes 2 and 3) and 'Why, what and how do we do what we do?' (Themes 4 and 5). The five themes underpinning these questions are summarized below and each has an overall description, which fits the key narrative/story underlying the theme.

These five key relational themes provide a clear illustration of the foundational nature of a connection to the natural world and how this drives the strategic processes of participant organizations. This is the raison d'être of the organizations, upon which all else stands. It is of the utmost importance to participants, often part of their core sense of identity, the way in which they define themselves in the context of the world around them.

How and why does a sense of connection with the natural world impact the ability of small- and medium-sized environmental organizations to think strategically? The participants' analytical story does not, necessarily, confirm a simple, direct organizational link, although individual decision-makers use a broad range of different sensibilities (or intelligences) within the strategic decision-making process and this can be significant, particularly at senior level. Critically, however, there is also a powerful indirect link through the mutuality of purpose-driven organizations. For participants this is an intense experience and makes a big difference. It is:

> bordering on life and death importance … there are people for whom … finding that safe space is essential … [*it involves*] all those kind of things that … get turned into clichés about wellbeing but … it's very nitty-gritty. It's absolutely specific. It's about the moment when you are … looking at, touching, smelling …, sensing … being in a place, being in contact with something physical or biological … that's not you but is. (Interview 3)

How does a more relational approach to strategic thinking, based on a sense of connection, challenge our existing understanding of strategic thinking? The participants' story is based on relationship, a strong shared sense of connection with the natural world, expressed through a diverse range of individual sensibilities or intelligences and a shared experiential process of connection that is specific and personal but leads to a sense of universal shared meaning (Cameron, 2017; Rohr, 2016, 2018). This acts as a normative glue that holds the participant organizations together, sustains them and allows them to meet their core purpose:

> You certainly do not do this for the money … you do not do it for any other reason other than being motivated by the feeling that nature deserves a better deal at the hands of humankind. So, that … manifests in

terms of strategic thinking …. It sounds a bit pretentious to say it's my lifetime work … but that's how I see it. (Interview 10)

4.3 | Managing the strategic process

The nature of the strategic processes of the participant organizations and their ability to leverage their resources is complex and intertwined. The four key themes represent the different ways of thinking that underpin decision-making in the organizations (loosely equivalent to strategic thinking and strategic planning, Themes 6 and 8), how this contributes to achieving their key purpose (including external communities of interest, Theme 7) and how the resulting tensions and conflicts that result from differing worldviews and perspectives are either resolved or simply held (Theme 9).

Participant organizations recognize that both strategic thinking (rarely named as such, but seen as a holistic process that is linked closely with organizational purpose and values, Theme 6) and effective strategic planning (Theme 8) are both required for organizational survival and sustainability, not least because different stakeholders have different mindsets (worldviews and perspectives) and the participant organizations need to talk to each set of stakeholders in the language that they best understand. Participants use a more embodied language, clearly linked to purpose and values, to talk to extended communities of interest ('insiders') and a cognitive, analytical language (often evidence based) to talk to outside stakeholders (e.g., funders, policy-makers and partners outside the environmental sector).

This allows participating organizations to leverage their limited resources by reaching out to their extended communities of interest (those who 'get it'), who provide long-term financial stability and resource continuity, the bedrock support for long-term sustainability (members' subscriptions, legacies and a commitment from volunteers and others to work for reduced, limited or no financial reward). This includes collaborations, joint projects and other, both formal and informal, collective endeavours enabling these smaller social organizations to reduce capability, resource and skill gaps to meet major environmental societal issues (sometimes known as social business orchestrators) prevalent at the bottom of the pyramid (Gold et al., 2020). It has also been suggested that contribution to social value enables a collaborative approach between multiple actors (including business, government and civil society), which leads to achieving sustainability at a wider level (De Giacomo & Bleischwitz, 2020).

It also enables organizations to communicate, and work with, more traditional stakeholders, who are essential for financial sustainability and the ability to achieve organizational purpose (grant and project funding, access to policy-makers and those in control of resources and power). It is the way in which these two areas act *together* that ensures the long-term sustainability of participant organizations and enables them to achieve their core purpose by leveraging their limited resources effectively.

This process creates a tension within the participant organizations, which needs to be reconciled or simply held. The four key themes underpinning this area are summarized in Figure 6 and each has an overall description, which fits the key narrative/story underlying the theme.

Whilst the term 'strategic thinking' was rarely used by participants, its function is embedded within participant organizations, formally and informally, operating at pivotal points and acting as a proxy for core purpose and values. Participants most often referred to it indirectly as a way of ensuring that the organization remains true to its guiding or first principles (the 'fundamentals'). It is linked closely to core purpose, mission, vision and values, and it is the part of the decision-making process that keeps the participant organizations on track in terms of long-term strategic direction, organizational scope and boundaries, and the prioritization of key aim(s) and objectives. It overlaps with the strategic planning process and is complementary with it, outlined in Figure 7.

5 | DISCUSSION OF THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

5.1 | Foundations in a connection to nature: A relational purpose-driven model (Research Question 1)

Many of the specific research findings reflect key themes in the specific strands in the broader body of the literature (the nature of a connection to the natural world, multiple intelligences, purpose driven and not-for-profit organizations). However, the way in which participants related these themes together points to a dramatically different way of viewing the world and this impacts directly on the strategic processes within the organizations. Critically, it is these relationships that drive the strategic process and not the other way around. This might be best described as 'bottom-up strategy' fired by the passion to make a real difference in the world.

> You do not come [*here*] to earn lots of money. You come here to make a difference … people do it because they are passionate about the environment. They actually want to make a difference. (Interview 21)

> The most important thing is in the emotional engagement and an emotional connection because what we are trying to do is to get people to be inspired and for people to care … I think its hearts and minds so … it's about that emotional connection. (Interview 19)

Participant organizations are purpose driven and relational (Drucker, 1989), the foundation for participants to work together collectively to make a difference in their field. They navigate strategically through fundamental or guiding principles, closely linked to the organization's core purpose (Collins & Porras, 1996, 2005) and deeply held values and culture (Goldman & Casey, 2010; Moon, 2012;

Schein, 2010; Weeks, 2006), underpinned by their strong connection to the natural world (Bragg et al., 2013; Clayton, 2003; Dutcher et al., 2007; Kals et al., 1999; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Nisbet et al., 2009; Schultz, 2002; Schultz et al., 2004). These guidelines, both formal and informal, act as a proxy for core purpose and are embedded in pivotal spaces, critical decision-making points within the organizations, which act as an equivalency to a more formal strategic thinking process.

During the interviews and workshop events, participants resonated most strongly with the subject of connectivity with nature. When they were given the space to speak freely, this was invariably the subject to which they returned. They discussed a broad and full range of sensibilities or intelligences (Gardner, 1993, 2003, 2011; Robinson, 2011) with a strong emphasis on embodied forms of connection, including heart-based (emotions and feelings; Goleman, 1996, 2004), body-based (intuition and senses; Minocha & Stonehouse, 2007; Mintzberg, 1994; Shapiro, 2011, 2019) and a deep sense of knowing that was sometimes overtly spiritual (Zohar & Marshall, 2001). Overall, there was a strong relational component.

Whilst these non-cognitive sensibilities are important in influencing individual decision-making, it is the *shared experience* of the connection process to nature (in itself specific and diverse) that binds participants together and underpins the purpose-driven nature of their organizations with a sense of universal shared meaning. This concept is more common in areas such as creativity and the arts (Cameron, 2017) and spirituality (Rohr, 2016, 2018). It was sometimes expressed by participants as we 'get it', the 'thing', the 'spark' or 'trigger', and it provides the glue that binds them together in collective endeavour.

Participants often expressed the value of nature in intrinsic terms (Collins & Porras, 1996; McCarthy, 2009; Schultz et al., 2004; Senge, 1990) and experiential terms (Mayer & Frantz, 2004), which resulted in a strong sense of being different from mainstream society, where some sense of separation is common (Vining et al., 2008). Many talked about a sense of oneness with nature (Clayton, 2003; Dutcher et al., 2007; Kals et al., 1999), although each participant expressed this in his or her own way. Others linked a connection to nature with their sense of identity (Oliver, 2009). Nevertheless, most participants also acknowledged the importance of rational, evidence-based thinking, particularly within the strategic planning process, as a necessity of organizational survival and sustainability and of the critical importance of understanding the extrinsic value of nature as humanity's life support system, a key message when reaching out to engage and communicate with society. 'Human survival is directly tied to our relationship with the natural environment' (Schultz, 2002).

The purpose-driven nature of participant organizations impacts significantly on the strategic processes that participants discussed in relation to strategic thinking, expressed in terms of purpose (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1993; Beng Geok, 2018; BoardSource, 2005; Collins & Porras, 1996, 2005; Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1997; Quinn & Thakor, 2018; Rey et al., 2019; Stead & Stead, 2000), mission

(Drucker, 1989), vision (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Moon, 2012; Senge, 1990) and shared values, beliefs and culture (Cardona et al., 2019; Goldman & Casey, 2010; Moon, 2012; Schein, 2010; Weeks, 2006). Changes to strategic direction, scope and boundaries are charged, very significant and not taken lightly. Core purpose, and the deeply held shared values that underlie it, are inviolate for participant organizations. 'Nonprofits do not base their strategy on money, nor do they make it the center of their plans ... [they] start with the performance of their mission' (Drucker, 1989, p. 89).

Participants have a strong connection with the natural world, which reflects a broad spectrum of sensibilities (mind, body, heart and spirit) and perspectives (ecological, holistic and scientific), but it is the shared *experience* of that connection (Mayer & Frantz, 2004) that binds them and underpins the purpose-driven nature of their organizations. A strong, personal connection to the natural world does not, necessarily, lead directly to participant organizations developing a more overtly holistic or embodied strategic thinking process at an organizational level. There are other factors involved including the human dynamics of management (leadership characteristics, issues of power, control and influence and so on), but it does influence decision-making at the personal, individual level and this can be significant, particularly when individuals are in senior decision-making roles.

Significantly, however, there is a strong indirect link to the nature of participant organizations, which are purpose driven and relational, underpinned by a shared experiential connection with nature, expressed through deeply shared values, mission and vision, which drives the strategic process, both formally and informally. Participant organizations exist to make a difference in the world, and this is of the utmost importance to them. They are purpose driven not profit driven. Thus, a fundamental sense of connection with nature is best seen as the core organizing principle underpinning participant organizations, which underpins all their processes, both strategic and operational.

5.2 | Nature of strategic thinking in environmental organizations (Research Question 2)

The findings of the research study support the theoretical view of strategic thinking as a *way of thinking* (Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1987a, 1994), one that is complex, interconnected and holistic. In particular, the participant descriptions often reflected the work of Mintzberg (1987a, 1987b, 1994) on the process-driven, emergent and complex nature of strategic thinking. It is a complex, embedded, interconnected and often informal process, which acts as a proxy for core purpose, shared values, mission and vision of the organizations.

As the natural world is a complex environment, characterized by turbulence and uncertainty, the strategic thinking process of participating organizations is emergent rather than deliberate (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b, 1994; Neugebauer et al., 2015). It is

embedded within the broader strategic processes and social networks (Granovetter, 2005) and coordinating mechanisms between these processes (Mintzberg, 1980), including strategic planning and governance (Figure 7). Strategic thinking and planning within participating organizations are different in scope, represent different ways of thinking (Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1987a, 1994) but are complementary and both are critical to the survival and success (Graetz, 2002; Heracleous, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994).

When participants talked about strategic thinking (or the equivalency of it), they tended to view it as a way of thinking (Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1987a, 1994) which reflected elements identified in the core strategic literature including a holistic or systemic perspective (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Goldman & Casey, 2010; Liedtka, 1998; Moon, 2012; Senge, 1990), synthesis (Graetz, 2002; Heracleous, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994), creativity (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Graetz, 2002; Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1987b, 1994; Moon, 2012), divergent thinking (Bonn, 2001; Graetz, 2002; Moon, 2012) and intuitive and innovative thinking (Graetz, 2002; Heracleous, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994).

For participants, however, it is more than this; it is a way of *perceiving* the world, which is more holistic and relational. This links with the view of strategy as a mindset or a perspective, 'an ingrained way of seeing the world' (Mintzberg, 1987a, p. 16), one that is 'whole brained' (Graetz, 2002, p. 460), one that is closely aligned to the participants' holistic worldview, influenced by their ecological and scientific perspectives. Organizational performance depends critically on the way in which organizations think, their mindfulness (Ndubisi et al., 2019).

The participants' descriptions of the strategic process closely reflect Mintzberg's process-oriented approach to strategy and strategic thinking (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b, 1994) rather than the more analytical and cognitive strategic models (Ansoff, 1965; Porter, 1991, 1996), seeing strategy through the lens of different perspectives, patterns and streams of interrelated activities (Mintzberg, 1987a) that somehow come together when married to a deep sense of commitment (Mintzberg, 1987b; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Participants also saw strategy as complex, interconnected and multidimensional (Mintzberg, 1994) as well as sometimes confusing, daunting and frustrating. This view of strategy focuses on a more practical, 'hands-on', emergent, opportunistic approach that is holistic, creative and linked to commitment and mindset. Strategic thinking is:

> 'An ingrained way of seeing the world' and 'an immensely complicated process, which involves the most sophisticated, subtle, and, at times, subconscious elements of human thinking' (Mintzberg, 1994) where 'formulation and implementation merge into a fluid process of learning through which creative strategies evolve' (Mintzberg, 1987b) and where 'effective strategic thinking, acting and learning seem to depend a great deal on intuition, creativity, and pattern recognition, none of which can be programmed although they

may be recognized, facilitated, and encouraged'. (Monnavarian et al., 2011, paraphrasing Mintzberg et al., 1998)

The integration of strategic planning and strategic thinking in participant organizations is complex, often informal rather than formal, and embedded. They are distinct but complementary processes (Graetz, 2002; Heracleous, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994), and both are critical for survival and success. When participants discussed their decision-making processes, particularly the 'big' strategic questions (long-term strategic direction, changes in scope and organizational boundaries, monitoring strategic decisions against purpose, mission, vision and values), their discussion tended to be holistic, fluid, creative, intuitive and holistic or systems based as well as emergent (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b, 1994; Neugebauer et al., 2015), suggesting that strategic thinking has a deeper quality, more complex, holistic and involving synthesis between different components to produce an integrated whole.

Whilst participants tended not to use academic language, this process is very close to the strategic process that Mintzberg describes: open, fluid, emergent, practical, intuitive, complex and influenced by its environment and context. It is, perhaps, best captured by Mintzberg's view of strategy *as a stream of actions*, a fluid learning process, one which is creative and open to innovation, influenced by commitment and intuition; a process that he compared with the craft approach of a potter, one in which both learning and action are important:

> Now imagine someone *crafting* strategy. A wholly different image likely results, as different from planning as craft is from mechanization. Craft evokes traditional skill, dedication, perfection through the mastery of detail. What springs to mind is not so much thinking and reason as involvement, a feeling of intimacy and harmony with the materials at hand, developed through long experience and commitment. Formulation and implementation merge into a fluid process of learning through which creative strategies evolve. (Mintzberg, 1987b)

> There are times when thought should precede action, and guide it ... other times, however, especially during or immediately after major unexpected shifts in the environment, thought must be so bound up with action that 'learning' becomes a better notion than 'designing' for what has to happen. And then, perhaps most common are a whole range of possibilities in between, where thought and action respond to each other. (Mintzberg et al., 1998)

Where participants differ from the strategic literature is in the *intensity* of their connection with nature. This drives the strategic process as purpose-driven organizations and underlies the emergence of their

strategic processes, which have developed through practice and experience expressly to achieve their core purpose.

5.3 | Enhanced ability to leverage limited resources (Research Question 3)

The research participants focused on what they actually *did* rather than strategic theory. The strategic processes have emerged over time incorporating an important element of strategy as practice, accumulated practical learning and experience, which highlights the importance of the praxis literature (Goldman et al., 2015; Whittington, 1996). This enables participant organizations to integrate different types of thinking and approaches within the decision-making processes (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Regnér, 2003) including the ability to hold the contradictory worldviews and perspectives of key stakeholders (British Academy of Management, 2018, 2019; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Kaiser & Overfield, 2010; Regnér, 2003).

Participant organizations meet the needs of both their extended communities of interest, which are often integrated into the broader strategic process, and other external stakeholders. This enables them to leverage their limited resources to achieve long-term sustainability and meet their core purpose. The governance process is key (BoardSource, 2005; Low, 2006) with the trustees normally playing an important role acting as custodians of organizational purpose, mission and vision. The strategic thinking process is often found within or alongside the processes where the executive and non-executive teams interact. A strong sense of environmental stewardship, reinforced by strong network ties within the extended communities of interest (Granovetter, 2005), produce strong bonds of trust reinforcing a servant leadership governance model (Heuer, 2012).

The strategic planning process in participating organizations is more formalized and plays a key role in the operationalization of strategic thinking (Heracleous, 1998) and effective resource utilization (Hatten, 1982). However, when the strategic thinking component was partially embedded within or alongside it, the process remains fluid and responsive, reflecting an emergent quality (Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b, 1994; Neugebauer et al., 2015). The complex and interconnected nature of the processes (Graetz, 2002; Heracleous, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994) underpin the ability of participant organizations to speak different languages to different stakeholders and surface, address, resolve or simply hold the conflicts, tensions and challenges that arise from the different underlying worldviews and perspectives of key stakeholders (Figure 7). Participants viewed *both* strategic thinking and planning as critical (Whittington & Cailluet, 2008) in achieving organizational purpose and long-term sustainability.

Participant organizations have learned to speak different languages to different stakeholders and run parallel processes, loosely equivalent to strategic planning and strategic thinking, which emphasize different aspects of the value of the natural world (primarily intrinsic value to 'insiders' and extrinsic value to 'outsiders'). They need *both* processes to be sustainable and to meet their core purpose. As a result, they have developed the ability to *hold*

tensions that arise when the underlying perspectives and worldviews key stakeholders' clash.

Whilst many of these strategic processes within participant organizations have emerged over time, often with a strong practical dimension, and have a degree of uniqueness related to the specific context of the inductive nature of the research, the principle of generating both social change and value creation has been established in broader fields including entrepreneurial and hybrid businesses (Reynolds & Holt, 2021).

6 | THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The contribution of the research is best understood at both theoretical and practical levels, within the context of qualitative research, which is not generalizable as such but offers significant opportunities for further research, both in the environmental sector as a whole and the broader not-for-profit sector.

The aim of the research is to explore the nature of strategic thinking from a broader and deeper perspective focusing on small- and medium-sized environmental organizations and to explore whether there is a link between the participants' connection with nature and the strategic thinking process. What has emerged from the research is a deeply relational model of strategy, one which is full of surprises and unanticipated insights. The participant organizations' strategic processes have emerged from their deep desire to make a difference in the world. This includes a different way of seeing the world, based on multiple sensibilities or intelligences, but this is not the full story. What has emerged is deeply layered, interconnected and, above all, complex.

6.1 | The theoretical contribution of the study

The key theoretical contribution of the research is that it provides a valuable illustration of an *integrated* relational model of strategy, which includes the fundamental role that connection to the natural world plays in developing a shared sense of purpose that underpins, and drives, the strategic process in small- and medium-sized environmental organizations. It contributes to the literature on purpose-driven organizations and on connection to the natural world by providing a wealth of detail on the complexity that underlies these areas. It highlights the role that different sensibilities or intelligences (mind, heart, body and spirit or inner knowing) play within the participants' personal connection to the natural world and how a shared sense of the *experience* of the connection process binds them together in collective endeavour, which becomes the foundation for their purpose-driven strategies. Participants are connected in diverse ways but share a common experience.

This integrated relational model of strategy does not conflict with the broad scope of strategic thinking theory, in particular, its nature as a *way* of thinking, its key role in underpinning organizational sustainability and long-term viability and its complementary nature with the strategic planning process. There is, however, a critical difference. The strategic processes of participant organizations have emerged to enable them to make a difference in the world. This imperative to make a difference drives the configuration of organizational strategy. It is the fundamental organizing principle. As a result, the deeply felt connection with nature informs *all* the aspects of the participants' organizational processes, both strategic and implementational. It is of the utmost importance to participants, either by directly impacting the natural world or by improving the lives of people through nature. And it is of the utmost importance to those who support or engage with these organizations.

This is key to how these organizations leverage their resources so effectively. It links the strategic process from the top to the bottom, both 'upwards' to core purpose, mission and vision and 'downwards' to the strategic process and operational implementation through:

> A 'golden thread' ... bringing it all together ... this is why we are doing that, that's why it ties in ... they get it, they understand where they are part of the bigger picture and how that works. (Interview 23)

The strategic processes within participating organizations have emerged to ensure that organizations are able to meet their purpose, survive day to day and are sustainable in the long term. The relational model of strategy adopted by these organizations draws on two very different modalities. The ability to husband resources effectively, attract additional funding, ensure a place in policy discussions and communicate with those who hold resources and power, all of these require some form of effective strategic and financial planning (a cognitive, analytical, evidential modality). But it is strategic thinking, as a different, more holistic, way of thinking (drawing on an embodied connection with nature), that keeps them on track, keeps them 'on beam' with their core purpose and deeply held values. It is best recognized by its quality, a place where current decisions (strategic and sometimes operational) can be questioned and evaluated against a simple embodiment of the organization's purpose. The strategic processes that have developed have both an emergent and strongly practical quality, following the work of Mintzberg (1987a, 1987b, 1994).

The precise ways in which this is done, how participant organizations meet the complex challenges that they face and how they resolve or hold the tensions between the different thinking modalities they employ underpin both theoretical and practical contributions. Key findings and insights are often in areas where there is a paucity of existing literature (including strategic thinking, governance and stakeholder management), particularly in the context of not-for-profit and small- and medium-sized organizations and in the environmental sector as a whole (Clifford et al., 2013; Kendall & Knapp, 1996). This is strongly linked to the praxis literature, through the practical, managerial contribution below.

Definitions for strategic thinking and a connection with nature emerged from the interplay between the participants' story and the broad theoretical context. Strategic thinking in participant organizations may be defined as:

A *way* of thinking, all those activities, both formal and informal, that enable the organization to see a bigger picture and integrate different aspects of that picture within its key decision-making processes in order to maintain a long-term sustainable position, combined with a capacity to act in order to achieve its core purpose.

This definition incorporates the practical, emergent and holistic and/or systemic nature of the participants' strategic thinking process (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994). Participant data confirmed a definition for a connection to nature that is strongly aligned with extant body of the literature:

A shared sense of identity, an experience of oneness, in part or whole, which enables us to love and care for the natural world and act on its behalf, recognizing both its extrinsic and intrinsic value.

6.2 | The managerial contribution of the study

The managerial contribution of the research is contained within the key insights into how the strategic process works in *practice*, which includes the importance that participants place on intrinsic as a well as extrinsic value, the role of specificity in the connection process, which brings a universal sense of meaning to the participants, the links to broader societal values that integrate nature and people (justice, equity, kindness, compassion, empathy) and the importance that being outsiders plays in forging the determination, commitment and drive of the participants.

The embodiment of both environmental and social values (De Giacomo & Bleischwitz, 2020) is a key characteristic of many of the participant organizations. Indeed, in some specific environmental fields, such as permaculture, care for the environment, and the equity and fair treatment of people working with it, is directly linked (Genus et al., 2021). This study highlights the critical role that broader societal values play in binding environmental organizations together in collective endeavour and in underpinning purpose-driven organizations at a deeper level encompassing *both* nature and people:

I want to be remembered for making a positive impact on wildlife worldwide … not just helping animals … but also people … it's all linked together, it cannot be separated. (Interview 29)

A strong connection to nature impacts all aspects of the practical strategic processes within participant organizations. These are complex, nuanced and often informal, allowing the organizations to speak different languages to stakeholder groups holding very different perspectives on the natural world. This strong sense of connection extends well beyond cognitive understanding to a diverse, broad range of embodied sensibilities. However, paradoxically, it is the

shared experiential process of connection that binds the organizations together internally as purpose-driven organizations, building extended communities of interest around their purpose, vision, mission and values, which act like ripples in a pond extending out into the wider world. It is this shared mindset that binds internal and external communities that stretches the concept of 'stakeholders' to the limit.

Many of those who contribute to the participating organizations, financially, on a voluntary basis or in many other ways, do not regard themselves simply as stakeholders. They regard themselves as members of a community engaged in achieving something that is vitally important to them. In practical terms, this deeply relational and interconnected world is best viewed from the bottom up, beginning with the individual themes, each of which has a separate, and important, narrative. The practical contribution is thus at a practitioner level as strategy as practice, which also has a contribution through the praxis literature.

6.3 | Limitations of the study and avenue for further research

As with all qualitative research, the specific findings of this study are not generalizable, but they provide a focal point for future research to investigate whether they can be replicated within the environmental sector and/or other not-for-profit sectors, extending the potential for theory development beyond the limitations of the inductive, embedded case study methodology used in this research study. There are significant opportunities for further research within the environmental sector and related not-for-profit sectors, including key areas such as stakeholder theory, governance, purpose-driven organizations and strategic thinking itself.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

The participants' analytical story is a rich, deeply layered illustration of strategy as practice focused on small- and medium-sized environmental organizations. The strategic thinking process of the participating organizations is strongly linked to organizational purpose and shared values and beliefs and is underpinned by the participants' strong personal, yet shared, connection to the natural world. This integrates the strategic process from the top to the bottom, directly linking core purpose, mission and vision to the overall strategic process and operational implementation.

The participants' story that emerges from this research study is paradoxical. At one level, it is holistic and complex. At another level, it is surprisingly simple and intuitive. Participant organizations do what they do, in the way that they do it, to achieve their core purpose. Purpose not profit drives them. But survival and sustainability are essential to make a difference in the future so complex strategic processes have emerged to enable them to become resilient in a challenging world, where resources are often very limited and are not guaranteed.

Underpinning everything is a fundamental sense of connection with nature, which permeates the organizations. It is the glue that holds them together, integrated tightly with core purpose. It is, perhaps, best expressed as their core organizing principle, and it underpins all their processes, both strategic and operational. Other non-business organizing principles can perform a similar role, for example, the role of shared Buddhist beliefs and moral principles (the intrinsic interrelationship between the economy, society and environment) in shaping and reframing the sustainability framework in Thailand (Song, 2020, 2021).

Within this strong relational model of strategy, both strategic thinking and strategic planning play an important role and the strategic processes of participant organizations have emerged to incorporate complex parallel processes to manage the different worldviews and perspectives of stakeholders, both those connected to the values and purpose of the organizations (extended communities of interest who 'get it') and other external stakeholders who may not 'get it' but are nevertheless essential for survival and long-term sustainability (including funding and policy engagement). The equivalency of the strategic thinking process operates at key pivotal places within the organizations where tensions and issues arising from these very different perspectives and worldviews of stakeholders are resolved or simply held, alongside other key processes including governance, formal planning and consultation.

This delicate 'balancing act', incorporating the needs, worldviews and perspectives of very different stakeholders, enables the organizations to leverage their limited resources effectively, underpinning their ability to make a difference through collective endeavour and working towards big and often very long-term strategic goals, mission and vision. In short, it enables them often to 'punch well beyond their weight'. This long-term orientation is not static. It evolves as the nature of society changes, and it has widened appreciably over the last decade to acknowledge the critical importance of both nature *and* people in the work of participant organizations.

Whilst this is a qualitative study and the findings cannot be generalized, the specific insights and findings offer significant opportunities to extend the research within the environmental sector and to other not-for-profit organizations. This study indicates that broader societal values and an identification with individuals and communities, who are disenfranchised, disempowered, marginalized and sometimes excluded altogether, play a key role in binding the organizations together, one key component of how a specific and unique sense of connection becomes a universal sense of meaning. For participant organizations, underpinning all this is the strong connection to the natural world, a sense of interconnectedness of all things, which does not change. Aldo Leopold (1887–1948; one of the father figures of ecology and conservation) put it this way nearly a century ago:

> The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant, 'What good is it?' If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering. (Aldo Leopold, published posthumously, 1953; source, Leopold & Schwartz, 1993)

It is a lesson we have still yet to learn.

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