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Defining Regenerative Business Through the Context of Place: A Case Study West Michigan Businesses

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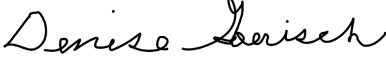
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Defining Regenerative Business Through the Context of Place:
A Case Study West Michigan Businesses

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A Project Submitted to

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In

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Abstract

This study builds upon existing scholarly literature on regenerative design and regenerative sustainability by relating the framework to existing West Michigan businesses and their place-specific practices. Applying concepts from those more developed fields to business sustainability, this paper contributes to the still emerging field of regenerative business by proposing a comprehensive definition of regenerative business. The definition is then applied to three businesses in a case study format to highlight regenerative business practices. While none of the businesses highlighted claim to be regenerative, all have examples of practices that demonstrate regenerative action and enhance the West Michigan community.

By defining regenerative business comprehensively and contextualizing it with place-based examples, the research seeks to advance the current understanding of the topic while making it more tangible for business leaders. Bringing the current, well-developed regenerative framework into conversation with real-world business applications through the context of place will help advance its effectiveness, and hopefully, encourage its implementation in the West Michigan community. The research also links social innovation with regenerative business activity. With a focus on community building, strategic partnerships, collaboration, systems thinking, and creative problem-solving, regenerative practices are often a by-product of social innovation, as the study illustrates.

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Introduction

Environmental conditions have worsened over the last thirty years despite the surge in popularity surrounding sustainability (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013, p. 85). While it was once believed that businesses had no place working toward goals outside of their agendas to increase shareholder value and profits at all costs, corporate responsibility has become much more popular since the early 2000s. This is largely a result of the growing alarm over the climate crisis and the understanding that businesses disproportionately impact the environment. Sustainability measures have been one of the most common elements of the corporate social responsibility agenda, which has urged businesses to take more accountability for their cost externalization. While the mainstream sustainability practices embraced by businesses have made some progress and encouraged awareness of environmental and social concerns, it has fallen short of creating meaningful change. Ecology scholars and researchers argue this is the result of an insufficient cultural and behavior shift, pointing to the dominant paradigm or worldview that embraces a linear, standardized, value-extracting economic model (take-make-waste) as the root cause of the mainstream and corporate sustainability movement's shortcomings (Hahn & Tampe, 2020, p. 457). Despite new metrics and professions dedicated to measuring and improving sustainability, linear forms of economic growth remain the norm, inhibiting real change. Therefore, to truly be able to sustain and improve environmental conditions, communities and businesses must embrace a more holistic, ecologically grounded worldview in examining sustainability measures (du Pleuss, 2012, p. 19).

The lack of meaningful progress and increase in greenwashing, or using baseless claims of sustainability to market products, now demands a reimagined course of action for businesses and a new paradigm from which to approach social and environmental responsibility. The

concept of regeneration offers a promising alternative to the shortcomings of the sustainability movement by approaching social and environmental concerns holistically. Although scholars in fields such as Ecology, Philosophy, and Urban Planning have studied the regenerative paradigm, it has only recently begun expanding into sustainability and organizational studies. The unique social and environmental challenges of today in conjunction with the shortcomings of business sustainability measures have encouraged its recent proliferation because it offers a promising alternative or counterpart to sustainability. As such, it aims to redefine the purpose and capabilities of business to make real progress toward social and environmental goals. While the emergence is exciting, prior research relating the well-developed regenerative framework to organizational capacities and defining regeneration in terms of a business application are few and those that exist are scattered. Based on a review of the literature, there exists a wide range of definitions and meanings that have been applied to regenerative business, but the lack of a comprehensive definition of regenerative business limits its effectiveness as a tool for social change and innovation. This forms the basis of this study.

“Whereas a sustainable firm seeks merely to reduce its ecological footprint, a regenerative company boldly seeks to increase its socio-ecological handprint...by restoring the health of individuals, communities and the planet.” (Radjou, 2020)

Problem Statement

My survey of scholarly literature shows that while there is robust and consistent literature exploring the regenerative framework, there are few scholarly publications that relate it to business, and those that do fail to use the same language and concepts. Without a clear definition and framework for how to meaningfully incorporate the ideals of regeneration, business owners and sustainability practitioners may find difficulty implementing it, limiting its effectiveness.

This study aimed to fill that absence by providing an all-encompassing definition of regenerative business and make it more tangible for local business leaders by incorporating examples from businesses.

Goals & Objectives - Statement of Purpose

This project aims to encourage businesses to take a more meaningful, impactful approach to their sustainability and use their platform to enhance the communities in which they are embedded and interdependent. It is necessary to move toward a different understanding of sustainability so that businesses feel responsible, compelled, and empowered to take an active part in reshaping human interaction within their social and ecological environments. By defining regenerative business comprehensively and putting it in context with real-world examples, this paper seeks to expand the concept of regeneration in business terms and exemplify the socially innovative nature of applying the regenerative framework to business practice. Lastly, it aims to speak to the business community, sustainability practitioners, and other community leaders and change agents rather than just scholars. Because place is critical to regenerative sustainability, this advances the current understanding of the topic while making it more tangible for business leaders. Bringing the current, well-developed regenerative framework into conversation with real-world business applications through the context of place will help advance its effectiveness, and hopefully, encourage its implementation in the West Michigan community.

Literature Review

What is regeneration?

The roots of regeneration are found in what du Plessis calls a paradigm of “radical ecologism” that began surfacing in the 60s and 70s alongside the environmental movement (du Plessis, 2012 p. 8). Ecologism called for significant changes to the structures and belief systems

underpinning modern, Western human life as well as the human relationship with nature (du Plessis, 2012 p. 8). Over time, the worldview that emerged realized humans are not separate from nature, but interconnected and interdependent within it (du Plessis, 2012 p. 15). As Mang and Reed explain, regenerative design and development were born out of the ecological worldview, acknowledging that humans are one part of a larger ecological system and are dependent within that system for life. Therefore, humans must co-evolve alongside natural systems symbiotically rather than attempt to dominate and control them (Robinson & Cole, 2015, p. 135; Mang & Reed, 2015, p. 9; Cole, 2012). Among scholars studying regeneration, there is consensus that the foundation of the regenerative movement is a paradigm shift from the dominant, western worldview that assumes humans as superior and in control of nature to accepting that humans and nature are interdependent. Alongside the shift in worldview, scholars across disciplines agree upon the other main characteristics of regeneration as well (Cole, 2012b; du Plessis, 2012; Mang & Reed, 2012; Reed, 2007). The literature shows that key elements of regeneration are that it is holistic, systems-thinking, collaborative, adaptive, ecologically grounded, based on an understanding of interconnectedness, and place-based in some aspect (Robinson & Cole, 2015; du Plessis, 2012; Hahn & Tempe, 2020; Mehmood et. al., 2020).

Munoz and Branzei emphasize the element of interconnectedness. In their view, this concept references a “process, where the healthy development of one form of life is inseparably connected to the healthy development of all others” (Munoz & Branzei, 2021 p. 510). Interconnectedness requires humans to actively work toward creating “life-enhancing conditions” both for the environments and communities they reside in (Zhang and Wu, 2015, p. 39). The process of doing so can help to redefine the relationship between humans and their environments, making them more mutually beneficial (Zhang and Wu, 2015, p. 39) &

(Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 458; Cole, 2012). In order to do so, actions must be holistic, employ systems thinking and collaboration, and adaptive, all of which are antithetical to our current systems which are more mechanistic and linear (Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 458). At its core, this means working in ways that are “based on how nature works not on how humans would like to work” which requires seeing systems holistically rather than as individual parts to be manipulated (du Plessis, 2012 p. 15 & Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 458). Lastly, in order to give meaning to this approach, regenerative scholars note that action must be rooted in an understanding of place.

Place as a Precursor for Regeneration

Sense of place has been widely studied in philosophical geography and ecology circles, and the concept is a hallmark of the regenerative paradigm. Place is defined by more than a geographical location. It combines the “historical, cultural, ecological, and economic patterns” of a defined location that give it a unique essence or character (Mang, 2009, p. 8). Most scholars studying regeneration contend that understanding place and the dynamic characteristics of a location is necessary for true regenerative action to occur. It provides the context for what it means to be enriching for a specific location based on its unique needs. In this way, place also provides a baseline for adaptive systems thinking (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013; Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 458). Environmental and social needs vary for each place, so a one-size-fits all approach is “meaningless in a dynamic and ever-changing world” (du Plessis, 2012, p. 16). To be regenerative means something different for each socio-ecological system. Therefore, regenerative action requires context and understanding of what is needed, and place helps provide that context.

Additionally, understanding one's place fosters care and connection which is a step towards a regenerative mindset. Connecting with place enables us to reconceive of our relationship with place, moving from exploiters to partners in co-evolution (Mang & Haggard 2016). Mang and Reed explain that "...understanding how a living place works becomes the touchstone for organizing how the project needs to work as a living system nested in its place to achieve the connectedness required for increasing mutuality of relationship." (Mang & Reed, 2012, p. 28). In this sense, place offers a foundation from which to design regenerative efforts because it offers a meaningful connection between people and their place which can promote their tending to it (Mang, 2009, p. 5; Cole, 2012, p. 3). Reinhabiting places in this way then encourages us "to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7). Therefore, this reinhabitation of and sense of place is crucial to fostering a regenerative approach to sustainability (Reed, 2007, p. 680).

Relating Regeneration to Business Practice

Although the regenerative paradigm is more established in its application to design fields, urban planning, and development, it has only recently been applied to business and organizations as a new approach to sustainability (Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 462; Hahn & Tempe, 2020; & Munoz & Branzei, 2021 p. 510). Realizing that mainstream, sustainable business efforts have not improved anthropogenic climate change, regenerative sustainability scholars agree that a different approach is necessary. One common critique of traditional business sustainability efforts is that it has focused on harm reduction rather than our ability to contribute positively (Robinson & Cole, 2015, p. 140; Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 462; Cole, 2012, p. 3). This promotes a scarcity framework from which business sustainability approaches have worked which has created a system of limits and "monetary values" that has led us to conceptualize "both nature

and humans as economic commodities.” (du Plessis, 2012, p. 14). Taken together, the harm-reduction and commodification that has come to define traditional business sustainability efforts comprise an “eco-efficiency” model characterized by static thinking, which is useless when designing for dynamic systems that are found in nature (du Plessis, 2012 p. 12). Additionally, the business-case-type sustainability practices have prioritized business interests over pressing environmental and social concerns because addressing them would not align “...with short-term business outcomes” (Hahn & Tempe, 2020, p. 458). Sustainability measures also tend not to focus on social concerns, whereas regeneration takes into account social concerns or community health. Taken together, these flaws render the current mainstream thinking about business sustainability ineffective which has encouraged a new framework to emerge.

Varying Definitions of Regenerative Business

Regeneration offers a much-needed reorientation of the ineffective thinking that dominates business sustainability efforts. Instead of only exploiting nature, regeneration urges us to consider our capacity to create positive environmental and social outcomes by giving back and regenerating places (Robinson & Cole, 2015, p. 140; Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 462; Cole, 2012, p. 3). However, because definitions and applications of regenerative business practices are emerging, it is still iterative in practice, “making it difficult to operationalize” (Mehmood, et. al, 2020, p. 462; (Hahn & Tampe, 2020, p. 459). Part of this is because there lacks a clear, consistent, all-encompassing definition of regenerative business and implementations of it in academic research. For example, Morsetto (2020), in their discussion of the circular economy, proposed a definition that puts “regeneration as the promotion of self-renewal capacity of natural systems with the aim of reactivating ecological processes damaged or over-exploited by human

action,” but argues this does not “fit with technical cycles” consistent with business activity (Morseletto, 2020, p, 769). Therefore, they suggest it may be best confined to agriculture (Morseletto, 2020, p, 769). Contrarily, Hahn and Tempe (2020) provide one of the few scholarly definitions for regenerative business, positing that regenerative businesses are “businesses that enhance, and thrive through, the health of SES [social-ecological system] in a co-evolutionary process.” (Hahn & Tampe, 2020, p. 460). Taking a different approach, regenerative business proponent and organizational design practitioner, Carol Sanford works with regenerative business from the standpoint that it is a “a process by which people, institutions and materials evolve the capacity to fulfill their inherent potential in a world that is constantly changing around them.” (Sanford, 2017, p. 2). She argues that this understanding of regeneration paves the way for businesses to develop their people to their full potential which will naturally encourage positive disruptive innovation. Outside of scholarly literature, the professional-led institution, World Council for Sustainable Development advocates for a regenerative capitalism “...based on the premise that there are universal principles and patterns of systemic health – such as circularity and balance – that can and should be integrated into economic system design.” (World Council for Sustainable Development, 2020, p. 17). Clearly, there is a lack of consistency and cohesion amongst the definitions and applications of regenerative business.

Methods

For this project, I approached the research using qualitative and deductive methods. I surveyed, analyzed, and synthesized the literature on the regenerative framework and regenerative business to inform a comprehensive definition of regenerative business. The proposed definition is a starting point for the inclusion of regenerative business practices that are currently being performed by family-owned businesses in West Michigan.

Following a literature review of the regenerative framework to inform a definition, I briefly discuss the place of West Michigan, drawing on environmental history and basic geographical data in tandem with my personal experience as a West Michigander. Because this concept is iterative and dependent on the uniqueness of place, this dialogue provides an overview of place to ground the subsequent examples of regenerative business practices within it. I then performed a case study using document analysis as the primary research and data collection method to analyze business practices that fit the definition of regenerative business from three local, family-owned businesses. Criteria for selecting businesses were based on the organization's categorization as both a family-owned business and a certified B-Corporation.

The rationale for choosing family-owned businesses is twofold. I chose to narrow the scope of the case study to family-owned businesses in West Michigan because of my personal experience working for a nonprofit dedicated to helping family businesses. Research supports that they tend to be more intentional about community building, more values-oriented, and more rooted in place (Shrivastava & Kennelly JJ, 2013, p. 91). My personal experience working with West Michigan family businesses has further reinforced this, making it a natural starting point. Hopefully this indicates that not only is it more likely that family businesses are already performing regenerative business practices, but also that they are more likely to be receptive to embracing and employing this emerging framework within their businesses.

The second criterion was that the company was a certified B-Corporation. According to B Lab, the nonprofit organization that founded and governs B-Corporations, B-Corporations are “companies that meet high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency” (B Lab, 2022). To become a certified B-Corp, businesses must pass the B Impact Assessment which measures business activities from employee benefits, company

governance, environmental performance, community and social impact, and more (B Lab, 2022). Businesses must recertify every three years to keep their designation. This designation was chosen because it is currently one of the most progressive certifications for businesses to showcase their sustainability efforts and because of the accessibility to data it ensures. B-Corps publish detailed reports each year to ensure they uphold their reputation as being transparent and accountable to the public. The score from each certified business is also publicly available on the B Lab website. Having this data readily available ensured there would be sufficient information available for this study. Notably, while the certification is progressive, it focuses on harm reduction, minimizing environmental costs, and is not place-specific, which are some of the reasons scholars have pointed to the sustainability movement's failings (Hahn & Tampe, 2020, p. 457). Nonetheless, it provides a great starting point for businesses to do good and for consumers to seek businesses that perform well environmentally and socially.

In addition to the data gathered from B-Lab assessments and the primary data provided from the businesses themselves, I incorporated secondary qualitative data ranging from news articles, published interviews, press releases, social media outlets, and blogs to gather information about their environmental and social impact in West Michigan for analysis. This data helps inform how the businesses speak about and internalize their communities and environment. The primary empirical question when gathering and analyzing data was: *how are locally-owned businesses implementing regenerative business practices?* The cases are broken down into categories based on the elements of regenerative business outlines as:

- 1). Illustrates an investment inclusively in its internal and external community, including all stakeholders (employees, customers, partners, residents, etc.) with the goal to contribute to the positive of development of stakeholders,

- 2). Elicit a commitment to enhance the ecological conditions of the community, and
- 3). The business is rooted in place and actions are informed by the unique characteristics of the place where the business is located.

Given these constraints, the GFB (The Gluten Free Brothers), Brewery Vivant, and Cascade Engineering were selected. Incorporating examples from businesses of different sizes and industries illustrates the scope and range of possible avenues for regeneration.

Definition

Based on the main pillars of regeneration identified in the literature, I propose a definition of regenerative business as *a business entity that is rooted in and connected to its uniqueness of place, actively works to the enhance people, community, and environment of which it is interdependent and connected, and takes accountability and responsibility for its external costs as a business*. Based on this definition, a regenerative business practice falls into one or more of the three categories to be considered regenerative:

- 1). Illustrates an investment inclusively in its internal and external community, including all stakeholders (employees, customers, partners, residents, etc.) with the goal to contribute to the positive of development of stakeholders,
- 2). Elicit a commitment to enhance the ecological conditions of the community, and
- 3). The business is rooted in place and actions are informed by the unique characteristics of the place where the business is located.

Given the infancy of study and adoption of regenerative business, I focus primarily on regenerative actions performed by businesses. Because a connection to place is a component of regenerative action, regenerative business practices likely will vary widely based on a location's

environmental, social, and economic needs and specific characteristics. Therefore, there truly is no one-size-fits-all approach.

The Intersection of Social Innovation & Regenerative Action

With the goal to empower and benefit social and ecological conditions of a community, the regenerative philosophy requires socially innovative solutions. Although definitions of social innovation vary widely, my understanding of social innovation is that it is a stakeholder-focused and place-based means of creating new solutions to social problems. Actions or processes based on social innovation tend to be “both people- and place-oriented, since the principal purpose remains the needs satisfaction and empowerment of communities to address societal challenges” (Mehmood et. al, 2020, p. 457). Therefore, its impact transcends individuals and benefits entire communities, creating social value for the public or society as a whole (Baker & Mehmood, 2015, p. 3). Based on this understanding of social innovation, regenerative action is a form of social innovation. Because regenerative practices require community actors to utilize community-based, novel approaches to revitalize and empower their communities, the results tend to be a product of social innovation.

Word of Caution & Disclaimer

Sustainability has largely become a buzzword in recent years, used for marketing and branding purposes. While increased awareness of the issues at hand is a positive step, true sustainability has lost much of its original meaning. This study aims to highlight examples of regenerative action and the scope of work that can fall into the category of regeneration in effort to change the way we think about sustainability. Practices can and should vary widely based on the business and its social-ecological system. There is no one-size fits all. So, as the field continues to advance, we must ensure that the principles of regeneration remain forefront to the

cause and be diligent about not separating the phrase from the true meaning and opportunity it provides for communities to reconnect with each other and with the surrounding environment.

The health of both are necessary for businesses to thrive.

Defining Place: West Michigan

“If there is one recurring theme that has transcended all of Michigan’s historical eras, it is the importance of natural resources to the growth and development of the state. Whether it was the early fur trade, the discovery of mineral deposits, the development of agriculture, the harvesting of the state’s forests, or the growth of manufacturing, Michigan’s resources have always played an integral role in the state’s economy.” (Michigan Legislative Council, 2002).

Because regenerative action is contingent upon the context of place, it would be remiss to not ground the study within a conversation of sense of place for West Michigan. When considering the modern day cultural and industrial landscape of West Michigan, it is impossible to ignore the influence of the natural environment. In the 18th century, the thriving forests throughout the state in combination with the waterways lent itself to a robust timber industry that fueled the state economically for decades (A Brief History of Michigan, 2001). The Great Lakes and surrounding rivers also made it possible in the 18th century to reach many states, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Atlantic Coast, making Michigan an ideal location for manufacturing (The Right Place, 2022). Rich soils, access to water, and seasonality made the region ideal for agriculture, and today, West Michigan is still a top location for food processing, fruit farming, and agriculture overall (Schaetzl, (n.d.)). Michigan’s natural resources and West Michigan’s convenient geographical location has driven the dominant industrial activities that are still visible today, but also the culture.

The abundant water and beautiful and diverse ecological makeup of West Michigan is central to the way West Michiganders conceive of place. Access to the Great Lakes, and specifically, Lake Michigan, provides a sense of awe and appreciation for the natural beauty. The

lakes, trees, seasonality, and beauty provide intrinsic value to many in the region and drive activities that are characteristically “West Michigan.” From water sports and recreational activities such as fishing and hunting to cabins and camping, it is impossible to separate the importance of the ecological landscape from the cultural landscape. The pride and appreciation of these aspects have undoubtedly contributed to a culture of environmental activism and imprinted a conservation and preservationist mindset amongst many inhabit the area. This pride has contributed to tension between the competing intrinsic and extrinsic value of the aforementioned ecological elements.

The cultural pride and connection to place has influenced many business ventures to be more environmentally conscious. For example, at the height of the environmental movement, the state successfully passed the 1970 Michigan Environmental Protection Act of Michigan. The result of citizen activism, the act redefined Michiganders’ relationship to the state’s environment, making it considered an extension of the “public trust” (Blum, et. al, 2018). Not only did this allow “citizens to bring suits against the government and corporations whose policies might lead to environmental degradation, but it was also a leading example of environmental reform nationally (Blum, et. al, 2018). In 1976, Michigan voters passed the Michigan Beverage Container Act, also known as the ‘bottle bill’ which mandated a ten cent deposit on aluminum and plastic cans (Blum, et. al, 2018). To this day, this is the highest deposit in the country. Actions like these have contributed to the collaborative relationship between citizens, environmental organizations, municipalities, and businesses throughout West Michigan today (Blum, et. al, 2018).

Grand Rapids, the largest metropolitan area and anchor of West Michigan is recognized as a leading city for sustainable initiatives. In addition to being named the top metropolitan area

for sustainable development, Grand Rapids has the most LEED Certified buildings per capita (Experience Grand Rapids, (n.d.)). A notable project in the region that is currently underway is the River Restoration project which seeks to restore the health of the Grand River which flows through the heart of the city, through West Michigan, and empties into Lake Michigan.

Undoubtedly, the ecological makeup of West Michigan has laid the foundation for business activities in West Michigan. It has also contributed significantly to the cultural fabric of the region, underpinned by a unique sense of pride that has cultivated a history of environmental activism. The activism has influenced the sustainable development of the area and how businesses and organizations operate today.

Case Studies

Case 1: Brewery Vivant

Introduction

Opened in 2010 by Kris Spaulding and husband, Jason Spaulding, the family-owned brewery is located in the East Hills neighborhood of Grand Rapids in a historic building and specializes in European-style beers (About, 2022). Just two years after opening they made history by being awarded the first ever LEED certified micro-brewery which is notable because “Leed certified buildings are resource efficient”, use less water, and generate fewer emissions as a result (Sanford & Jones-Ridders, 2022). The business emphasizes environmental awareness since its beginning and became Michigan’s fourth certified B-Corp in 2014. Part of the desire to become a B-Corp was the added accountability and authenticity to their community-building and sustainability goals at a time when sustainability was garnering more attention (Wells, 2014). Today, the core of their business ethos rest on three pillars, according to their website:

1. “Our love of the tradition and artistic approach of European beer styles, with some emphasis on Belgian & French styles
2. Devotion to using local sources for ingredients and running our business according to the three pillars of sustainability; Environmental Integrity, Social Equity, and Economic Viability
3. Sharing the experience of how beer and food can be paired to uplift the enjoyment of both” (About, 2022).

Clearly stated in their business model, sustainability, environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability are critical aspects of the business’s functioning and their approach to sustainability. Their certifications help cement the brewery’s mission and lays a foundation for the positive contributions it makes within West Michigan. In addition to their B-Corp score and required testing, Brewery Vivant publishes an internal sustainability annual report called “Beer the Change” which helps them track and measure their progress as well as bolster transparency and accountability to the community.

Community Investment for Inclusive Development of Stakeholders

Within the regenerative framework, the community where a business exists is key to the actions it takes. In their first ever Beer the Change report published in 2011, owners Kris and Jason Spaulding write, “Sustainability is one of our founding core values at Brewery Vivant. That means when making decisions for our business we are guided not just by financial concerns but also try to equally weigh the impact of our decision on the environment and our community.” (Sustainability, 2011). Furthermore, the three tenets of the brewery’s operating philosophy are profitable, lean, and nice (About, 2022). Profitable is described as their ““sweet spot”” of 5,000 bbls of beer produced where we can maximize our output with our brew system and be

profitable. Our goal is to get this volume of production, be profitable and stay there.” (About, 2022). To reach profitability and not seek unended growth and profit potential, is contrary to dominant, Western conceptions of business in that it does not follow the linear economic philosophy. This perspective underlies a regenerative economy and the regenerative framework, and taken together, these two aspects clearly highlight the purpose of Brewery Vivant is more about improving the community and operating according to the needs of the surrounding ecological system than about creating a vessel for profit.

According to the 2021 “Beer the Change” sustainability report, Brewery Vivant “exists to build community both inside and outside” of their doors (Sustainability, 2021, p. 3). To fulfill this promise meaningfully and inclusively, the company has a DEIJA (diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, accessibility) committee composed of team members who work together to strategize how to implement their purpose. Part of that work means providing opportunities for team members to understand barriers to access and how Brewery Vivant can act to help overcome them in the community (Sustainability, 2021, p. 3). To achieve this, they outline the following goals:

- “Our teams are representative of the community we live in
- We have continued dialogue and training for staff including 2 opportunities a year for training/learning around DEIJA topics
- Our guests are representative of the community we live in and our marketing and advertising reflect that
- Our cultural collaborations consider the values alignment of those we are working with
- Our company uses its resources to support local organizations that are also building community through their charters
- Our company uses its resources to source from suppliers that are local with an emphasis on those owned by underrepresented persons such as women and POC
- Our company uses its voice to advocate for equity and justice within regulations, policies, and other structural barriers” (Sustainability, 2021, p. 3)

The commitment to employing inclusive and developing team members who act inclusively illustrates how the business enhances internal and external stakeholders and contributes to a better community for all.

One of the goals mentioned above is aimed at supporting local organizations that also prioritize building community. One way they approach this is through their goal of donating one percent of its sales annually to locally-based charitable organizations which it has successfully done in 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2021 (Sustainability, 2015), (Sustainability, 2016), (Sustainability, 2017), (Sustainability, 2018), (Sustainability, 2021). One way they support other organizations is through their Partner Beers program. Each year, the Brewery partners with local organizations to help them raise money through the sale of their beers for specific causes. Often they brew a new beer specifically for the cause or organization and donate a portion of the proceeds. In 2021, they debuted six different partner beers and raised over \$4,400 to donate to the associated organizations (Sustainability, 2021, p. 5-7). Some of the organizations included Friends of Grand Rapids Parks, a West Michigan non-profit dedicated to “empowering people to cultivate vibrant parks, trees, and green spaces” (About, 2021), John Ball Zoo in support of the zoo’s conservation efforts, the West Michigan Land Conservancy and Blandford Nature Center (Sustainability, 2021, p. 5-7). This year, Brewery Vivant has partnered with the Women’s Resource Center to raise awareness and funds for the center’s new facility which will allow them to expand accessibility of its services (Staff, 2022).

The community partnerships and collaborations that Brewery Vivant spearheads through their benefit beers highlights their commitment to actively enhancing the community of which they are apart. Also, by creatively and strategically using their products as a vehicle for good captures the essence of social entrepreneurship and social innovation. This is just one example of

how they implement socially innovative, regenerative business practices to enhance and build community. By focusing its philanthropic dollars and platform to support local organizations that enhance the community, Brewery Vivant exhibits a clear commitment to regenerative action and improving the social-ecological systems of which they are a part.

Environment: Enhance the Ecological System

As part of Brewery Vivant's mission to maintain environmental integrity, the brewery measures many statistics annually about their consumption of resources as well as the resources they offset through strategic environmental initiatives. Many of them focus on limiting consumption or reducing negative impact consistent with B Lab's certification and traditional sustainability measures. However, the brewery also employs regenerative practices that serve to enhance the local ecological system. For example, in 2019, Brewery Vivant was "Cow Neutral," meaning they fed more cattle by donating spent grain from the brewing process post-use which equated to feeding 30 total cows (Sustainability, 2019, p. 21). This program also helps offset their waste which works toward their goal of achieving zero waste annually. Working with local companies to repurpose waste while providing a needed commodity is both innovative and regenerative. A similar example is the brewery's partnership with Regal Bison Company, a company south of Grand Rapids that farms 100% grain-fed bison using regenerative grazing methods (Sustainability, 2019, p. 20). The impact of a strategic partnership such as this is multifold: it bolsters local communities by keeping dollars local and contributes to improving the ecological conditions of the community overall by choosing to work with a company who specializes in cruelty-free, regenerative agricultural practices.

Another positive environmental tactic Brewery Vivant uses is rain barrels. In urban areas when it rains, stormwater carrying debris, trash, and many other pollutants enter local water

systems, making it a “major source of water pollution in urban areas,” (Hinsch, Carpenter, & Sterrett, 2022). The rain barrels at the brewery capture the rain, which reduces pressure on the water system, limits stormwater pollution in waterways, and acts as irrigation for their landscaping (Sanford and Ridders, 2022). Systems like these improve the watershed at the benefit of the entire community, and according to the EPA “provide cleaner air and water as well as significant value for the community with flood protection, diverse habitat, and beautiful green spaces,” (Environmental Protection Agency, 2022).

But they didn’t stop there. The brewery has collaborated with WMEAC (West Michigan Environmental Action Council) to host rain barrel workshops where local participants learn about the importance of rain barrels and get to take one home. The event was hosted at Broad Leaf Beer & Spirits, Brewery Vivant’s sister company, and they donated post-use bourbon barrels from their facility (Christmann, 2019). In addition to improving ecological conditions with their own property, this community, place-based initiative encouraged others to do the same, furthering the positive impact. A consistent concern in Grand Rapids is the health of the Grand River, so the more barrels in the community “the healthier our streams and rivers, and by proxy the water supply,” (Christmann, 2019). As Christmann explains, the health of the water supply “indirectly affects the brewery’s cost of production...it also keeps their customer health, which means a consistent revenue stream” (Christmann, 2019). The desire to proliferate an ecologically- enhancing system such as these barrels throughout the community illustrate that Brewery Vivant goes beyond B Corps’ certification requirements and actively seek to regenerate, enhance, and improve the ecological system that the business is embedded within and interdependent for its own success.

Attention to the Unique Characteristics of & Rooted in Sense of Place

Having a connection to place is a key element of the regenerative paradigm because in addition to its technically positive ecological impacts, a connection to one's place can help foster care and reciprocity for that place. Caring for a place means we are more likely to want to enhance it. Brewery Vivant exhibits their place-based initiatives in numerous ways, and it seems to be a factor weighed in most of their business and operating decisions.

For example, they have an annual goal to make seventy five percent of all purchases in Michigan, and in 2021, they recorded seventy nine percent of all purchases made within the state (Sustainability, 2021, p. 11). Additionally, over sixty percent of their food offerings were purchased in the state. Part of their desire to do this is to put their money back into the local economies, enhancing the surrounding community. Another reason is because of the decreased negative environmental impact. Notably, the brewery also limits its distribution within the state, again, emphasizing the importance of keeping things local for the betterment of the ecological conditions (Christmann, 2019).

In addition to prioritizing local sourcing of ingredients as much as possible, they often make dishes according to seasonality of ingredients and dishes inspired by local flavors. In 2021, ten team members from the brewery volunteered with a local nonprofit organization to remove an invasive species. After removing it, they brought it back to the brewery where the chefs were able to craft new dishes with it to sell to patrons (Sustainability, 2021, p. 9). Not only did this help native plant species to West Michigan thrive, but they were able to repurpose it for something good. Improving knowledge of local ecological systems for team members, spending time in the community, and upcycling a previously destructive species all contributed to a positive connection with place and enhancing it, which underlies regenerative action.

Conclusion

While the certified B-Corp does operate according to some of the limiting sustainability principles found in B-Lab's standards, they clearly exhibit regenerative business practices that are informed by the surrounding place, promote and invest in the surrounding social system and community, and actively work to improve the community that Brewery Vivant is embedded within. The brewery takes into account the needs of the community and environment and takes accountability for its external costs both by reporting them and by actively working to offset them. Although only some examples of their positive contributions are highlighted here, their many socially innovative partnerships, collaborations, and strategic initiatives contribute positively to the socio-ecological system.

Case 2: Cascade Engineering

Introduction

Founded in 1973 by Fred Keller, Cascade Engineering is a family-owned manufacturing company which specializes in large plastic injection moldings. The company which is now run by Keller's daughter, Christina Keller, currently has over 1,600 employees. Founded and headquartered in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cascade Engineering has expanded to fourteen locations in the US and with an additional operation in Budapest, Hungary. The Cascade family of companies comprises nine business units, serving automotive, office furniture, waste and recycling, material handling, among others (The Markets we Make Better, 2022).

The manufacturer has a long history of innovation, progressive policies, and is commonly awarded accordingly. They operate according to the 'triple bottom line' mentality, which measures their success in three areas: people, planet, and profit. Each year, they publish a TBL, Triple Bottom Line, report which provides information on how they are doing in each area. The first edition, released in 2003, states that Cascade Engineering was founded "with a belief

that a business could be profitable and socially and environmentally responsible” (TBL, 2003). Clearly, the family-owned company established themselves as a leader in this progressive business philosophy before it was common. Following this tradition, Cascade Engineering was the first company in Michigan to become a certified B-Corp (Sanford & Ridders, 2022). Becoming certified in 2010, they helped legitimize B Lab and B Corporations by being one of the first to formally commit to the triple bottom line philosophy and get certified (Be the Change, 2019). Today they are one of the largest companies to have this certification.

According to their 2021 TBL report, their vision as a company is “to be the highest value partner to our customer, by shaping ideas in plastics. We operate under the Triple Bottom Line through empowering people to drive innovative solutions and excellence in manufacturing” (TBL, 2021, p. 2). Their purpose “is to have a positive impact on society, the environment and to be financially successful” (TBL, 2021, p. 2). Cascade Engineering has undoubtedly been a leader in sustainable business practices and community impact in West Michigan for decades.

Community Investment for Inclusive Development of Stakeholders

Falling under the people category of their triple bottom line philosophy, Cascade Engineering has implemented many socially innovative programs and initiatives throughout the community that demonstrates a commitment to investing in its internal and external stakeholders. According to Kate Isaacs and David Brodwin of Harvard Business Review, Fred Keller’s ultimate purpose behind starting the business “was to help people achieve their potential – with “people” meaning not only employees but also customers, suppliers, and even the citizens of West Michigan” (Isaacs & Brodwin, 2022).

In an effort to use the business for good while building talent in the community, Cascade Engineering began implementing their Welfare the Career program in 1999. Designed to help

individuals receiving welfare benefits in West Michigan get out of poverty by providing a well-paying, stable path to employment and career advancement, the program has helped over 800 people off of welfare into careers (Welfare to Career, 2022). However, this meant truly understanding the barriers that exist for low income individuals and families. The manufacturer worked with state officials to provide transportation to the plant, recognizing that transportation was a barrier (Be the Change, 2019). They quickly realized that was not enough, and hired a case worker to be on site to help the candidates get the help they needed, like safe housing (Be the Change, 2019). Since then, they have achieved an impressive employee retention rate for the Welfare to Career program of ninety five percent from 2018, 2019, and 2020 (TBL, 2021). Going to the root of the problem, understanding the needs of the community, and working to truly enhance their lives, the Welfare to Career program is one example of a truly socially innovative and regenerative business practice.

Along a similar vein, another community enhancing program the company initiated with their Returning Citizens program. Launched in 2012, the program was designed to formally express their commitment to hiring individuals who were previously incarcerated. They began by removing the question asking if they had previously been convicted of a crime from their job applications, and now actively recruit people who are exiting prison, and provide support for them once hired (B the Change, 2019). Although they had been hiring people from this population since the mid-1990s, the program helped spur other companies in the area to follow suit, and now “more than 100 local companies have prisoner reentry programs” (Weisul, 2021). The goal was to decrease recidivism and encourage successful re-entry into the community through a stable job and to ensure “everyone is given an equal chance at success” (Returning Citizens, 2022). Cascade Engineering’s commitment to expanding employment opportunities for

disadvantaged populations within West Michigan has impacted the community positively in numerous ways. Not only are they enhancing the lives of individuals who may not have many options but also helping solve these problems on a community-wide basis by encouraging others to do the same. Programs like these enhance the health and wellness of the overall community and provide a prime example of how business needs can be reshaped in ways that help empathetically solve a community need.

Internally, Cascade Engineering is dedicated to the positive development of their employees and prides themselves on being inclusive. According to the 2021 TBL report, “We value every human being at Cascade Engineering and we work to ensure that all of our employees have an opportunity to build successful careers” (TBL, 2021, p. 38). One way they contribute to the positive development of their employees is through on-going job training to support career development. The People Advancement and Cascade Enterprise System, or PACES, team is tasked with upholding this mission and advancing their employees through programs and skill-building resources (TBL, 2021, p. 5). The company deems their employees their most valuable asset, and clearly invests in them. In 1999, they were awarded the Ron Brown Award from Vice President Al Gore for their work/family PHASES program (History, 2022). According to the 2003 TBL report, PHASES had over eighty benefits that helped employees attain a successful work/life balance, including, a computer loan program, an internal network of services and discounts such as child care referrals and mortgage information, and a company-sponsored pager for expectant parents in the last six weeks of pregnancy, to name a few (TBL, 2003, p. 6). While it is unclear if Cascade Engineering still has this program, the essence of it illustrates their action toward enriching the lives of their employees on multiple levels.

Lastly, Cascade's commitment to being an anti-racist organization contributes to a healthier workplace and community. The company believes an inclusive work environment helps empower and engage employees while contributing to a more innovative workplace (Our Culture, 2022). As part of their declaration as an anti-racist organization, they partner with the nonprofit, Partners for a Racism-Free Community "to deepen discussions of race and color and how they affect the organization" (Be the Change, 2019). They also ensure all managers within the company undergo training from the Institute for Healing Racism (Weisul, 2021). Not only do these programs and commitments benefit the employees, but they also help enrich the community as a whole by providing opportunities for them to understand structural racism and barriers. Contributing to positive development is a crucial aspect of what it means to be regenerative, and these are just some examples of how Cascade Engineering does that.

Environment: Enhance the Ecological System

Much like their community impact, Cascade Engineering has also been a leader in progressive environmental and sustainability initiatives. One of the most prominent ways they exhibit regenerative environmental policies is through their investment in developing products and processes that are closed-loop and contribute to a circular economy. As explained in the 2021 TBL report,

"Our current economy is often a linear process of materials to products to waste. The circular economy is a booming business and sustainability philosophy to eliminate waste and pollution, circulate products and materials and regenerate nature. It is a resilient system that is good for business, people and the environment." (Tbl 2021, p. 11).

One example of how they contribute to a circular economy is through one of their subsidiaries, Noble Polymers. The company innovated a way to purchase previously non-recyclable paint waste to be upcycled to reuse for their plastic pallet production (TBL, 2017, p. 14). By removing previously hazardous waste and finding a new solution for it, the company

was able to use a product-based solution that benefits the environment. Additionally, the manufacturer partnered with an Israeli startup, UBQ, to further incorporate upcycled materials into their products. UBQ “developed a process to convert household waste into a material that can be utilized at a certain percentage in the injection molding process (TBL, 2020, p. 10).

Possibly one of their most esteemed projects, the EcoCart also displays properties of a closed-loop manufacturing. Made from a minimum of ten percent post-consumer plastics, the EcoCarts are curbside, residential recycling carts. They are closed-loop because the plastic recyclables that are put in them actually contribute to their production (TBL, 2020, p. 10). These closed-loop processes contribute positively to the environment by reducing plastic waste and giving it a new purpose. By the end of 2021, the carts were estimated to repurpose 2.2 million pounds of curbside plastic waste (TBL, 2021, p. 10). For this innovative product, Cascade won the Excellence in Recycling Award in 2021. The award is given based on an organization’s excellence within or contribution to “creating or enhancing recycling programs, educational programs or closed loop manufacturing” (Watson, 2021).

While they have pioneered many socially innovative processes and products to help enrich the environment, the manufacturing company explains their commitment to the third component of their triple bottom line in two competing ways, “going beyond environmental compliance through improvements, prevention, and protection” (What We Believe, 2022). While the essence of going beyond compliance to improvements is central to regenerative action, on the same web page, they also describe their dedication to the planet as “There’s only one earth, so we do everything possible to reduce our impact on it. We work hard to build a sustainable organization and are committed to continuously reducing waste emission into the air, land, and water” (What We Believe, 2022). This is the type of thinking that the regenerative philosophy

seeks to transcend. So, although they demonstrate positive ecological policies through closed-loop manufacturing and circular processes, many of their efforts and ways of measuring environmental impact revolve around the sentiment of reducing and limiting. Also, the lack of attention to place in how they measure and conceive of their environmental impact may be hindering the company from implementing more regenerative practices. However, the policies discussed here are only a few of the ways they are a leader in environmental practice.

Attention to the Unique Characteristics of & Rooted in Sense of Place

That founder Fred Keller was born and raised in West Michigan and that the business is anchored there surely influences the positive contributions the business makes to the socio-ecological community. Being attuned to the needs of West Michigan, Keller helped build Talent2025, a West Michigan nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing the region's workforce need through connecting local citizens with skill-building and talent development opportunities (Isaacs & Brodwin, 2022). The place-based business coalition, as referred to by Isaacs and Brodwin, works within the business community to bridge the gap between community needs and business needs, effectively benefiting the region as a whole. This sentiment echoes Cascade's workforce and community-based solutions previously mentioned, so it is no surprise he helped bring this to West Michigan. Talent2025 is just another example of the company's programs that demonstrate their attunement to the social needs of the community. However, ecologically, there is a lapse in Cascade Engineering's attention to place.

To explain, one of the only examples of a place-based initiative that is beneficial for the environment that the manufacturing company implemented was in partnership with the city of Holland, the Western most city comprising West Michigan. Cascade produced Holland-specific EcoCarts for residential, curb-side recycling and rolled out 10,000 of them to Holland residents

in 2021 (TBL, 2020, p. 10). The city's previous recycling program had a failure rate at seventy four percent (Miller, 2021). While this is an example of the company creating partnerships with intent to benefit the community through increased recycling, Cascade has had similar community partnerships to advance recycling efforts throughout the nation. Because they have fourteen other US locations, it is difficult to assess if this effort is truly place-specific. It is also difficult to understand how much this program is adjusted to the uniqueness of West Michigan.

Within the company's reporting, they speak about place in varying ways. They often reference positively impacting their community and region, which they demonstrate through their programs previously mentioned such as Welfare to Career, Returning Citizens, and the Talent2025 coalition. However, they rarely mention West Michigan as an environmental or ecological landscape. Instead they speak of 'place' in terms of environment broadly, often using terms like "our planet" and "earth." This is illustrated in what they measure annually as well. One of their five social-based measurements is social contributions. In 2021, they contributed \$426 thousand (TBL, 2021, 18). However, it is unclear what these funds went to or where they were spent, making it difficult to understand if these dollars were given to benefit which communities or for what causes. Contrarily, for example, Brewery Vivant specifically spends a portion of their total purchased through local sourcing and participates in local environmental efforts. It is possible some of Cascade's contributions went to West-Michigan specific environmental action, however, that is unclear.

Also, the same year the company reported 35.2 thousand metric tons of CO₂ emissions for the Grand Rapids campus, one of three of their planet-based annual measurements (TBL, 2021, p. 18). While they are place-specific in this measurement, it would be interesting to see their total overall emissions as a company or at least what they are doing to enhance the West

Michigan region as a result of these emissions. Working toward specific place-based goals to enhance West Michigan's ecological system for the benefit of the rest of the community is crucial to being regenerative, but place-specific language is largely absent from their reporting.

Overall, this demonstrates that while the company is place-based in its community-initiatives, it is lacking attention to the uniqueness of West Michigan. Of course as a national and multinational entity, this becomes increasingly difficult. That said, because regenerative action is contingent upon place-based ecologically beneficial action, I would propose the company partake in place-specific positive environmental initiatives in each location they operate. While being regenerative is certainly more difficult as a large, global company, it also presents interesting opportunities based on their resources. For example, they could create more local employment opportunities to achieve these goals.

Conclusion

While the Grand Rapids-based company shows dedication to positively contributing to people and the planet, and has made considerable strides in both arenas, there is more work to be done to be a regenerative organization. The company exhibits no shortage of socially innovative initiatives and programs, however, the lack of attention to place limits its ability to truly be regenerative. In order to move beyond limiting resources and reducing waste and be regenerative, the Grand Rapids-based company must first acknowledge the uniqueness of the place and ecological system that it is embedded within and interdependent. Without this understanding and attention, it is difficult to implement policies that enhance the region.

Case 3: The GFB, Gluten Free Brothers

Introduction

Founded by brother-duo Marshall and Elliott Rader in 2010, the Gluten Free Brothers was started to bring tasteful gluten free products to the market. Upon being diagnosed with Celiac disease, the brothers were determined to create a gluten-free, protein-filled product that they “looked forward to eating” because at the time gluten-free products were much fewer and further between (Rader, M. 2020). They currently have three product lines and sell them throughout the US and Canada. The food company is located in Southeast Grand Rapids and has over sixty employees. When they first started the company, they were dedicated to creating a company that “did the right thing” which meant paying fair wages and recycling (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 1). As they have grown, they have adopted their business model to become a triple bottom line company, and in 2015, they became a certified B-Corp, one of 120 food companies throughout North America (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 1). According to Elliott Rader, the decision to become a B-Corp was because “We have never put profits above all else. We always strive to do the right thing for our team members, community, and the planet. We believe that being a B Corp leaves the world a little bit better than the way we found it” (Rader, E. 2020). This sentiment is echoed in their 2021 sustainability report. They explain that they believe business should move beyond profit goals and “work to benefit the community, team members, and environment as a whole” (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 1).

Community Investment for Inclusive Development of Stakeholders

According to their website, the company aims

“to make the world a better place by committing to producing healthy foods in honest ways... We actively search for ways to innovate healthy living, operate more sustainably, diversity our workforce, and enrich our community. The focus of the GFB now encompasses the quality of both our products and the lifestyles of our team members, the community, the retailers we work with, our suppliers, and our customers – gluten intolerant or not” (The GFB. (n.d.))

Based on their B-Corp assessment and score, The B-Lab considers the GFB a mission-locked company which situates them as an Impact Business, or a company that intentionally works to create positive outcomes for stakeholders (Rader, M. 2020). They include “investing in community” as part of how they define sustainability as a business (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 2). Taken together, these statements indicate the company is dedicated to advancing their community and attention to all stakeholders impacted by the business, a key component of a regenerative business.

One way they achieve this is through their commitment to employing individuals in underemployed communities and those with barriers to employment. The GFB participates in the 30-2-2 program which is an initiative of West Michigan businesses designed to increase employment for formerly incarcerated citizens (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 6). In 2019, nearly forty-five percent of their employees were returning citizens (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 6). Since then, they have stopped asking applicants if they have been convicted previously, so they no longer record this metric. In addition to intentionally creating jobs for people with barriers to employment, the GFB also commits to paying living wages. The minimum pay of employees is six percent above living wage in Kent County and fifty-five percent above Michigan’s minimum wage (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 5). It is one thing to provide a job for local residents who face barriers to employment, but by creating access to well-paying jobs once employed is progressive. By ensuring their employees are paid fairly, the GFB is helping stop the perpetuation of poverty and discrimination which actively contributes to improving the lives of their internal stakeholders while helping create a more equitable and better community for all.

Another way they exhibit their commitment to fair pay is through their executive salary policy. While executive pay scales at large companies in the country is on average 271 times higher than the average employee's pay, they keep their ratio of top paid employee at four to one, ensuring "the highest paid person makes 4x the lowest paid team member" (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 5). This policy reinforces their commitment to being a business that is more focused on community than profits.

To benefit their external stakeholders and broader community, they offer full-time employees twenty-four hours of paid volunteer time off to volunteer or attend nonprofit events (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 5). The GFB also consistently supports more than fifty local nonprofit organizations through donations. For example, in 2020, they donated more than 26,000 products (2020) and in 2018, some of the local nonprofits they donated to included Gazelle Girl, Junior League of Grand Rapids, Spectrum Health, Tri-County Celiac Support Group, and Dog Story Theater, among others (The GFB 2020 Sustainability Report, 2020, p. 5 & The GFB 2018 Sustainability Report, 2018, p. 5). By focusing on helping local causes and encouraging team members to actively participate in their communities by supporting causes that are important to them through paid time off, the GFB invests in the surrounding community and helps enhance it. These are just some examples of the GFB practicing regenerative policies within their business and living up to their commitment to enrich their community and "leave the world a little better" than they found it (Rader, E. 2020).

Environment: Enhance the Ecological System

As a B-Corp, the GFB tends to measure their environmental impact generally, rather than focusing on their local impact. One of their environmentally-responsible accomplishments they are most proud of is their zero-waste food production facility (Rader, E., 2020). To be considered

zero-waste, the company diverts at least ninety percent of their waste to be recycled, composted, upcycled, or reused (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 7). While it is unclear what percentage of their waste is upcycled, creating a new purpose for waste, especially if said purpose is a benefit to the community, is regenerative. On a blog written by cofounder, Marshall Rader, he explains that since they began operating, the company would resell their food storage barrels that could be used as rain barrels or many other useful applications (Rader, M., 2022). Although the barrels have gotten bigger as their production grew, they now upcycle the large barrels to growers and farmers (Rader, M., 2022). Repurposing an item that would otherwise be wasted for something like local farming which enriches the community, this would certainly be an example of regenerative business practice. It is unclear who the GFB partners with for this, however, this practice has the potential to be regenerative.

A recent example of the company participating in enhancing the ecological system in West Michigan is their partnership with Consumers Energy, a Michigan-based energy company. The GFB enrolled in the Renewable Energy Program where they pay a fee to help the energy company generate more clean energy, such as solar power and wind power (Torre, 2022). Because this partnership actually helps create more clean energy for the community, this actively contributes to beneficial ecological conditions of the region, and therefore, is a regenerative practice. While being a zero-waste facility or simply offsetting the negative ecological impacts a business creates subscribes to a negative harm reduction view of sustainability, generating something to restore the health of ecological conditions is regenerative.

Lastly, the GFB commits to using ingredients in their products that are better for the health of the environment. Their products are non-GMO and plant-based (The GFB Sustainability Report 2018, 2018). According to their 2018 sustainability report, they do this

because plant-based products “consume less resources”, and GMOs “use herbicides and pesticides which pollute the environment” and are linked to health issues (The GFB Sustainability Report 2018, 2018). Because this was a decision made based on improving health outcomes of ecological systems and people, this captures the essence of regenerative business.

Attention to the Unique Characteristics of & Rooted in Sense of Place

In terms of the business’s connection to place, the GFB’s location in West Michigan had everything the local characteristics of the region. West Michigan natives, the brothers were living in Chicago when they first decided to start the gluten-free business, but quickly relocated to their home region due to favorable conditions for food processing (Experience Grand Rapids, 2021). The access to water, local grocer giants such as Meijer and Spartan Foods, accessibility to local fruits, and the robust network of skilled food production laborers were crucial to the implementation and success of their business (Experience Grand Rapids, 2021). Clearly, the GFB is connected to place in that its success is driven by the unique characteristics of West Michigan. The decision to be in the region captures the inextricable link between business and place, and how businesses are reliant on place for their success. Therefore, businesses can and should work within the place they take from to actively regenerate it.

One example of the GFB’s connection to West Michigan is that they keep their food processing in-house. Many food processing companies outsource the production, but doing it at their own facility ensures they can provide solid employment opportunities for people in the local community (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021, p. 2). They also intentionally contribute to the enhancing the local economy by choosing to use local business for a range of business needs. In 2021, GFB successfully spent over forty percent of all business expenses locally (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021). This includes business needs such as

“professional services, packaging manufacturers, or suppliers and vendors,” all of which helps advance their commitment to local spending (The GFB 2021 Sustainability Report, 2021). Consciously choosing to keep money local and have local partnerships ensures the ongoing vitality of the community.

Conclusion

The GFB exemplifies how important the health of the social-ecological system a business exists within is for its continued success. As such, the business places considerable weight on investing in their internal and external community and operating locally. They portray characteristics of a regenerative business, and have many examples of regenerative practices. The GFB passionately expresses their commitment to being good stewards of the environment, and the B-Corp certification provides an outline for them to achieve that. However, to move beyond sustaining and be a truly regenerative organization, implementing more place-specific initiatives to enhance the local ecological system would be imperative.

Discussion

Building upon existing literature that exists on the regenerative framework from more well-developed disciplines, this paper aimed to comprehensively define regenerative action in its business application. Then, using a case study model to ground the proposed definition (*a business entity that is rooted in and connected to its uniqueness of place, actively works to enhance the people, community, and environment of which it is interdependent and connected, and takes accountability and responsibility for its external costs as a business*) with examples from local businesses, this case study elicits the range to which some businesses have already begun doing this work. While none of the businesses highlighted claim to be regenerative, all

have examples of practices that demonstrate regenerative action and contribute to enhancing the West Michigan community.

By bringing three different businesses from varying industries and sizes into conversation with each other, the case study illustrated the vast scope of actions that businesses in West Michigan have been taking to benefit the larger communities for decades. Understanding the region based on its history of environmental activism and philanthropic character, it is no surprise West Michigan is home to trailblazers of progressive policies. That said, while a company can have regenerative practices, being a regenerative business requires different goals. It takes considerable dedication to prioritize social-ecological health of the community over profit and requires a mindset shift in how we define the purpose of business as a society.

Of the three cases illustrated, Brewery Vivant most closely emulates what it means to be a regenerative organization. Because their purpose is to benefit the community, Brewery Vivant remains rooted in place and considers the needs of West Michigan in every business decision. Deliberately choosing to limit their distribution and not seek unended business growth is a prime example of choosing the health of a community over profit and embracing a business philosophy that is regenerative.

Cascade Engineering and The GFB illuminate how West Michigan benefits from strategic regenerative business practices. Their ambitious community-enhancing practices and environmentally conscious business decisions undoubtedly propel the community forward. These examples reveal that even if a business is not regenerative, we still stand to benefit from businesses incorporating regenerative practices. Ideally, more businesses will begin to incorporate regenerative practices within their organizations to incrementally enhance the social-ecological conditions of the community as a whole.

This paper also indicates that regenerative business practices are socially innovative. The practices documented in this paper are the result of unexpected partnerships, strategic decision-making, and innovative solutions that benefit the well-being of communities, and therefore, are socially innovative. Hence, regenerative business is the result of methods and practices of social innovation in action.

The study also revealed that the larger a company is, the more difficult it is to be connected to place, and, therefore, regenerative. Based on the three case studies, implementing regenerative action is more difficult for businesses that are not explicitly in one place. The regenerative paradigm is ambitious and requires ambitiously different business models with different goals. That said, part of a regenerative economy may mean making conscious efforts to keep businesses locally-owned and more focused on doing business locally.

Lastly, the paper shows that implementing regenerative business actions based on community-enhancing practices seems to be easier than enriching ecological systems. This is likely because of how disconnected we are from place-based knowledge and nature as a whole. To truly make an impact and revitalize our social-ecological systems, we must first learn about our environments, how it is negatively impacted, and what it needs to thrive. Ecological systems are a stakeholder affected by business actions and require specific attention and dedication to be heard. The success of regenerative businesses are contingent upon our ability as individuals and organizations to prioritize our personal connections and appreciation for the places we inhabit.

Conclusion

Moving to an ethos of regeneration where businesses prioritize the health of the entire social-ecological systems that they depend on and use for profit by being rooted in place and working to enhance is a necessary step to revitalize our communities and ecological systems. As

the most prominent forces of environmental degradation, businesses must reconsider their purpose. Business success is dependent on the health of the social-ecological systems they exist within. Therefore, it is crucial that businesses take a vested interest in working to understand the unique needs of the place they operate in and actively contribute to enhancing it.

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