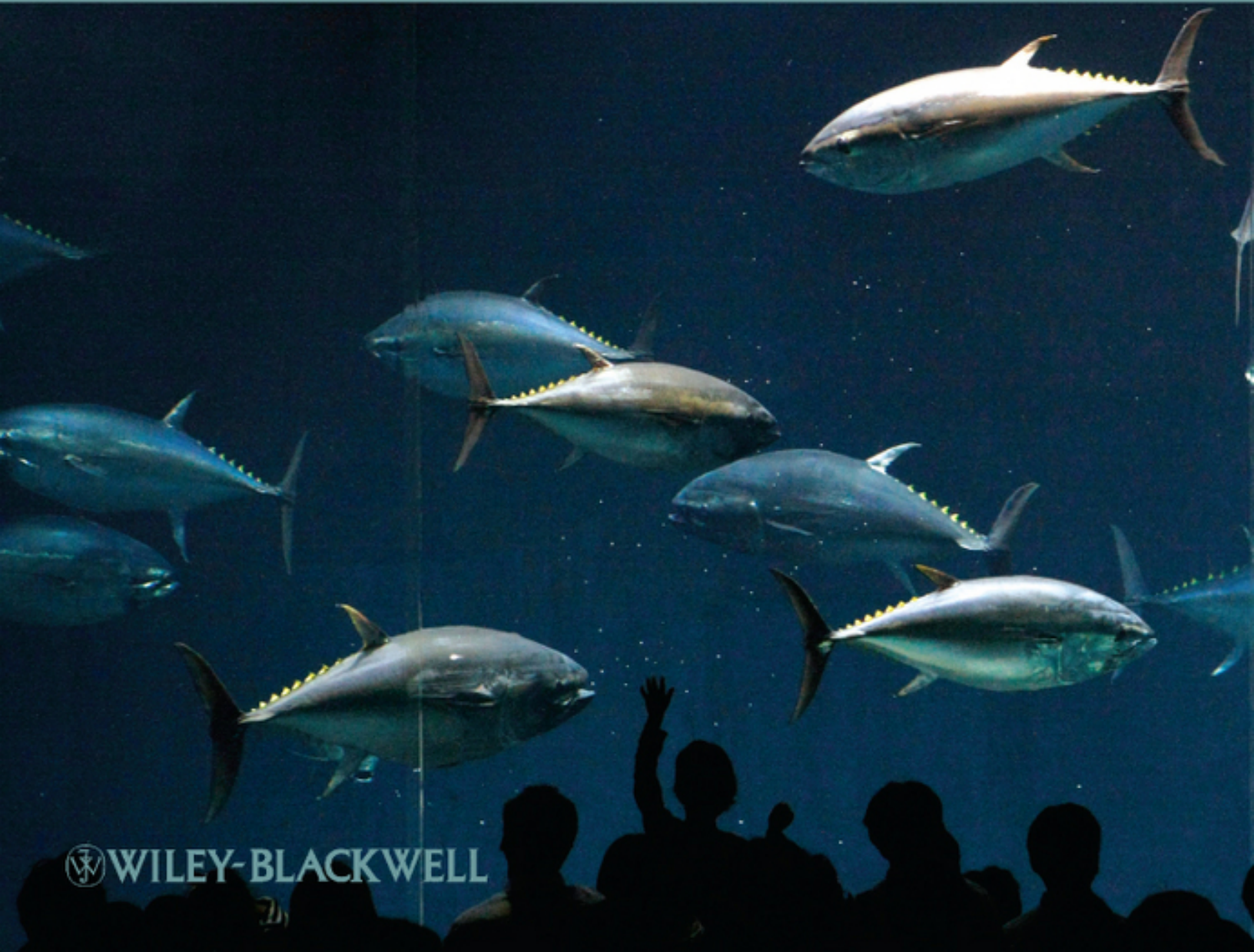



CRITICAL INTRODUCTIONS TO GEOGRAPHY

Paul Robbins, John Hintz,  
and Sarah A. Moore

# Environment and Society



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

# Contents

*Figures*

*Tables*

*Text Boxes*

*Acknowledgments*

*1: Introduction: The View from Clifton Bridge*

*What Is This Book?*

*Suggested Reading*

## *Part I: Approaches and Perspectives*

*2: Population and Scarcity*

*A Crowded Desert City*

*The Problem of “Geometric” Growth*

*Population, Development, and Environment Impact*

*The Other Side of the Coin: Population and Innovation*

*Limits to Population: An Effect Rather than a Cause?*

*Thinking with Population*

**Questions for Review**

**Suggested Reading**

**Exercise: What Is Your Ecological Footprint?**

### **3: Markets and Commodities**

**The Bet**

**Managing Environmental Bads: The Coase Theorem**

**Market Failure**

**Market-Based Solutions to Environmental Problems**

**Beyond Market Failure: Gaps between Nature and Economy**

**Thinking with Markets**

**Questions for Review**

**Suggested Reading**

**Exercise: The Price of Green Consumption**

### **4: Institutions and “The Commons”**

**Controlling Carbon?**

**The Prisoner’s Dilemma**

**The Tragedy of the Commons**

**The Evidence and Logic of Collective Action**

**Crafting Sustainable Environmental Institutions**

**Are All Commoners Equal? Does Scale Matter?**

**Thinking with Institutions**

**Questions for Review**

**Suggested Reading**

**Exercise: A Commons Nearby**

## **5: Environmental Ethics**

**The Price of Cheap Meat**

**Improving Nature: From Biblical Tradition to John Locke**

**Gifford Pinchot vs. John Muir in Yosemite, California**

**Aldo Leopold and “The Land Ethic”**

**Liberation for Animals!**

**Holism, Scientism, and Pragmatism? Oh My!**

**Thinking with Ethics**

**Questions for Review**

**Suggested Reading**

**Exercise: Pass the Bacon (or don't)**

## **6: Risks and Hazards**

**The Great Flood of 1993**

**Environments as Hazard**

**The Problem of Risk Perception**

**Risk as Culture**

**Beyond Risk: The Political Economy of Hazards**

**Thinking with Hazards and Risk**

**Questions for Review**

**Suggested Reading**

**Exercise: Mapping Risk**

## **7: Political Economy**

*The Strange Logic of “Under-pollution”*  
*Labor, Accumulation, and Crisis*  
*Production of Nature*  
*Global Capitalism and the Ecology of*  
*Uneven Development*  
*Social Reproduction and Nature*  
*Environments and Economism*  
*Thinking with Political Economy*  
*Questions for Review*  
*Suggested Reading*  
*Exercise: Commodity Analysis*

## **8: Social Construction of Nature**

*Welcome to the Jungle*  
*So You Say It’s “Natural”?*  
*Environmental Discourse*  
*The Limits of Constructivism: Science,*  
*Relativism, and the Very Material World*  
*Thinking with Construction*  
*Questions for Review*  
*Suggested Reading*  
*Exercise: Analysis of Energy Discourses*

## **Part II: Objects of Concern**

### **9: Carbon Dioxide**

*Stuck in Pittsburgh Traffic*  
*Institutions: Climate Free-Riders and*  
*Carbon Cooperation*

**Markets: Trading More Gases, Buying Less Carbon**

**Political Economy: Who Killed the Atmosphere?**

**The Carbon Puzzle**

**Questions for Review**

**Suggested Reading**

**Exercise: The Ethics of CO<sub>2</sub>**

## **10: Trees**

**Chained to a Tree in Berkeley California**

**A Short History of Trees**

**Population and Markets: The Forest Transition Theory**

**Political Economy: Accumulation and Deforestation**

**Ethics, Justice, and Equity: Should Trees Have Standing?**

**The Tree Puzzle**

**Questions for Review**

**Suggested Reading**

**Exercise: Trees and Institutions**

## **11: Wolves**

**January 12, 1995, Yellowstone National Park**

**A Short History of Wolves**

**Ethics: Rewilding the Northeast**

**Institutions: Stakeholder Management**



***Social Construction: Of Wolves and Men  
Masculinity***

***The Wolf Puzzle***

***Questions for Review***

***Suggested Reading***

***Exercise***

## **12: Tuna**

***Blood Tuna***

***A Short History of Tuna***

***Markets and Commodities: Eco-Labels to  
the Rescue?***

***Political Economy: Re-regulating Fishery  
Economies***

***Ethics and Ecocentrism: The Social  
Construction of Charismatic Species***

***The Tuna Puzzle***

***Questions for Review***

***Suggested Reading***

***Exercise: Eco-Labeling and Certification***

## **13: Bottled Water**

***A Tale of Two Bottles***

***A Short History of Bottled Water***

***Population: Bottling for Scarcity?***

***Risk: Health and Safety in a Bottle?***

***Political Economy: Manufacturing Demand  
on an Enclosed Commons***

***The Bottled Water Puzzle***

***Questions for Review***

***Suggested Reading***  
***Exercise***

***14: French Fries***

***MMM-MMM Good***

***A Short History of the Fry***

***Risk Analysis: Eating What We Choose and  
Choosing What We Eat***

***Political Economy: Eat Fries or Else!***

***Ethics: Protecting or Engineering Potato  
Heritage?***

***The French Fry Puzzle***

***Questions for Review***

***Suggested Reading***

***Exercise***

***Glossary***

***References***

***Index***



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# Environment and Society

## A Critical Introduction

Paul Robbins, John Hintz, and Sarah A. Moore

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*For Elizabeth A. Moore  
and  
For Michelle*

# ***Figures***

- [2.1](#) The skyline of Phoenix, Arizona
- [2.2](#) Hypothesized demographic trends in a Malthusian conception
- [2.3](#) World population since 1750
- [2.4](#) Global population growth rates
- [2.5](#) The demographic transition model
- [2.6](#) National fertility and female literacy rates around the world: 2006
- [3.1](#) Wagering the future
- [3.2](#) Environmental scarcity drives markets
- [3.3](#) The market response model
- [3.4](#) Regulation versus cap and trade
- [4.1](#) The Prisoner's Dilemma in game theoretical terms
- [4.2](#) Irrigation systems
- [4.3](#) A woman tending her herd in India
- [5.1](#) A sow's "farrowing crate"
- [5.2](#) Hetch Hetchy Valley
- [6.1](#) Voluntary/Involuntary-Common/Catastrophic: A matrix for explaining what people think is risky and why
- [6.2](#) Cultural theory
- [7.1](#) The secret of surplus value, in a nutshell
- [7.2](#) Schematic representation of the possible contradictions that capitalism produces and the social and environmental responses they engender
- [8.1](#) Power to the people
- [8.2](#) Pollen evidence from Morocco over 14,000 years
- [8.3](#) John Gast, "American Progress," 1872
- [9.1](#) Carbon on earth
- [9.2](#) The Keeling curve
- [9.3](#) Atmospheric concentration of carbon
- [9.4](#) Global average temperatures, sea level, and snow cover



[9.5](#) The strange logic of carbon offsets

[10.1](#) *Sequoia sempervirens*, the genus in the cypress family Cupressaceae

[10.2](#) European forest cover from 1700 to 1980

[11.1](#) The wolf motorcade passes under the Roosevelt Arch as it enters Yellowstone National Park on January 12, 1995

[11.2](#) The gray wolf, *Canis lupus*

[11.3](#) World map of countries with known wolf populations

[11.4](#) Estimated range of gray wolves in the contiguous United States, 1500, 1915, and 2009

[11.5](#) Wolf Management Zones in Minnesota

[11.6](#) An early-twentieth-century government wolf trapper

[12.1](#) Artist's rendition of the sleek, powerful bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*)

[12.2](#) Dolphin mortality, 1960–97

[12.3](#) The “Medina panel”

[12.4](#) A label from a can of Alaska salmon bearing the Marine Stewardship Council stamp of approval

[12.5](#) Still image from the Sam LaBudde video

[12.6](#) Does a tuna have rights? Mutilated tuna rest here on pallets at a seafood wholesaler in Tokyo, Japan

[13.1](#) The Poland Spring “Spring House” in 1910

[13.2](#) Women draw water from a communal well in Rajasthan, India

[13.3](#) US per capita consumption of bottled water from 1988 to 2007

[14.1](#) Concern over amount and types of fat

# ***Tables***

[2.1](#) Who is overpopulated?

[3.1](#) Market-based solutions

[9.1](#) Why is Kyoto a “shallow” treaty?

[10.1](#) Change in cover of forest and wooded land (by world region)

[10.2](#) Comparison of the number of important insect species measured to be present in differing systems of coffee production in Costa Rica

[10.3](#) Some key tropical exports, their recent price fluctuations, and their leading export countries

[10.4](#) The predominant banana export companies operating globally, their share of the market, and their headquartered locations

[11.1](#) Countries worldwide with wolf populations of 2,000 or greater

[12.1](#) Overfished species “red-listed” by the Blue Ocean Institute

[13.1](#) Freshwater usage around the world

[13.2](#) Typical interior water usage in the developed world

[13.3](#) Selected leading per capita consumer nations of bottled water, 2007

[14.1](#) Energy inputs and costs of potato production per hectare in the United States

[14.2](#) World potato production, 1991-2007

## ***Text Boxes***

- 2.1 The Nine Billionth Person
- 3.1 Peak Oil
- 4.1 The Montreal Protocol
- 5.1 Endangered Species Act
- 6.1 The Bhopal Gas Disaster
- 7.1 Love Canal
- 8.1 Wild Horses
- 9.1 Mayor's Climate Protection Agreement
- 10.1 Shade Grown Coffee
- 11.1 Predator-Friendly Beef and Wool
- 12.1 Longliners
- 13.1 Cryptosporidium Outbreaks
- 14.1 Slow Food

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# 1

## ***Introduction: The View from Clifton Bridge***

The Clifton Suspension Bridge, spanning Avon Gorge near Bristol, England. *Credit: willmetts/Shutterstock.*



### Keywords

- Political ecology
- Reconciliation ecology

### **Chapter Menu**

#### What Is This Book?

News headlines from forests, fields, rivers, and oceans suggest we are in a world of trouble. Fresh water is increasingly scarce around the globe, owing not only to heavy water use but also widespread pollution; there is not a single drop of water in the Colorado River in the United

States or the Rhone River in France that is not managed through complex dams and distribution systems, or affected by city and industrial waste along their paths to the sea. Agricultural soils are depleted from years of intensive cropping and from the ongoing application of fertilizers and pesticides in the search for ever-sustained increases of food and fiber; in North India, after decades of increasing production, yields of wheat and rice have hit a plateau. Global temperatures are on the rise and, with this increase, whole ecosystems are at risk. Species of plants and animals are vanishing from the earth, never to return. Perhaps most profoundly, the world's oceans - upon which these global systems rest - show signs of impending collapse. The accumulation of these acute problems has led observers to conclude that the environment may be irreversibly lost or that we may have reached "the end of nature" (McKibben 1990).

And yet, looking down from a two-century-old suspension bridge spanning the Avon Gorge in Bristol, England, along the winding waterway towards the lower reaches of the River Avon and the ocean beyond, it is hard not to be swept away in a fantastic environmental romance. Peregrine falcons nest in the walls and can be seen on rare occasions, seeking pigeons and seagulls for prey, flying along the updrafts that rise from the gorge cut by the ancient river, as it makes its way to the sea. Orchids thrive here, as do horseshoe bats. The river is all the more remarkable for its incredible flood tide range, with water rising and falling as much as 15 meters (49 feet) between low and high tide. In the entire world, this dramatic distance is second only to that of the Yangtze River in China. The power of the sea, the river, and the moon is almost palpable as the water passes beneath the bridge out to Avonmouth, adjacent to the vast Severn Estuary, and on to the Atlantic.

But all is not well here. The blessing of a massive tidal flow has made the Severn Estuary a very desirable location for tidal power generation, which captures the energy of the rising and falling water to generate electricity for homes and businesses. Harnessing the tidal power of the area might provide as much as 5 percent of the United Kingdom's power. Because this is a form of power that generates no greenhouse gas emissions, which are the main culprit behind global climate change, this is an environmentally attractive project. The plan, however, does not come without environmental costs and the proposed projects include the construction of vast lagoons, huge underwater fences, and an enormous tidal reef. This could destroy marshland, drive away migrating birds, and harm the fish population in ways that are hard to estimate.

The view from Clifton Bridge makes our global situation easier to understand, though perhaps no simpler to solve. The contradictory proposition – harnessing green power in a way that will paradoxically transform the environment – is a metaphor for the condition of our long-standing relationship to the non-human world. From this view, looking down across the gorge, one can catch a glimpse of heavily quarried sites where the land was mined for lead and iron for more than a thousand years. Yet these quarry sites also provide habitat for wild animals and birds. Everywhere the works of people are in evidence; bridges, tunnels, docks, all formed from brick and iron, span the chasm and snake along the valley floor. Yet these features frequently vanish into the riotous growth of trees and walls of stone. Decisions made at the estuary downstream, therefore, cannot be made solely on the basis that the region is a “natural” one, nor a “social” one. The area is simultaneously neither and both, with environmental features (deep sea inlets, open gorges, and veins of minerals) inspiring invasive human



actions (docks, bridges, and mines), which sometimes produce altogether new habitats and environments.

The landscape here has been worked and reworked for centuries by human hands, creating a thoroughly social environment, yet falcons nest here, as do bats and a range of other species, making this an undeniably natural space as well.

If these sorts of decisions are to be made, and the larger complex puzzle of living *within* nature is to be solved, therefore, we need tools with which to view the world in fresh ways and assess possible routes forward. For example, viewed as a problem of ethics, the development of the estuary becomes one of sorting through competing claims and arguments about what is ethically best, on whose behalf one might make such an argument (that of power customers or that of the river itself?), and over which criteria we might use to adjudicate “good” policy. From the point of view of political economy, by contrast, one would be urged to examine what value is created and destroyed in the transformation of the marshlands, which specific technologies are selected for power generation and why, whose pockets are filled in the process, and how decisions are controlled and directed through circuits of corporate power and national authority. Indeed, there is no shortage of ways to view this problem, with population-centered considerations competing with those that stress market logics, and arguments about public risk perception competing with those about the romantic social construction of the river.

## **What Is This Book?**

This book is designed to explain these varied interpretive tools and perspectives and show them in operation. Our strategy is first to present the dominant modes of thinking

about environment-society relations and then to apply them to a few familiar objects of the world around us. By environment, we mean the whole of the aquatic, terrestrial, and atmospheric non-human world, including specific objects in their varying forms, like trees, carbon dioxide, or water, as well as the organic and inorganic systems and processes that link and transform them, like photosynthesis, predator-prey relationships, or soil erosion. Society, conversely, includes the humans of the earth and the larger systems of culture, politics, and economic exchange that govern their interrelationships.

From the outset we must insist that these two categories are interlaced and impossible to separate. Humans are obviously environmental beings subject to organic processes. Equally problematically, environmental processes are also fundamentally social, in the sense that they link people and influence human relationships. Photosynthesis is the basis of agriculture, for example, and so is perhaps the most critical environmental process in the history of civilization. More complex: human transformation of carbon levels in the atmosphere may further alter global photosynthesis in a dramatic way, with implications for human food and social organization. Obviously, it is difficult to tell where the environment leaves off and society begins. On the other hand, there is not universal agreement on exactly of what these relationships and linkages consist. The perspectives summarized in this text present very different views about which parts of society and environment are connected to which, under what conditions these change or can be altered, and what the best courses of action tend to be, with enormous implications for both thinking about our place in the ecosystem and solving very immediate problems like global warming, deforestation, or the decline in the world's fisheries.

In Part I, we lay out some of the dominant ways of interpreting the environment/society relationship. We begin in Chapter 2 with a perspective that is foundational to the history of both the natural and social sciences: population. Here we describe how human population has been viewed as a growing threat to the non-human world, contrasting this with views of population growth as a process that not only consumes, but also potentially *produces*, resources in the world. In Chapter 3 we consider economic ways of thinking about the environment. These views stress the power of markets – a category in which we include systems of economic exchange – to respond to scarcity and drive inventive human responses. This is followed in Chapter 4 by approaches that stress institutions, which we define as the rules and norms governing our interactions with nature and resources. Institutional approaches address environmental problems largely as the product of “common property” problems that are amenable to creative rule-making, incentives, and self-regulation. Chapter 5 examines ethics-based approaches to the environment, with their often radical ways of rethinking the place of humans in a world filled with other living and non-living things. The view of the environment as a problem of risk and hazard is explored in Chapter 6. That approach proposes a series of formal procedures for making the best choices possible, given that environments and environmental problems are inherently uncertain and highly variable. This is followed by a description of political economy approaches in Chapter 7, which are those that view the human relationship with nature as one rooted in the economy, but which insist that the economy is based in, and has fundamental implications for, *power* relationships: who gets what, who works for whom, and who pays. Contrary to market-based approaches, these point to the environmentally corrosive impacts of market economics. Chapter 8 closes this part of the book by describing approaches to environment and

society issues that stress social construction, which we define as the tendency for people to understand and interpret environmental issues and processes through language, stories, and images that are often inherited or imposed through systems of media, government, education, or industry. These stories are not harmless, since they can encourage or overlook very real actions, impacts, and behaviors with serious environmental and social consequences.

Within these several ways of seeing are many others, of course. Within political economy, for example, issues of environmental justice are critical to understanding why some people are more heavily exposed to hazards than others. We have nested many of these perspectives within larger categories of thought, though without pretending we can do more than introduce many important concepts. Of particular significance are issues related to gender. These are so important, indeed, that we chose not to set them aside in a separate chapter, but to thread them throughout the book, amidst themes as varied as population and political economy.

Part II presents a set of six critical objects, and examines each of them in turn using a sample of these approaches. Each chapter begins with a “short history” of the object followed by a discussion of ways in which the characteristics of the object present a puzzle or conundrum, and then presents divergent ways of thinking about the object from competing points of view. In Chapter 9, we introduce carbon dioxide, a curious gas with a complicated history on the earth that shows it to vary widely over time, with enormous implications for the forms of life dwelling here. As one of the most important greenhouse gases, moreover, CO<sub>2</sub> has become an increasingly contested object, with competing views about its control, regulation, and circulation. In Chapter 10, we discuss trees. These plants have been

companions of human civilization since the beginning, though the long relationship has been marked by dramatic ebbs and flows. In this chapter we take the opportunity to introduce varying theories to account for deforestation and reforestation, as well as a startling ethical proposal for trees to legally represent themselves. Chapter 11 is dedicated to wolves, a species with which humans have a current love-hate relationship and whose return throughout North America and parts of Europe and Asia represents a dramatic change in the way humans and animals relate. This chapter stresses diverse cultural understandings of the same animals, and the implications of our ethics and institutions for the many animals that share the landscape with humanity. The tuna takes center stage in Chapter 12, and with it the profound problems faced by the world's oceans. Here, human economics and ethics collide in a consideration of how fish production and consumption are regulated and managed in a complex world. Chapter 13 addresses one of the world's fastest-growing commodities, bottled water. This object has the rare dual role as a solution to problems of water supply in some parts of the world, while being a clear luxury item - with attendant environmental problems - in others. We close with French fries (also called "chips"!) in Chapter 14, a culinary invention that connects the complex centuries-old history of the transatlantic "Columbian Exchange" with the health controversies and industrial food economies of the twenty-first century.

Quite intentionally we have selected *objects* for exploration, rather than *problems*. We do this for two reasons. First, while many objects are obviously linked to problems (trees to deforestation, as we shall see in Chapter 10, for example), *not all human relations with non-humans are problems*. Second, we intend by this structure to invite people to think seriously about how different things in the world (giraffes, cell phones, tapeworms, diamonds,

chainsaws ...) *have their own unique relationship to people* and present specific sorts of puzzles owing to their specific characteristics (they swim, they melt, they migrate, they are poisonous when eaten ...). This is intended as an opportunity to break away from the environment as an undifferentiated generic problem, one universally characterized by a state of immediate and unique crisis. While global climate change is a critical (and sprawling) suite of problems, for example, the long and complex relationship of people to carbon dioxide itself provides a focused entry point, filled with specific challenges and opportunities. We do indeed face enormous environmental problems, but we believe them to be best solved by exploring the specificities and differences, as well as commonalties, of both people and things.

Needless to say, these objects do not encompass the full enormous range of environmental actors with which society is intertwined and, though these chapters do capture a number of key issues and ideas, we do not pretend to have provided an exhaustive list of socio-environmental situations, interactions, and problems. Instead we provide a few key examples to show how objects are tools to think with, and to demonstrate the very different implications of divergent ways of seeing environmental issues.

It is also important to note that this is not an environmental science textbook, though it is a book that takes environmental science seriously. Several key concepts and processes from a range of environmental sciences are described and defined, especially in the latter half of the book, including carbon sequestration, ecological succession, and predator/prey relationships, among many others. These are described in terms detailed enough to explain and understand the way human and social processes impinge upon or relate to non-human ones. Throughout we have drawn on current knowledge from environmental science

sources (the report on global climate change from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, for example), but we intend a book that requires no previous knowledge of such sciences or sources. We believe this book might reasonably accompany more strictly environmental science approaches, or be used in courses that seek to bridge environmental ethics, economics, or policy with issues in ecology, hydrology, and conservation biology, or vice versa.

## **The authors' points of view**

Finally, we provide many points of view in this volume that directly contradict one another. It is difficult, for example, to simultaneously believe that the source of all environmental problems is the total population of humans on the earth, and to hold the position that population growth leads to greater efficiencies and potentially lower environmental impacts. Even where ideas do not contradict one another (for example, risk perception in Chapter 6 might be seen as a sort of social construction in Chapter 8), they definitely stress different factors or problems and imply different solutions.

With that in mind, it is reasonable to ask what the points of view of the text's authors might be. Which side are we on? This is difficult to answer, not only because there are three of us, each with our own view of the world, but also because, as researchers, we often try to bring different perspectives and theories to bear on the objects of our study, and to foster a kind of pluralism in our thinking.

Nonetheless, we do collectively have a point of view. First, we are each urgently concerned about the state of natural environments around the world. Our own research has focused on diverse environmental topics, including Professor Hintz's work on the status of bears in the western part of the United States, Professor Moore's research on the management of solid and hazardous waste in Mexico, and



Professor Robbins' investigation of the conservation of forests in India. From these experiences, we have come to share an approach best described as **political ecology**: an understanding that nature and society are produced *together* in a political economy that includes humans and non-humans. What does this mean? To keep it as straightforward as possible, we understand that relationships among people and between people and the environment are governed by persistent and dominant, albeit diverse and historically changing, *interactions of power* (Robbins 2004). This means that we have some special sympathy for themes from political economy and social construction.

**Political Ecology** An approach to environmental issues that unites issues of ecology with a broadly defined political economy perspective

When Hintz examines the conservation of bears in Yellowstone, for example, he thinks it is critical to examine how bears are *imagined* by people and to know what media, assumptions, and stories influence that imagination, since these prefigure how people do or do not act through policy, regulation, or support for environmental laws. When examining solid waste in Mexico, in another example, Moore thinks the crucial question is who *controls access to and use of* dumps, since this determines, to a large degree, how waste is managed, whether problems are addressed or ignored, and where the flow of hazards and benefits is directed. When examining forests in India, Robbins wants to know how local people and forest officers *coerce one another*, in a system of corruption that determines the rate and flow of forest cutting and environmental transformation. People's power over one another, over the environment, and over how other people think about the environment, in short, is our preferred starting point.