

Paul Robbins, John Hintz and Sarah A. Moore

Environment and Society

A Critical Introduction

Second Edition



WILEY Blackwell

Environment and Society

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
List of Tables	xi
List of Boxes	xii
Acknowledgments	xiii
1 Introduction: The View from a Human-Made Wilderness	1
What Is This Book?	4
The Authors' Points of View	7
Part 1 Approaches and Perspectives	11
2 Population and Scarcity	13
A Crowded Desert City	14
The Problem of “Geometric” Growth	15
Population, Development, and Environment Impact	17
The Other Side of the Coin: Population and Innovation	20
Limits to Population: An Effect Rather than a Cause?	22
Thinking with Population	27
3 Markets and Commodities	31
The Bet	32
Managing Environmental Bads: The Coase Theorem	34
Market Failure	37
Market-Based Solutions to Environmental Problems	38
Beyond Market Failure: Gaps between Nature and Economy	43
Thinking with Markets	46
4 Institutions and “The Commons”	49
Controlling Carbon?	50
The Prisoner’s Dilemma	50

The Tragedy of the Commons	52
The Evidence and Logic of Collective Action	54
Crafting Sustainable Environmental Institutions	56
Are All Commoners Equal? Does Scale Matter?	61
Thinking with Institutions	62
5 Environmental Ethics	65
The Price of Cheap Meat	66
Improving Nature: From Biblical Tradition to John Locke	68
Gifford Pinchot vs. John Muir in Yosemite, California	70
Aldo Leopold and “The Land Ethic”	72
Liberation for Animals!	75
Holism, Scientism, and Other Pitfalls	77
Thinking with Ethics	79
6 Risks and Hazards	82
Great Floods	83
Environments as Hazard	84
The Problem of Risk Perception	86
Risk as Culture	89
Beyond Risk: The Political Economy of Hazards	90
Thinking with Hazards and Risk	94
7 Political Economy	98
The Strange Logic of “Under-pollution”	99
Labor, Accumulation, and Crisis	100
Production of Nature	107
Global Capitalism and the Ecology of Uneven Development	109
Social Reproduction and Nature	111
Environments and Economism	115
Thinking with Political Economy	115
8 Social Construction of Nature	119
Welcome to the Jungle	120
So You Say It’s “Natural”?	122
Environmental Discourse	126
The Limits of Constructivism: Science, Relativism, and the Very Material World	131
Thinking with Construction	134
Part 2 Objects of Concern	139
9 Carbon Dioxide	141
Stuck in Pittsburgh Traffic	142
A Short History of CO ₂	143
Institutions: Climate Free-Riders and Carbon Cooperation	149
Markets: Trading More Gases, Buying Less Carbon	152

Political Economy: Who Killed the Atmosphere?	157
The Carbon Puzzle	160
10 Trees	163
Chained to a Tree in Berkeley, California	164
A Short History of Trees	164
Population and Markets: The Forest Transition Theory	172
Political Economy: Accumulation and Deforestation	175
Ethics, Justice, and Equity: Should Trees Have Standing?	177
The Tree Puzzle	179
11 Wolves	183
The Death of 832F	184
A Short History of Wolves	185
Ethics: Rewilding and Wolves	191
Institutions: Stakeholder Management	194
Social Construction: Of Wolves and Men Masculinity	197
The Wolf Puzzle	199
12 Uranium	203
Renaissance Derailed?	204
A Short History of Uranium	205
Risk and Hazards: Debating the Fate of High-Level Radioactive Waste	211
Political Economy: Environmental Justice and the Navajo Nation	214
The Social Construction of Nature: Discourses of Development and Wilderness in Australia	217
The Uranium Puzzle	220
13 Tuna	224
Blood Tuna	225
A Short History of Tuna	225
Markets and Commodities: Eco-Labels to the Rescue?	230
Political Economy: Re-regulating Fishery Economies	233
Ethics: Saving Animals, Conserving Species	236
The Tuna Puzzle	239
14 Lawns	243
How Much Do People Love Lawns?	244
A Short History of Lawns	244
Risk and Chemical Decision-Making	248
Social Construction: Good Lawns Mean Good People	251
Political Economy: The Chemical Tail Wags the Turfgrass Dog	253
The Lawn Puzzle	255
15 Bottled Water	259
A Tale of Two Bottles	260
A Short History of Bottled Water	261

Population: Bottling for Scarcity?	266
Risk: Health and Safety in a Bottle?	269
Political Economy: Manufacturing Demand on an Enclosed Commons	272
The Bottled Water Puzzle	275
16 French Fries	279
Getting Your French Fry Fix	280
A Short History of the Fry	280
Risk Analysis: Eating What We Choose and Choosing What We Eat	285
Political Economy: Eat Fries or Else!	288
Ethics: Protecting or Engineering Potato Heritage?	293
The French Fry Puzzle	296
17 E-Waste	299
Digital Divides	300
A Short History of E-Waste (2000)	301
Risk Management and the Hazard of E-Waste	304
E-Waste and Markets: From Externality to Commodity	306
E-Waste and Environmental Justice: The Political Economy of E-Waste	310
The E-Waste Puzzle	313
Glossary	316
Index	324

List of Figures

1.1	Heck Cattle	2
2.1	Hypothesized demographic trends in a Malthusian conception	16
2.2	World population since 1750	17
2.3	Global population growth rates	22
2.4	Population growth rates worldwide by country	24
2.5	The demographic transition model	25
2.6	National fertility and female literacy rates around the world: 2006	26
3.1	Environmental scarcity drives markets	33
3.2	The market response model	34
3.3	Regulation versus cap and trade	41
4.1	The Prisoner's Dilemma in game-theoretical terms	52
4.2	Irrigation systems	59
4.3	A woman tending her herd in India	62
5.1	A sow's "farrowing crate"	66
5.2	Hetch Hetchy Valley	72
6.1	Voluntary/Involuntary–Common/Catastrophic: A matrix for explaining what people think is risky and why	88
6.2	Map of tribal lands and superfund sites	92
7.1	The secret of surplus value, in a nutshell	102
7.2	Schematic representation of the possible contradictions that capitalism produces and the social and environmental responses they engender	107
8.1	Pacific Northwest forest	125
8.2	Pollen evidence from Morocco over 14,000 years	128
8.3	John Gast, "American Progress," 1872	130
9.1	Carbon on Earth	143
9.2	The Keeling curve	145
9.3	Atmospheric concentration of carbon	146
9.4	Global average temperatures, sea level, and snow cover	147

x List of Figures

9.5	Cartogram of carbon emissions	150
9.6	The strange logic of carbon offsets	156
10.1	<i>Sequoia sempervirens</i> , the genus in the cypress family Cupressaceae	166
10.2	Global deforestation rates	168
10.3	European forest cover from 1700 to 1980	173
11.1	The gray wolf	185
11.2	World map of countries with known wolf populations	186
11.3	Estimated range of gray wolves in the United States	189
11.4	Wolf management zones in Minnesota	196
11.5	An early twentieth-century government wolf trapper	197
12.1	The nuclear fuel chain	207
12.2	World uranium production, 2012	208
12.3	Colonial division of labor in the Navajo uranium mines	215
12.4	The Ranger Uranium Mine and Mill, Northern Territory, Australia	219
13.1	The sleek, powerful, bluefin tuna	226
13.2	Dolphin mortality, 1960–97	230
13.3	The “Medina panel”	231
13.4	A label from a can of Alaska salmon bearing the Marine Stewardship Council stamp of approval	235
13.5	Does a tuna have rights? Mutilated tuna rest on pallets at a seafood wholesaler in Tokyo	237
14.1	Lead arsenate – most popular pesticide prior to DDT	246
14.2	Map showing quantity of turfgrass across the United States	247
14.3	The lawn chemical commodity and knowledge chain	253
15.1	The Poland Spring “Spring House” in 1910	261
15.2	Women draw water from a communal well in Rajasthan, India	262
15.3	US per capita consumption of bottled water from 1988 to 2007	263
15.4	Cartogram of bottled water consumption worldwide	263
16.1	Transfer and spread of the potato after the Columbian Exchange	282
16.2	Concern over amount and types of fat	287
17.1	In Agbogbloshie, Accra, Ghana	300
17.2	Life-cycle flow chart for electronic products	305
17.3	Global trade in e-waste, 2006	312

List of Tables

2.1	Who is overpopulated?	18
3.1	Market-based solutions	40
10.1	Comparison of the number of important insect species measured to be present in differing systems of coffee production in Costa Rica	170
10.2	Some key tropical exports and their leading export countries	176
10.3	The predominant banana export companies operating globally, their share of the market, and their headquartered locations	177
11.1	Countries worldwide with wolf populations of 2,186 or greater	186
12.1	Comparison of predicted and actual radioactive contaminant migration, Kentucky, 1962	213
13.1	Severely overfished marine species	228
15.1	Freshwater usage around the world	267
15.2	Domestic US water use	268
15.3	Selected leading per capita consumer nations of bottled water, 2007	268
16.1	Energy inputs and costs of potato production per hectare in the United States	284
16.2	World potato production, 1991–2007	292

List of Boxes

2.1	The One-Child Policy	20
3.1	Natural Gas as a Bridge Fuel	39
4.1	The Montreal Protocol	56
5.1	Endangered Species Act	73
6.1	Insuring for Climate Change	87
7.1	Joint and Several Liability	114
8.1	Preserving “Alien” Species in Wild Horse Conservation	132
9.1	The Mayor’s Climate Protection Agreement	153
10.1	Shade Grown Coffee	171
11.1	Wildlife Friendly Beef and Wool	190
12.1	Energy-Efficient Buildings	210
13.1	Open Ocean Aquaculture	229
14.1	Organic Lawn Inputs	250
15.1	Filling Stations for Reusable Bottles	265
16.1	Slow Food	291
17.1	The E-Waste Stewardship Project	309

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1

Introduction

The View from a Human-Made Wilderness



Source: Oostvaardersplassen, a nature reserve in the Netherlands.

Keywords

- Anthropocene
- Political ecology
- Reconciliation ecology
- Rewilding

Chapter Menu

What Is This Book?	4
The Authors' Points of View	7

Environment and Society: A Critical Introduction, Second Edition. Paul Robbins, John Hintz, and Sarah A. Moore.

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2 Introduction: The View from a Human-Made Wilderness

News headlines from forests, fields, rivers, and oceans suggest we are in a world of trouble. Storms ravage the coasts of Asia and the Americas, with more looming as sea levels slowly rise. 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 in Flevoland, a province in the Netherlands, wild species are thriving as never before. Red deer roam the landscape, feral horses travel in herds, and an ecosystem of foxes and wild birds has arisen, including egrets and wild geese. Aurochs – the massive wild cattle of Europe – have been extinct for centuries, but their human-bred cousins, Heck Cattle, graze the landscape, their long horns and hairy forms rumbling across the marshland (Figure 1.1). This 15,000-acre wilderness, called Oostvaardersplassen, is filled with wild



Figure 1.1 Heck Cattle. *Source:* Roel Hoeve/Foto Natura/Corbis.

life. Remarkably, all this wildlife is thriving in one of the places on Earth most densely populated by people. For safari visitors, who pay 45 dollars for a visit to the park, there is no question that the place creates a great sense of wonder, as visits to wild places do for most all of us in a world that is increasingly encroached by human activity, pollution, and influence.

But if this place is a wilderness, it is by no means a natural one. Envisioned and created by biologists in the 1980s, this park had previously been little more than muddy lowlands devoid of wildlife. Over time, and with the careful introduction of various animals and plants, the landscape has been crafted to produce these animals. Most notably, the very ground upon which the park sits was reclaimed from the sea, as much of Dutch land was long ago. In the time of the Aurochs, Oostvaardersplassen would have been under meters of water! Though intended to mimic a late Pleistocene (10,000-year-old) ecology, therefore, the place is artificial. It is the product of **rewilding**, where long-lost ecosystems are crafted by people from whole cloth, in order to reclaim – or create – landscapes as they might have been before human influence (Kolbert 2012).

Rewilding A practice of conservation where ecological functions and evolutionary processes, which are thought to have existed in past ecosystems or before human influence, are deliberately restored or created; rewilding often requires the reintroduction or restoration of large predators to ecosystems

The wonderful landscapes of Oostvaardersplassen therefore raise as many questions as they answer. Which animals are introduced and which are not? Who says this state, devoid of people, is the natural one? Where some animals like the Aurochs are extinct, is a human-bred substitute ecologically acceptable? Given that the Heck Cattle were in fact bred by the Nazis in their effort to restore “pure” European nature, are such introductions socially acceptable? In a world desperate for the protection of existing wilderness (to say nothing of clean water and air), are expensive efforts at creating new wildernesses practical, or elitist?

This view from the Netherlands makes our global situation easier to understand, though perhaps no simpler to solve. The contradictory proposition – dramatically transforming the environment in ways that may preserve the environment – is a metaphor for the condition of our longstanding relationship to the non-human world. From this view, Oostvaardersplassen is in no way unique. Yellowstone National Park in the United States, though heralded as a wilderness, was created through the violent extirpation of the dozens of native tribes who lived in the region, transformed its landscapes, and relied on the resources of what would become a park devoid of people. Coffee plantations throughout Asia and Latin America, though regarded purely as economic and artificial landscapes, often teem with wild birds, mammals, and insects, all beyond the intent and control of farmers, conservationists, or anyone else for that matter. Everywhere we seek some place beyond people, the marks of human creation and destruction confront us, and wherever the works of humans are in evidence, there are non-human systems and creatures, all operating in their own way.

Decisions made in places like Oostvaardersplassen, 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 animals, plants, and waterways springing from human interventions, creating altogether new habitats and environments. Wildlife parks and coffee

4 Introduction: The View from a Human-Made Wilderness

Anthropocene A metaphoric term sometimes applied to our current era, when people exert enormous influence on environments all around the Earth, but where control of these environments and their enormously complex ecologies is inevitably elusive

plantations are *both* landscapes of the **Anthropocene**, therefore, one term for our current era, when people exert enormous influence on the Earth, but where control of these environments and their enormously complex ecologies is inevitably elusive.

If decisions about what to do (and what not to do) are to be made, and the larger complex puzzle of living *within* nature is to be solved, 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 creation of a Dutch wilderness 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 people with competing claims on the scarce resources required in this undertaking or that of the animals themselves?), 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 these muddy lands, which specific species are selected and why, whose pockets are filled in the process, and how decisions are controlled and directed through circuits of expert power and conservation 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 park.

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 these relationships and linkages. 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 nine 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 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, CO₂ 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. Chapter 12 addresses uranium, a natural element that has been harnessed for extraordinary power and benefit, but which has a history rich in danger, injustice, and environmental harm. The tuna takes center stage in Chapter 13, 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 14 discusses lawns and the risks posed by the artificial chemical inputs required to maintain them. Chapter 15 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 next examine French fries (also called “chips”!) in Chapter 16, 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. We close by addressing e-waste in Chapter 17, all the hazardous trash from cell phones, computers, and other electronics that continues to build up in landfills around the world, but which has also become a source of “treasure” for people and companies who mine it for recyclable materials.

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 commonalities, of both people and things.

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 implications of divergent ways of seeing environmental issues.

We have also provided boxed discussions throughout the text entitled: “Environmental Solution?” Our use of the question mark is both intentional and provocative. All the examples we describe have been considered, by someone, to be a solution to environmental problems. We invite readers to consider whether these solutions make sense but also to interrogate the theoretical assumptions that underpin each such solution, using the tools we have provided in the text to think critically about what constitutes a sensible way to address environmental challenges.

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 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

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

Reconciliation Ecology A science of imagining, creating, and sustaining habitats, productive environments, and biodiversity in places used, traveled, and inhabited by human beings

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 2012). This means that we have some special sympathy for themes from political economy and social construction.

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.

We also share an assumption that persistent systems of power, though they often lead to perverse outcomes, sometimes provide opportunities for progressive environmental action and avenues toward better human–environment relationships. We are stuck in a tangled web, in other words, but this allows us many strands to pull upon and many resources to weave new outcomes.

As a result, we also stress throughout the volume a preference for some form of **reconciliation ecology**. As described by ecologist Michael Rosenzweig (2003), this describes a science of imagining, creating, and sustaining habitats, productive environments, and biodiversity in places used, traveled, and inhabited by human beings. This point of view holds that while many of the persistent human actions of the past have stubbornly caused and perpetuated environmental problems, the solution to these problems can never be a world somehow bereft of human activity, work, inventiveness, and craft. Such a point of view does not deny the importance of making special places (conservation areas, for example) for wild animals, sensitive species, or rare ecosystems. But it does stress that the critical work of making a “greener” world will happen in cities, towns, laboratories, factories, and farms, amidst human activity, and not in an imaginary natural world, somewhere “out there.” As Emma Marris describes the possibilities of such a world, she invokes the metaphor of the Earth and its ecosystems as a “Rambunctious Garden,” a hybrid of wild nature and human activity (Marris 2011).

For all the weight of our own views, however, we strongly believe in the analytical challenges presented by *all* of the approaches described here. It is our intention, therefore, to present the most convincing and compelling arguments of the many and diverse ways of viewing society and environment. We insist that, while it is impossible for us to present a fully unbiased view of the many ways of thinking about nature, it is possible to present fair characterizations of many points of view, characterizations without caricatures. Only the reader can judge our success in this regard.

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Part 1

Approaches and Perspectives

2

Population and Scarcity



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Chapter Menu

A Crowded Desert City	14
The Problem of "Geometric" Growth	15
Population, Development, and Environment Impact	17
The Other Side of the Coin: Population and Innovation	20
Limits to Population: An Effect Rather than a Cause?	22
Thinking with Population	27

Keywords

- Birth rate
- Carrying capacity
- Death rate
- Demographic transition model
- Ecological footprint
- Exponential growth
- Fertility rate
- Forest transition theory
- Green Revolution
- Induced intensification
- Kuznets curve (environmental)
- Neo-Malthusians
- Zero population growth

A Crowded Desert City

A trip into Phoenix, Arizona on almost any day of the week is a journey into a dense haze of exhaust fumes, ozone, and blowing dust. This desert metropolis of four million people is the tangled conurbation of 10 separate cities, together planted squarely in a low desert depression: “The Valley of the Sun.”

The city effectively did not exist at the turn of the twentieth century. In a place that receives seven inches of rain a year and where summer temperatures can exceed 120°F for many days in a row, it was a largely overlooked site for settlement during the period of American Westward expansion, though a range of native peoples had adapted and thrived in the area in small numbers in the centuries prior.

Starting in the 1950s, new people began to arrive in the area, bringing with them new demands for land and water. Going from a half million people before 1960 to its present size, the rate of growth in the valley has been on the order of 40 percent per decade. In the 1990s, the population grew by roughly 300 people per day, as a sun belt economy mushroomed in the region, driven by high tech production, service industries, and retirement communities. As of 2012, Phoenix is home to 1.5 million people, making it the fifth largest city in the United States.

With each new person comes more demand for limited available water, the production of mounds of garbage, and the disturbance of large areas for new home construction. Given weeks on end with temperatures above 100°F (more than 38°C), summer demands for air conditioning are constant. The hundreds of thousands of cars in the region (two automobiles per household) each emit roughly their own weight in greenhouse gases per year, contributing seriously to both local air pollution and global climate change. The dramatic rate of population growth poses obvious questions about the limits of the land, water, and air to support the city.

Still, there is more than just the *number* of people to concern us here. The average person in Phoenix consumes more than 225 gallons of water per day. This compares poorly even to nearby municipalities like Tucson, where an average individual uses around 160 gallons a day. Where does all this water go? To dishwashers and toilets, among other things, but also to green lawns and vast green landscapes in the desert. Given that by best estimates the minimum amount of water required for human survival is perhaps five gallons a day, it is clear that the affluence and living conditions of people in Phoenix are as important contributors to water use as the overall number of residents.

Either way, the human pressure on resources in the region is tremendous and that impact is by no means limited to water. As new home sites devour land across the valley, the habitat of rare and important desert species (like Gila monsters – rare and fabulous local lizards) declines as well, with implications for global biodiversity. Dense human habitation and activity also encourages the arrival and spread of invasive species and increases the risk of fire hazards across the region. There is a growing human footprint in The Valley of the Sun.

To what degree do the explosive numbers of people in Phoenix represent an environmental crisis? How have affluence and lifestyle influenced this impact? Is there enough