

Political ecology: where is the policy?

Peter A. Walker

Department of Geography, University of Oregon, Eugene,
OR 97403-1251, USA

I Introduction

I ask readers to forgive a brief indulgence in personal anecdote, albeit ostensibly for a purpose. In youth I studied in India as an undergraduate, served in Sierra Leone as a Peace Corps volunteer, and worked as a research consultant in Malawi. From these diverse experiences, I was, like many others, bewildered that conventional development and environmental policies so often go so badly wrong. I read Graham Hancock's plaintive *Lords of poverty* (1989), which offered darkly searing critique but little analytical basis for more effective solutions. Until I could better understand the failures of development, a career in this field seemed ruled out. Looking for a new direction, in the early 1990s I stumbled onto geography, and, at the recommendation of friends, studied the emerging subfield of political ecology. I read Michael Watts' *Silent violence* (1983) and Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield's *Land degradation and society* (1987). Although these were quite different books (one rich in theory; the other also rich in theory but with a more applied approach), I felt I had found my intellectual home. Political ecology offered powerful analytical tools to understand more holistically the social and environmental problems I had observed, without the intellectual restraints of narrower disciplines. Surely, I thought, the purpose of this kind of deep analysis is to help

solve these problems. That is why, as I began my professional career as a geographer, I was quite surprised to find that political ecology is divided and ambivalent in its attitude toward and engagement with environmental and social policy.

Indeed, it is possible at times to feel that political ecologists perceive policy as a kind of uncouth distant cousin to be kept at a safe distance. At the 2000 Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers, an eminent political ecologist on a major panel about the history of political ecology responded to criticism that the subfield lacks engagement with practical problem-solving with a statement memorable for its blunt honesty: 'I feel no obligation', said the political ecologist, 'to be useful'.¹ This position is by no means representative of the subfield as a whole (indeed, with its diversity today, it may be impossible for any statement to be representative of this subfield as whole). Yet, in an odd harmony of unkindred souls, some professional policy-makers share this disinterest in linking to political ecology. Another prominent political ecologist recently quoted a World Bank representative attending a joint workshop for scholars and policy-makers as responding to a political ecology paper by saying, 'If this came across my desk, I'd throw it in the trash as useless and ill-informed (or something to that effect)'.² Other scholars of

political ecology and related fields observe similar skepticism and distrust of political ecology among bureaucrats and policy-makers. Again, by no means does this represent the attitudes or experiences of all political ecologists. Yet, it does illustrate the apathy, if not actual antipathy, that sometimes characterizes the relationship between political ecology and applied policy.

It seems surprising that political ecologists and policy-makers are often disinterested or even disdainful of each other. The subject matter of their work and their own professed goals are often the same. Moreover, this ambivalence appears (at least superficially) inconsistent with the history and stated goals of political ecology. For example, Piers Blaikie's book *Political economy of soil erosion* (1985) is often described as a pioneering work of neo-Marxian development critique and as a foundational text in political ecology. It was published with the clearly stated purpose of helping international aid agencies, development organizations, and charities understand the question 'Why do policies usually fail?' (the title of the book's fourth chapter). As discussed later in this essay, the 'New approach' (Chapter 5) that Blaikie offered got him in trouble with some policy-makers. Nevertheless, the book clearly focused on constructively engaging policy, in language that policy-makers could understand (events following publication of the book suggest that perhaps they understood it *too well*).

The structural neo-Marxian approach of political ecology pioneered by Blaikie and others was followed in the 1990s by a shift toward poststructuralist approaches, but much of the poststructuralist work in political ecology also focused strongly on engaging policy. Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, Fellows of the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex, co-edited the landmark political ecology text *The lie of the land* (1996) based on proceedings of a policy conference. Peet and Watts' enormously influential political ecology text

Liberation ecologies (1996) stated that its goal was to 'raise the emancipatory potential of environmental ideas and to engage directly with the larger landscape of debates over modernity, its institutions, and its knowledges' (p. 37). One might reasonably assume that development and environmental *policy* is a central feature of this intellectual and institutional landscape.

Yet, despite its rich history and professed interest in engaging public debate, the actual engagement of political ecology with fields of research and public debate outside the academy has been limited. For example, political ecology has had virtually no engagement with some of the world's most important international research programs dealing with environmental change and human-environmental relations, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change, and the Millennial Ecosystems Assessment (Turner in Murphy, 2005: 10). Nor have political ecologists had any major discernible presence at the United States National Academy of Sciences or the National Research Council. Political ecologists *have* established some links to important non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Social Science Research Council and a number of international development NGOs. Overall, however, the subfield remains largely inward-looking, directing much of its attention to scholarly debates within the academy. To be fair, the limited engagement of political ecology with broader social and environmental research, discourse, and policy may in part reflect the general weakness of public engagement by the discipline of geography as a whole (Murphy, 2005). Yet, as a field that largely emerged from critiques of policy, and owes much of its intellectual genealogy to applied fields such as hazards studies (Watts and Peet, 2004: 8), the ambivalence toward policy among many political ecologists seems puzzling.

How can we understand this apparent ambivalence? How can we explain the indifference, if not actual hostility, toward political ecology by some policy-makers? These are the questions this essay examines. The reader (and certainly the author) may be disappointed that this essay provides no firm answers but, after 20 years of an uncertain and sometimes tense relationship between political ecology and policy, these questions merit greater discussion.

II The blind men and the elephant: talking to the 'outside' world

Any discussion of political ecology today reminds one of the dangers suggested by the Buddhist parable of the blind men who touched different parts of an elephant and described it to the emperor, producing fierce quarrels as each described something different, yet part of a whole. Scholarship that is identified under the label of political ecology today is so diverse in its objectives, epistemologies, and methods that one can only discuss this 'subfield' with enormous trepidation, recognizing that it is in fact many diverse areas of scholarship lacking any single coherent theoretical approach or message.³ Yet a rapidly growing number of geographers identify themselves or their work as political ecology.⁴ Among them, it is true that some political ecologists simply do not aspire to advise or work with policy-makers. It is *not* true that political ecology *as a whole* does not engage policy. Some of the most distinguished political ecologists are deeply immersed professionally and intellectually in the world of applied policy. Anthony Bebbington, Piers Blaikie, Dianne Rocheleau, and Jesse Ribot (to name a few) come to mind.

Yet some political ecologists express concern that these are the exceptions that prove the rule. To quote British geographer and political ecologist Simon Batterbury, many feel strongly that political ecology as a whole 'should (but often does not) step outside the classroom and conference circuit'.⁵ This essay may be of no interest to those political

ecologists who do not share this concern. For those who do, this essay is an effort to consider some of the possible barriers and opportunities for communicating ideas from political ecology more effectively so they may be linked to efforts to solve specific social and environmental problems outside the academy. As to those in the policy world who are skeptical or dismissive of political ecology, this essay will suggest that one possible means to overcome this skepticism is for the subfield as a whole – recognizing all its diversity – to learn to 'talk' more effectively about what it is, and what it can offer. This essay does not attempt to provide answers; rather, its purpose is to stimulate dialog. The following sections offer some initial, tentative thoughts about barriers and opportunities for more productive engagement between political ecology and policy. These ideas are presented in no particular order other than as they occurred to the author.

III Compelling counter-narratives: missing in action

Consider the most influential social science narratives in modern history. The population 'explosion'. The 'tragedy of the commons'. The 'invisible hand' of the free market. Each is simple, clear, compelling – and powerful. None was created by critical social scientists. In contrast, like other fields of social theory, political ecology is not famous for producing concise and compelling narratives. Political ecology is better known for complexity and often dense theoretical prose – for example, Blaikie's (1985) almost humorously Rube Goldberg-esque box-and-arrow diagrams, or Watts' (1983) dense, arcane, and frustrating (but valuable) language of 'high Marx' (as Robbins, 2004: 68, has described it).

To be sure, this complexity and theoretical richness is the very backbone of political ecology's enormous analytical strengths; but with respect to influencing the world of policy outside the academy, this thickness can also be an obstacle. In his book *Narrative policy analysis* (1994), Emery Roe demonstrates

convincingly that it is rarely sufficient merely to provide accurate analytical critiques of policies. It may matter little that a critique is brilliantly insightful and true; critique *alone* rarely produces significant policy changes. Indeed, critique by itself can have the opposite effect of creating uncertainty and reinforcing the status quo. What is needed, according to Roe, are compelling *counter-narratives*.

As a whole, political ecology has not been notably successful in creating effective counter-narratives. In fact, for all its deeply insightful critique, political ecology (and Geography as a whole) has had relatively little impact in retelling the 'big stories' that dominate public discourse outside the academy. For example, from its inception political ecology has done battle with deeply flawed neo-Malthusian theories of population growth and environmental degradation. Yet political ecology has produced no counter-narratives that are remotely as influential as the powerful imagery of the population 'bomb' or the population 'explosion' (Ehrlich, 1968; Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1990).⁶ Indeed, in the realm of public debate, political ecology (and critical social theory generally) has been trounced in recent years by widely influential and popular yet deeply flawed and unapologetic neo-Malthusian rants such as Robert Kaplan's (1994) 'The coming anarchy' and Jared Diamond's (2005) *Collapse*.

Political ecologists might be credited for refusing to 'dumb down' their analysis to compete with the shallow but seductive narratives by authors such as Kaplan and Diamond. Political ecologists (and other social theorists) have unquestionably demolished simplistic neo-Malthusian theory on paper. Yet intellectual purity does little to change policy, and neo-Malthusian theory (albeit with some modifications – for example, Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2004) still largely dominates policy discourse. This begs the question: if a mighty 'received wisdom' falls in the dense forest of social theory but no one hears it, did it make a sound? Did it really *fall*?

It could be argued that the most fundamental role of political ecology is to question the oversimplifying and misleading conventional views of human-environment relations, not to compete in a race to the intellectual bottom. However, this notion would mistakenly conflate the problem of oversimplification in analysis with the skills of good storytelling. These are not the same. Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' (1968) and Ehrlich's 'population bomb' (1968) succeeded so phenomenally well not because they oversimplified reality (which they did), nor even because they supported the entrenched power of political-economic elites (which they also did): they succeeded in large measure because they were good stories that effectively communicated a powerful idea. It is not uncommon to hear political ecologists grumble that fields such as economics, political science, and biology dominate policy debates because they strip away complex social realities. This may be true, but it does not follow that the reason for their success is analytical oversimplification *per se*; rather, these fields have succeeded largely because they tell good 'stories' (though it is reasonable to suggest that simplification in analysis makes it easier to tell clear stories).

There is no reason that political ecology cannot tell good stories as well. Some of the very best and most influential works in political ecology have succeeded not because they have stripped their theoretical work to fit into sound-bite proportions, but because they have skillfully honed top-flight social and environmental research into elegant and powerful counter-narratives. Perhaps the best known of such works is the research presented in Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns' (1996) *The lie of the land* (the success of this book probably owes in no small part to its powerful and memorable title, which almost dares the audience to read on). This book responded directly to powerful, widely perceived images of environmental change within professional development circles and popular news and media. The book challenged conventional

narratives ('orthodoxies' and 'received wisdom') that lead to misguided or even fundamentally flawed policy. The book became (by the standards of scholarly books) a wild success, read by both researchers and decision-makers in many important policy institutions.

The research presented in *The lie of the land* was not new; rather, the success of this book derived from two sources: 1) an explicitly *comparative* analysis in which the case studies are presented so as to add up to 'more than the sum of their parts' (p. 4); and 2) an approach that recognizes policy orthodoxies as stories (Roe, 1991) that embody relationships of power (Foucault, 1981) that circulate among professional communities and can be 'un-told' through construction of effective counter-narratives. A counter-narrative approach recognizes that an effective challenge to flawed and power-laden 'received wisdom' not only depends on debunking science, but also requires penetrating and disrupting the flow of old, comfortable, convenient stories that circulate among environmental and development professionals, and replacing them with 'counter-narratives which better fit the claims of a different set of stakeholders; preferably, counter-narratives with equally attractive slogans and labels' (p. 33).

The real breakthrough, the key meta-narrative that Leach and Mearns offer, is the power of narrative itself: certain 'scientific' ideas are accepted because they have always been accepted – and can be challenged as such.⁷ Specifically, certain narratives may have been accepted because they fit conveniently with the political-economic interests of powerful elites (including policy-makers themselves), or simply because within the world of policy actors and networks certain foundational beliefs (accurate or not) become 'sticky' as institutions and careers are built around them (p. 28). Thus, a counter-narrative approach begins with Roe's (1991; 1994) observation that it is not enough to merely critique existing stories; rather, it is necessary to understand the social conditions that produce

and reproduce such stories (Forsyth, 2003), and to use this knowledge to supplant false narratives with stories that are scientifically robust and have the capacity to sustain and liberate both humans and nature. While political ecologists have shown great skill as critics, if they wish to influence policy they must learn, as Leach and Mearns (1996) put it, that "'better scientific research" is unlikely to have practical impact' (p. 30) unless this research is deliberately translated and projected into public debate in the form of clear and compelling counter-narratives. In short, political ecologists must become better storytellers.

IV The question of scale and integration

In describing research in development geography (a field closely related and overlapping with political ecology – see Peet and Watts, 1996), Anthony Bebbington (2003) has argued that this subfield has left few marks on the broader canvas of development theory and the ideas and practices of development organizations. In part, this is because the subfield has focused on research at the scale of the individual 'local' case study, making it difficult to ascertain the significance of such studies to broader development concerns. To address this problem, Bebbington calls for a greater effort toward comparative and broader-scale studies:

A second dimension of building better theory is by 'theorizing up' from place-based studies. Central to this is comparison of these different casual processes and factors across place-based studies . . . without such comparison and integration, it always remains unclear what to do with place-based case studies. They remain open to the charge (fair or not) that they are ultimately case specific and poorly linked to a wider context (or a broader population of similar cases) of which they are part. They remain subject to the criticism (again, fair or not) that they are in the end anecdotal . . . the dependence on single stories reduces the likelihood of influencing many bodies of thought, be they those that dominate development orthodoxy and its institutions or

those that lead ultimately to the formation of strategy in both liberal and alternative NGOs and social organizations. (Bebbington, 2003: 303)

A very similar argument could be made with respect to political ecology. While the early 'structural' political ecology often focused on broad regional themes (again, Blaikie's work in Nepal; or Hecht and Cockburn's broad-canvas examination of deforestation in the Amazon, 1990), by the early 1990s the field had shifted largely toward research that Donald Moore describes as focused on 'the micro-politics of peasant struggles over access to productive resources' and 'the symbolic contestations that constitute those struggles' (1996: 126). To be sure, by no means all work that is assumed under the label of political ecology focuses on individual 'micro'-scale case studies. For example, works on development and social movements in Latin America (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Escobar, 1995) and works on globalization and environment (Stonich and Bailey, 2000; Escobar, 2001; Goodman, 2004; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004) have made laudable efforts to 'theorize up'.

Yet it is also true that a very large proportion of today's political ecology still focuses on individual case studies with relatively weakly developed efforts to compare or contrast these case studies, or to synthesize these studies into broader, integrated regional (Walker, 2003) or global analysis. For example, some of the best efforts toward theoretical synthesis in political ecology today consist of edited volumes with broad introductory theoretical chapters followed by individual, independent case studies assembled *post hoc* under broad themes such as 'discourse' and 'institutions and governance' (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003; Peet and Watts, 2004). While these efforts should be applauded, the degree to which these can be considered to achieve a comparative integration and an effective 'theorizing up' is open to question, given the very different contexts, methods, and analytical categories of these individual cases.

The difficulties of weaving these place-based studies together *post hoc* into an integrative whole appear extremely daunting. A more coordinated comparative program based on individual case studies built from the initial stages of research design around common sets of theoretical questions, methods, and analytical categories and language may be called for.

V The Marx question

One might think that, with the fall of the Berlin wall receding into history and with western capitalism in a triumphant mood, the old reflexive hostility among mainstream policy-makers toward all things Marxian would have dissipated. One would be wrong. With its roots in Marxian political economy (Watts and Peet, 2004), political ecology's genealogy hardly opens doors in mainstream policy institutions. As Piers Blaikie recently observed, even today 'An overt Marxian analysis would make most policy makers bin the report after page 2.'⁸

Blaikie speaks from experience. His book *Political economy of soil erosion* (1985), a foundational text in political ecology, offered a powerful structuralist neo-Marxian explanation of soil erosion in Nepal. In combination with an earlier book, *Nepal in crisis* (Blaikie *et al.*, 1980), Blaikie's blunt challenge to class-based systems of accumulation in Nepal caused the Nepali government temporarily to ban him from the country (see Robbins, 2004: 53). Later, however, when multiparty democracy was introduced in Nepal, Blaikie states that he and his co-authors of *Nepal in crisis* became 'the flavor of the month' among policy-makers in the country. However, apparently that month expired. As Blaikie describes it:

[After the introduction of multiparty elections, I had] no problems and all doors were open but I feel that I and co-authors of [*Nepal in crisis*] might now have difficulty in re-entering Nepal with the present retrogressive policies of the king and army. The book did play a part in the introduction of democracy since the then-PM (B.P. Koirala) was photographed in a

newspaper holding our book, and became a rallying point for dissent and reform . . . not so much for the intrinsic quality of the book but simply there were no others like it. The banning of the book was due to the dependista approach and the critique of 'semi-feudalism' and land owning classes in Nepal.⁹

This experience may be an extreme example of the political difficulties associated with applying neo-Marxian critiques to policy analysis, but it also illustrates the enormous power of such critiques – Blaikie's books became popular and even iconic in the democratic Nepal that his writings helped to create precisely because his critiques were effective (which is also, of course, why Blaikie became *persona non grata* to Nepal's elite political classes).

These difficulties are not necessarily representative of works in political ecology today, which typically do not use overtly neo-Marxian analysis. To be sure, the focus on social relations of production and power as they shape human relations with nature remains perhaps the most definitive trait of political ecology (owing not in small part to the ubiquitous citations of Blaikie, Peet and Watts, and other neo-Marxian scholars). Indeed, critics of political ecology have argued that the purportedly dogmatic focus on relationships of political power is the subfield's biggest flaw (Vayda and Walters, 1999). Yet the time when political ecology scholarship framed its analysis in explicitly structuralist neo-Marxian terms (capital accumulation, surplus extraction, and so on) has largely passed (indeed, many traditional Marxian scholars have lamented the diminution of structuralist approaches in political ecology).

For example, in recent years Piers Blaikie himself has been accused by the more traditional Marxian scholars in the subfield of leaving Marx behind as he moved into a career as a consultant and activist. Today, Blaikie argues that 'Marxism is thoroughly out of favor and is considered arcane and deeply flawed in most quarters' (cited in Robbins, 2004: 53). In Blaikie's own words, the more

traditional neo-Marxian scholars in the subfield accused him of 'selling out the revolution'. To this Blaikie responds simply, 'there is the academy and [there is] the messy, constrained world outside'.¹⁰

Yet, analysis of *power* remains central in political ecology. Issues of justice, inequality, poverty, exploitation, and the structural reasons for the reproduction of poverty remain at the core of the subfield even if the theoretical language is muted. With or without overt Marxian language, it is probably fair to say that political ecology that does not focus on power as it shapes human-environmental relations would not be political ecology as most recognize it today. Some who have shed overt Marxian language perceive that these sorts of critiques of power can go a long way in the policy world and lead to important and positive changes.¹¹ For example, while drawing on neo-Marxian scholarship, distinguished political ecologist Dianne Rocheleau and others have been instrumental in advancing gender analysis among major international development and environmental policy organizations while using language that focuses tightly on relations of power but is largely free of heavy-footed and abstract analytical constructions (see Rocheleau *et al.*, 1988; Rocheleau *et al.*, 1996).

The upshot of all this with respect to policy is that, while political ecologists will no doubt continue to argue among themselves about the appropriate place for Marx, the legacy of Marxian analysis in political ecology will continue to present a sometimes awkward choice. For political ecologists who desire to engage policy and still work with Marxian analytical methods, the question arises whether a degree of compromise and even subterfuge is justified to get the camel's nose of radical critique under the tent of mainstream policy.

While some political ecologists resolve this question by leaving behind the subfield's Marxian analytical language, the label 'political ecology' and its association with Marxism *has* become known to some in the policy world.

Thus, for those political ecologists who wish to engage policy without explicitly incorporating Marxian analysis, it may be appropriate to challenge the now-conventional narratives of the intellectual history of the subfield that focus heavily on political ecology's Marxian roots (for example, see Paulson *et al.*, 2003). While not disowning these Marxian roots, the subfield has clearly moved in new directions – a fact that may be relevant when engaging policy. Neo-Marxian political ecologist Michael Watts has argued in another context (ie, whether political ecology should focus on biophysical ecology) that the subfield should celebrate its diversity, and 'let the flowers of openness and dialogue bloom' (2003: 12). With respect to its approach to political economy, that is exactly what happened: political ecology today has blossomed in a wide assortment of colors (not all of them red) – a fact that those political ecologists who wish to engage policy may find useful to point out when communicating with the 'messy, constrained world outside'.

VI 'To whom do we speak?'

The question of whether and how political ecologists can speak more effectively to a broader audience, including policy-makers, is a variation on a perennial question: to whom does political ecology speak (or wish to speak)? The answer to this question is evident in the choices of venues through which political ecologists present their work. If these venues are any indication, to a very considerable extent political ecologists appear to speak to other political ecologists (and perhaps to others in closely related fields). To the degree that political ecologists speak to others in their subfield through venues that are rarely accessed by those outside the academy, it is not surprising that political ecologists are marginalized in broader public debates.

Table 1, for example, may give some illustration of the degree to which the ideas of political ecologists are marginalized in public debates. The table lists the Amazon.com sales ranks of major books (including all fiction

and nonfiction) on themes of economic globalization, population, inequality and environment. At the top of the list (ranked 5 overall) is *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's *The world is flat*, a book that describes the world's rich and poor as 'lions' and 'gazelles' – a world that Friedman celebrates as desirable and unstoppable even though 'the weak will fall farther behind'. Not far behind Friedman's book are Jared Diamond's *Collapse* and *Guns, germs, and steel* (29 and 41, respectively), which explain global inequality as largely derived from environmental factors, and blame social collapses on population growth and 'eco-meltdowns'. Far behind the pack (36,820) is the revised 2004 edition of Donella Meadows *et al.*'s classic *Limits to growth*,¹² which uses the classic neo-Malthusian language of population 'overshoot' to explain today's environmental crises.

The field of political ecology exists in no small measure as a critical response to this sort of neo-Malthusian and pro-globalization argument. Yet, if the position of a body of ideas on the Amazon.com sales ranks can be taken as any measure of the degree to which it has penetrated public debate, political ecologists continue to be left in the dust behind their long-time rivals. At this writing, the highest-ranked major book of political ecology is Paul Robbins' *Political ecology: a critical introduction*, at 75,862, which sells fewer than half as many books as Meadows' *Limits to growth* – a book that has been a top-seller for more than three decades. The other contenders among major books in political ecology – Peet and Watts' 2004 edition of *Liberation ecologies*, Zimmerer and Bassett's *Political ecology*, and the now-classic *Fate of the forest* by Hecht and Cockburn – do not, combined, sell more than a small fraction of the number of books as Friedman or Diamond.

Sales ranks are unquestionably a crude measure of the impact of a field of intellectual inquiry. Yet these figures at least raise some important observations. First (and rather obviously), works such as *The world is flat* and

Table 1 Books (paperback editions) by sales rank on Amazon.com, 17 August 2005

| Author, year | Title | Publisher | Amazon.com sales rank |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Friedman, 2005 | <i>The world is flat</i> | Farrar, Straus and Giroux | 5 |
| Diamond, 2005 | <i>Collapse</i> | Viking | 29 |
| Diamond, 1999 | <i>Guns, germs and steel</i> | Norton | 41 |
| Meadows <i>et al.</i> , 2004 | <i>Limits to growth</i> | Chelsea Green | 36,820 |
| Robbins, 2004 | <i>Political ecology</i> | Blackwell | 75,862 |
| Peet and Watts, 2004 | <i>Liberation ecologies</i> | Routledge | 229,203 |
| Zimmerer and Bossett, 2003 | <i>Political ecology</i> | Guilford | 531,106 |
| Hecht and Cockburn, 1990 | <i>Fate of the forest</i> | HarperCollins | 623,776 |

Guns, germs, and steel were specifically written for a popular audience and marketed as trade books by major publishing companies. In contrast, most works in political ecology were published primarily through academic publishers for scholarly audiences. The major exception is *Fate of the forest* – a book that proved that a political ecology approach, when written for a general audience and marketed by a major publishing company, can reach a mass audience. The low sales rank for this book reflects the fact that this is now an old book, and its impact has faded. More importantly, arguably no book with a comparable critical political ecology edge has been marketed to a general audience in 15 years. The other observation from this list is that the style and language of these books is very different: the books by Friedman, Diamond, and Meadows are all praised by *Publishers Weekly* for being written with ‘accessible prose’ and ‘brilliant exposition’ (or similar terms). Few such words of praise for accessibility are offered to the books of political ecology.¹³

A similar pattern can be observed in journal publication. Using the Web of Science journal database, a search conducted in August 2005 for all major research or review articles published in geography or related interdisciplinary journals between January 2004 and June 2005 and identified by the phrase ‘political ecology’ in the topic or title

retrieved 48 articles. Of these, only eight articles (17%) appeared in journals that could be said to clearly aim at a broad audience that extends beyond the academic community.¹⁴ The great majority of political ecology articles appear in journals such as *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *Geographical Journal*, *Cultural Geographies* and others that define the research frontier but do not circulate widely among development or environmental policy professionals.

Again, this is a crude index, and it has a major weakness: it does not account for the very considerable number of publications that appear in the so-called ‘gray literature’ of professional development and environmental agencies and organizations that is usually not indexed and not easily enumerated. For example, some excellent political ecologists have worked directly within organizations such as the World Resources Institute (eg, Jesse Ribot) and the World Wildlife Fund (eg, Jennifer Olson). The contributions of these scholars in bringing the critical edge of political ecology into the realm of applied programs and policy should not be underestimated. However, these political ecologists remain relatively few in relation to the larger group of political ecologists whose careers are based primarily in academic institutions where

success is measured by traditional academic indices of scholarly achievement that focus heavily on publication of books and journal articles that have high conventional (ie, academic) 'impact' indicators (a very curious term worthy of serious critical deconstruction of its own!).¹⁵ Again, it is difficult to enumerate the influence of these amphibious political ecologists who straddle the academic and professional realms, but this is one potentially important avenue through which the subfield may reach out to enhance its true 'impact' on the world at large.

VII 'Who are we? Why are we here?'

The question 'to whom do we speak?' supposes, perhaps erroneously, that there is some coherent 'we' and something coherent that 'we' wish to say. This may be the biggest challenge of all for political ecologists who wish to speak to a broader public. There is simply no easy or universally agreed-upon answer to the questions of what political ecology is and what it does. As the field has grown, it has expanded in so many directions simultaneously that advocates and critics alike have questioned whether political ecology retains any coherence at all. Distinguished political ecologist Michael Watts (2000: 592) has observed: 'Political ecology has in a sense almost dissolved itself ... as scholars have sought to extend its reach ... [forming] a hugely expanded and polyglot landscape of political ecology.' Similarly, political ecology skeptic Billie Lee Turner has repeatedly voiced concern (in many public forums) that political ecology in its poststructuralist phase (see Bassett and Zimmerer, 2004) has grown to encompass so many various mixes of world-views that it is very difficult to discern any consistent meaning to the label (other than, perhaps, a shared antipathy toward postpositivist science).

If political ecology is to be largely an academic pursuit, this 'let a thousand flowers bloom' trend may be intellectually productive. If political ecology is to project itself into broader public debates, however, this poses a

problem. To the outside world, the first, natural question is 'What is political ecology?' Paul Robbins (2004: 12) has boldly gone where few have gone before by synthesizing many definitions of political ecology to offer the following: '[political ecology is] empirical, research-based explorations to explain linkages in the condition and change of social/environmental systems, with explicit consideration of relations of power.' This definition is as meaningful as any put forward so far, but the range of 'explorations' and 'linkages' in social/environmental systems under the label of political ecology is vast. For example, political ecology reveals the importance of non-timber forest products to First Nation communities in the remote Yukon (Natcher *et al.*, 2004) as well as the interactions between molecules, organisms, and the global biotechnology industry as regulated by intellectual property regimes under the World Trade Organization (McAfee, 2003). The span of theoretical approaches is as wide as the range of subject matter: from high Marxian theoretical critiques of capitalism (O'Connor, 1998) to studies of the formation of social capital and sustainable livelihood strategies by indigenous rural social movements (Bebbington, 1997). Robbins is correct that these disparate studies share some common elements, but the terrain across which these common themes have been stretched is so vast that the commonalities are all but invisible. Even for self-identified political ecologists, the subfield has expanded so greatly that it is no small task to explain what the subfield is and what it does. If 'political ecology' can mean almost anything, it can also mean almost nothing. The danger is that, to those outside, political ecology may come to appear as little more than disarticulated intellectual sprawl under a catchy label.

Simon Batterbury eloquently expressed his concerns about the impact of this sprawl within the subfield in a speech to the Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group at the annual conference of the Association of American Geographers in 2004.¹⁶ Batterbury

stated that the failure of political ecology that concerns him most is the lack of more explicit links between the subfield and environmental problems and concerns outside the academy:

Cultural and political ecology has not offered a strong and unified response to the major environmental debates and challenges of our time. Our own Specialty Group – perhaps by choice, perhaps because of our multiple foci and research objectives – does not engage in programmatic statements, lobbying, or coordinated research efforts . . . this lack of unity reduces our visibility, and allows analytical perspectives with narrower methods to be more readily embraced by policymakers. These include approaches that have different epistemologies – environmental economics, and the conservation-focused resource and ecological sciences . . . the role of the ‘analytical critic’, which many of us adopt, works best when it at least provides *some* tractable alternative proposals to the environmental and social problems that our research uncovers . . . Political ecology has an edge, and an opening here – it can be a critical ‘hatchet’ but also a ‘seed’ for new patterns . . . (Robbins 2004). Consider [for example] the disgraceful actions of the US government to deny the severity of global warming and the American consumer’s 25% contribution to it – we need to expose the free-market, anti-environmental agenda behind such actions, but also to conduct the careful work that people like Diana Liverman have been doing with researchers and policymakers in the USA, prefiguring more sustainable alternatives (Liverman 2004).

In short, the diffusion of political ecology may be a strength within the academy, but it poses an obstacle to the ability of the field to mount coordinated efforts to resolve tangible problems in the world outside. This is by no means a call for a more unitary or regimented approach to research. Rather, it suggests a need for better articulation and coordination as an intellectual *community* to put the vast wealth of knowledge generated within the subfield to work for tangible problem-solving. Such an effort would be a deliberate, normative, and *radical* act in a subfield that generally claims to aspire to these objectives. Critique alone is insufficient to generate change. This is the unfulfilled promise of political ecology,

and it is no small challenge. As Robbins (2004: 53) has stated: ‘Balancing criticism and effective policy intervention – weighing political ecology’s hatchet against its seed – is demonstrably difficult.’ Political ecology has long claimed the mantle of a normative and politically activist radical field. To take a hatchet to unjust and ineffective social and environmental policies is a *political* act. To *fail*, as many would argue political ecology has, to work together in some greater kind of unity to plant and tend the seed in the ground cleared by the hatchet is also a political act.¹⁷ One that few political ecologists desire.

VIII Conclusion

Political ecology has an enormous amount to offer to help create a more just and sustainable world, but this potential is underutilized. Critique by itself is not engagement. Virtually all political ecology research has policy relevance, but policy relevance alone does not mean the research is used effectively, or appropriately. Not every political ecologist sees this as a problem, but many believe the field can and should reach out more proactively. The challenges are not small. These include a need to more clearly articulate the commonalities that can bind political ecologists together *as a community*. These challenges also include doing a much better job of communicating to the outside world what the field has to offer, and how these ideas can be used appropriately, including the explicit exposition of *alternatives* as well as critiques. What are the most important ‘seeds’ political ecologists wish to plant? *Where* will they be planted? How will they be tended to assure they are not co-opted or distorted? Until the subfield can respond to these questions effectively, it can be expected that fields with more narrow perspectives that reinforce the status quo will dominate public debates and decision-making, leaving political ecology to the verdant but largely peripheral pastures of academia. Whether political ecologists recognize it or not, a failure to fully and energetically engage policy at a time when society and

the planet urgently need their perspectives is a political act with profound implications.

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Notes

1. Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers, Pittsburgh, PA, 4–8 April 2000: 'Reflections on Cultural/Political Ecology I: Paths Taken, Directions Forged'.
2. Personal communication, anonymous by request, 12 June 2005.
3. For an excellent overview of the diverse genealogy and status of political ecology today, see Bassett and Zimmerer (2004); also Robbins (2004); Neumann (2005).
4. For example, the Cultural and Political Ecology (CAPE) specialty group of the Association of American Geographers grew from 221 to 531 members between 2002 and 2005. Most new members label their work as political ecology. CAPE homepage: <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/cape/> (last accessed 16 August 2005).
5. Panelist Remarks, 'Cultural and Political Ecology at the AAG Century: Application and Impact in the World'. Association of American Geographers meeting 15–19 March 2004, Philadelphia. Transcript at <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/cape/batterbury.php> (last accessed 6 August 2005).
6. To his credit, critical cultural geographer Neil Smith has offered the memorable counter-analogy that 'population is to the environment as a fish is to a bicycle'. While the analogy never went much farther than the conference rooms of the academy, Smith (right or wrong) clearly showed he was getting into the spirit of things! Personal communication, 11 August 2005.
7. Notably, this success reflects the earlier success of Piers Blaikie's work in challenging conventional narratives of soil erosion in south Asia, which he has recently termed the

Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004).

8. Personal communication, 4 August 2005.
9. Personal communication, 3 August 2005.
10. Personal communication, 4 August 2005.
11. Piers Blaikie, personal communication, 4 August 2005.
12. With Jorgen Randers and Dennis Meadows; first published in 1972.
13. However, Amazon.com's book description praises Robbins' *Political ecology* as 'written to be accessible to students' and 'entertaining and rigorous synthesis'.
14. These included *Conservation Biology*, *Habitat International*, *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology*, *Society and Natural Resources (two articles)*, *World Development*, *Global Environmental Change – Human and Policy Dimensions*, and *Journal of Cleaner Production*.
15. Indeed, it could be argued that the internal institutional political economy of academic research in general forces publication in academic journal presses whose *raison d'être* is to provide the metrics of academic tenure and promotion. The libraries that provide the main revenue for academic publishers are essentially forced to buy them for that reason.
16. Transcript at <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/cape/batterbury.php> (last accessed 5 August 2005).
17. For example, Richard Schroeder (1999) brilliantly describes how environmentalist and feminist critiques by the scholarly community can actually become tools of oppression in the hands of development professionals when scholars offer critique without adequate engagement to assure that the critique is used appropriately.

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