

The Everyday Environmentalist:
Complicating Nature for Collective Action

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GOEG 410

Introduction

If there is one thing that studies in geography teach us, it is that context is everything. Unless geographers recognize the differences between every space and place, every time scale, every culture, and every individual body, the already complicated search for objective truths and knowledge becomes even more unattainable. It is only through the recognition of the importance of the particularities of a locale that we as human geographers can begin to attempt to understand what happens in the world around us, as “social relations do not operate independently of place and environment, but are thoroughly grounded in and through them” (Castree et al., 2013). Yet, as humans responsible for the rise of a vast number of ecological issues, and as environmentalists with the goal of combatting these problems, we are called to action to counter the large scale ecological shifts that threaten both us and millions of other species on earth. This is where a conflict arises; if such difference between cultures and ideologies exists across the world, how can we as environmentalists rupture this heterogeneity to find a common goal to work towards? The phrase “environmentalists should work towards protecting nature,” possesses a core principle that attempts to span this global difference, yet, as will be discussed in this paper, it is rooted in a particular imagining of human-nature relations, of which I will attempt to break down. In this paper, I argue that this phrase needs to be further complicated in order to be effectively employed, and that in order for environmentalists to coalesce to produce positive change, “the local” needs to be reinstated into the currently global foundations of Western environmentalism.

Problematizing nature

In breaking down the maxim that “environmentalists should work towards protecting nature,” it becomes vital to first deconstruct what are meant by the terms “nature” and

“environmentalist”. Conceptualizations of nature have always been contentious, as “no interpretation of the idea of nature is good for all people in all places at all times” (Oelschlaeger, 2005, p.1615). Imaginings of nature are dependent upon the social context within which a definition is sought. For example, a rural farmer’s definition and understanding of nature may differ from an urbanites (Cronon, 1995), a child’s from an adult’s (Payne, 2014), and in a local context, that of a Salish person from that of a white Canadian. If it is impossible to arrive to a definition of nature that spans across all cultures and knowledge systems, the idea of a universal goal that environmentalists can follow to protect nature becomes increasingly complicated, as the very thing to which they work to protect becomes unknown. As William Cronon would argue, nature exists everywhere and there is no such thing as true “wilderness”, as virtually all landscapes have been modified by humans, and inherently possess some anthropogenic influence (1995). From this interpretation, what, then, are we as humans obligated to protect, and what does it even mean to protect “nature”? If this post-humanist approach to cognizing nature is taken, which entails dismantling the human-nature dichotomy, all human activity could be regarded as natural and it appears that there is nothing to protect; as Times Square in New York City can be regarded with equal value to old growth forests in British Columbia. Other scholars, such as Michael Soule, take a different approach to defining nature. Soule, rooting his definition in science, uses the term “living nature”, defining it as “the native species of plants and animals in their native settings” (1995, p.137), most easily understood through “physical, evolutionary, ecological, and anthropocentric” (1995, p.141) processes. Soule argues that “living nature... is under two kinds of siege”, one physical and one ideological. The ideological siege is a social one, which “serves to justify, where useful, the physical assault” (1995, p.137). From this perspective, Cronon’s definition, and the discussion, in itself, of how we go about defining

nature, are determined as harmful, as they shift the focus away from pertinent issues at hand, such as global climate change and biodiversity loss, while simultaneously developing the grounds on which physical assaults on nature can be validated (Soule, 1995). However, these are only two mainstream Western perspectives on nature, which implores that we ask what alternate imaginaries exist outside of our immediate milieus. Jing Liu, in her article discussing Daoist definitions of nature, says “as long as both nature and the world are simply understood in the modern sense as the objective environment that human minds act upon, how can we even talk about the world losing nature” (2016, p.265)? Hinting at the prevalence of this human-nature dichotomy, of which the idea that humans should protect nature additionally recreates, Liu demands that we reconsider how we relate to nature. Observing the Greek roots of common Western interpretations of nature, in which “man defines himself as a rational being” and is therefore, “placed... in a position opposite to nature” (2016, p.267), she notes how through a Chinese Daoist philosophy, “humans... gain their measure from nature”, and understand nature not as a noun, “but as a happening that runs through all dimensions.” (2016, p.275). While Western constructions of nature are typically objective in their reach, alternate comprehensions of nature entail varied modes of its understanding, placing humans within it and as part of its processes, rather than separate and responsible for its management or use. This discussion muddles traditional understandings of what nature is, ultimately demonstrating the pitfalls that action rooted in a Western epistemological framework dedicated to “protecting nature” will encounter.

From this debate rises a plethora of other issues based in the struggle for social and environmental justice. In his book, *Una Epistemología del Sur*, in which he discusses non-Western modes of knowledge production, Boaventura de Sousa Santos states, “there is no social

justice without social cognitive justice” (2009, p.12). This quote gives light to a central topic in the debate related to the conceptualizations of nature; in defining nature, it is inevitable that power relations will materialize in loss for the weaker stakeholder, and a win for the stronger. As has been noted by recent studies, “conservation is a powerful, hegemonic industry that can, and does, trample on the rights of marginalized people to get what it wants” (Sandbrook, 2017, p.379). The exportation of Western modes of thinking about nature are seen globally, most notably through conservation projects in Latin America, where the visibility of “power relations [that] manifest in the creation of enclosures and the consequent evictions and dispossession of local people” (Ramutsindela & Sinthumule, 2017, p.415) are most evident. This is where another issue surfaces; if we as environmentalists are concerned about the state of the earth, should we give equal power to these different conceptualizations of nature, instead of applying one of the infinite number that exist? From an environmental and social justice point of view, the answer is yes, but in order to engrain alternative conceptualizations of nature in discourse and decision making practices by those committed to conservation efforts, this would require a radical shift in how nature is conceived by stakeholders who fund and participate in the conservation work. No matter the definition, whether it is nature “as a resource to satisfy humans’ needs” (Liu, 2016, p.266), or “[n]ature as an unspoiled world separated from human activity” (Gottlieb in Hess, 2010, p.91), it becomes vital to recognize the heterogeneity of these imaginings, and give light to each one.

Additionally important to break down is the term “environmentalist”. Stemming from a largely Western, Global North imaginary of human-nature relations, the term “environmentalist” is exclusive in its reach. If we are to investigate the foundations of environmentalism, we will find that it “covers a very broad range of ideas and actions, although they share the proposition

that the environment is something apart from society and under threat from it” (Castree et al., 2013). What, then, is to be said about those that do not possess the clear distinctions between nature and society, or those that do not imagine nature from within the human-nature binary? Can someone with alternate understandings on nature be considered an environmentalist? A further complication emerges when we are pushed to ask if it is simply the act of labelling one’s self as an “environmentalist” that determines their position as such, or if it is their actions that do so. While many middle-class Canadians may regard themselves as environmentalists, they may also continue practicing lives of relatively high consumption compared to their poorer constituents. If it is action based, then the vast majority of self-acclaimed “environmentalists” worldwide are actually doing more damage to the environment than poorer members of countries in the Global South, who may live lives in more direct contact with nature, as well as places receiving Western conservation efforts. Though it can be argued that acknowledging the problem is the first step in making environmental change, I deem it critical for environmentalists to recognize the uneven development that frequently lies unseen in Western environmentalism, and address how they themselves fit into the movement. Furthermore, when we consider that environmentalists seek to protect something that is fluid and changing, the very action of protecting requires reconsidering. If protection requires the removal of human bodies, and the concretization of the current status of an ecosystem (and a “pristine” one at that), the number of natures deemed worthy of conserving may be much fewer than if alternate understandings of nature were adopted, as “[l]ess sublime landscapes simply [may] not appear worthy of such protection” (Cronon, 1995, p.4).

Moving towards collective action

How, then, do we go about making collective action if the grounds upon which action is being taken are unstable? As wicked problems, environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification are multi-faceted and have no clear solution. Yet, in order to find a common solution that all environmentalists can work towards, which is important as it is the “*collective* dimension of pro-environmental action” rather than the “personal decision making process of individual actors” (Fritsche et al., 2018, p. 245) that is most effective in promoting changes, it becomes vital to establish a central maxim through which environmentalists can focus their efforts. In this section, I will argue that as environmentalists in the West, the means to making positive environmental change lie in first, adopting a new understanding of nature, and second, in the revival of “the local” within environmentalism.

The first step towards making positive environmental change involves the rethinking of nature. As described earlier, the discussion surrounding imaginings of nature is often polarized; it is either that nature is found everywhere and human action is natural within it, as would be argued by Cronon, or that humans and nature should be regarded independently to ensure that further destructive practices that are caused by humans do not continue, as would be argued by Soule. Perhaps, the ideal situation is being looked over, as it lies somewhere in the middle. Rather than act in this polarized fashion, conversation should incorporate both perspectives, as they are both correct in their own rights. While nature is everywhere, whether that be the dandelions pushing their way through cracks in the pavement, or the aspen forests of Colorado, nature is not treated the same everywhere. As Cronon argues, “if we accept the wilderness premise that nature, to be natural, must also be pristine—remote from humanity and untouched by our common past[,]” (13) then we “leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical,

sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like” (11). Simultaneously, scientific understandings of nature are integral to conservation efforts and should not be dismissed, as it is largely through this lens that understandings of how humans may negatively affect ecosystems emerge (Soule, 1995). As Soule argues, the key to environmental action lies in “active caring – in today’s parlance, an affirmative approach to wildlands: to maintain and restore them, to become stewards, accepting all the domineering baggage that word carries” (1995, p.160). On this ground, theory by Cronon, Soule, and Liu can all find a common objective, as the idea of “active caring” shifts the place humans occupy within the human-nature binary, placing them somewhere in the middle, within and as part of nature’s processes, rather than separate. This mode of active caring can additionally benefit from Cronon’s and Liu’s conceptions of human’s relation to nature, as environmentalists can reimagine what places need active caring. Through the recognition of the need for active care of ecosystems, not just in “pristine” places, but within the urban landscape and places close to home, the metabolic rift which divides the urban from the rural can be deconstructed. If we expand this scope, recognizing the ways in which natural processes and relationships between animals and flora are still present in urban landscapes, and can thrive, we as environmentalists may realize that that which we seek to protect is not necessarily located in far-off landscapes, but sitting right out our front door. Throughout the urban context are ecologically violent behaviors, yet discourse that revolves around these types of behaviors is most frequently targeted on fetishized, remote places, where deforestation, mining, and waste dumping become most obvious. Environmentalists, who should be fundamentally against these sorts of projects, subsequently focus their efforts on attempting to stop the action as it occurs in this place. Yet the issue at hand is that these forms of ecological violence happen daily within the urban context, and it is the fact that they are situated

within the urban that they are not understood as violent. Furthermore, environmentally degradative actions are most frequently administered from within the urban context, as it is in the city that the vast majority of extractive companies base themselves. As environmentalists largely separated from the places in which these companies operate we can harness “the local” by engaging in direct action with those that perform ecologically violent behaviors, which would arguably be more beneficial than simply supporting efforts to engage with them on the ground in a far-off place. Ultimately, as environmentalists in the urban landscape, the way in which we can find a common goal is by coalescing to actively care for nature not just in “wild” places, in which modification by humans has been most minimal, but within places not traditionally accommodated in conservation discourse, such as in the city.

Hence, the key to making positive environmental efforts lies not in the aggressive and global protectionist efforts that define Western conservation today, but in recognizing the alternate perceptions of nature that exist, and accommodating them both locally and globally within policy making action. Rather than supporting culturally imperialistic notions of environmentalism and conservation, the place in which the everyday environmentalists can most directly affect policy making and conservation efforts is in working at the local level, practicing the idea of “active care” in their particular local context. As Peter Huang notes in his discussion of local environmentalism in Taiwan, “[t]his kind of environmental involvement gives rise to more extensive, global forms of environmental thinking and action. It does not replace the global, but it is necessary for the global” (2014, p.3). Though rhetoric surrounding environmentalism and conservation efforts typically falls into global discourse, due to the “extraordinarily successful efforts by corporate global interests to discredit [local environmentalism]” (2014, p.2), I argue that the key to producing meaningful results in

environmentalism lies in the care for places that are most intimate to us as urban individuals, as it is here that changes and efforts are most visible and local constituents are given the ability to reimagine the space in which they reside. In their article, “Whose common future: reclaiming the commons”, *The Ecologist* details the ways in which the enclosure of space by the state has led to the detriment of the commons, places that are “neither public nor private”, in which “the relevant local community decides who uses it and how” (1994, p.109). By “reclaiming a political and cultural space for the commons” (1994, p.125), we as people, not just environmentalists, can “rejuvenate what works,” by introducing “traditional and new approaches to develop strategies that meet local needs” (1994, p.125). I argue that it is here that the everyday environmentalist should focus their efforts, as local knowledge can be harnessed to rethink how we relate to our local environments, and ecologically violent actions that are not so far from home can be addressed. This sort of action also aids in reinforcing the first vital element of positive environmental change that environmentalists can take, that of rethinking nature. Through local environmentalism and a reclaiming of the commons, efforts towards renaturing urban environments and coming into more direct contact with environmentalism can, as discussed earlier, break down the metabolic rift present within the city, so that community members can natural processes and the place where humans fit into these processes continue existing here and now.

While I have argued that the phrase “environmentalists should work towards protecting nature” needs to be complicated in order to be effective, in itself it does possess a call to action that many environmentalists across the world can stand behind and agree with. Where I find the fault of this phrase is in the way it propagates the idea that there is a single definition of nature that spans across all cultures, times, and scales. In relation to protecting nature, Cronon says “[i]t

is not the things we label as wilderness that are the problem—for nonhuman nature and large tracts of the natural world do deserve protection—but rather what we ourselves mean when we use the label” (1995, p.12). For the Western audience, the human-nature dichotomy tends to run deep, meaning that many environmentalists may not address the fact that environmental problems are not limited to one simple ecological understanding, but are part of greater socio-natural relationships, of which require further thought and investigation to completely understand. While it is true that there are vast swaths of land that require and need protection, the way in which this sort of conservation currently takes place needs to be further addressed. As I have argued, to do this we must accommodate local values and intimate, historical, place-based knowledge, as “...the environment itself is local...” and “[i]t is best preserved by societies which nourish these local differences...” (The Ecologist, 1994, p.113).

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have complicated the phrase, “environmentalists should work towards protecting nature,” arguing that it needs to be further complicated in order to become of utility. While the conversation that surrounds conceptualizing nature and environmentalist’s duties is difficult to navigate and find a clear position in, it is only through a reconceptualization of what nature is, and the subsequent use of this alternate understanding that environmentalists can find a common end to work towards. As geographers we recognize the heterogeneity that exists across the globe, yet we also recognize that there are a number of global environmental threats that span this heterogeneity. It is through the adoption of this unevenness into discourse on conservation that we as environmentalists can make positive steps towards environmental change. Discussing uneven power relations in conservation, Chris Sandbrook states “[u]neven

power doesn't have to lead to uneven behaviour: we need to ensure that conservation actions are fair and balanced wherever they take place” (380). While the individual body may not have the power of the transnational corporation, through collective local efforts that span the globe, the power that we as individuals possess to combat issues such as global climate change and biodiversity loss can be reimagined and acted upon in new manners.

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