

# INTRODUCTION

## Towards an Ethnography of Ecological Underprivilege

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Anthropologists at the start of the twenty-first century face familiar professional challenges. As always, they must engage with both the ethnographic encounter and the preoccupations of academic production. Once again, as a century ago, anthropological work is framed by the crumbling of relatively stable global power blocks. If a century ago the so-called centres of world civilisation found themselves dethroned by colonial independence movements, and then gutted by world wars, today a new order is being built upon the rubble of post-socialism and warring fundamentalisms. At the start of the past century, the great settler states of Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Russia and the United States launched continental ecological experiments, transforming grassland into farmland and forest into plantations. At the start of this century, intensifying competition to control strategic minerals and fuels continues to parcel out local ecosystems with pipelines, railways, and transitory settlements, and, more likely than not, it is altering the planet's climate. If in the nineteenth century botanists prospected among indigenous societies for useful plants, today biotechnologists race to license the genetic patterns of flora and fauna. Everywhere they go, anthropologists learn of the struggles that accompany these contests, yet their reflections on these encounters remain marginal to public and political debate. This book arises out of a sense that the discipline could and should reshape itself through an active engagement with these debates, alert to the echoes of the not dissimilar debates which shaped the discipline a century ago.

Seen in historical relief, the identity of the discipline appears fundamentally challenged by the new politics of ecology. At the start of the twentieth century, anthropologists were not yet 'professionals'. Nonetheless, when reading colonial blue books or even missionaries' accounts, we can still recognise ourselves in the actions of those who were concerned about the plight of rural peoples in colonial hinterlands. In particular, we like to claim a kinship with those 'practical men' who spoke against slavery and structured exploitation, and who drafted enlightenment programmes for the 'protection' of languages, cultures and traditional lands (Kuklick 1991). On this topic, however, we find an important contrast with the applied work of our twenty-first-century professional colleagues. The anthropological community, hardened by decades of struggle for recognition in various academies, is no longer confident that it is worthwhile to classify and collect folklore 'before it disappears', let alone contribute to 'the betterment of savages'. Most anthropologists today

would also be uncomfortable with the idea of engaging with 'traditional' communities. And so it is that many sit at the sidelines while not-yet professional environmentalists fight public battles to protect what they confidently perceive as untouched landscapes inhabited by traditional peoples. Does our absence from these battles stem from a wisdom already won through having travelled a similar path? Or does it have more to do with the possibility that professional anthropologists of the twenty-first century have lost faith in their ability to transform the arena of action out there into apposite knowledge, and that we are simply more comfortable occupying ourselves with texts and cultural critique?

Looking back on ourselves one hundred years ago we now puzzle at the heady mixture of imperial politics which lent a heavy hand in the drafting of ethnographies. As George Stocking (1991) noted, the ethnographer of the pristine and the exotic arrives on the scene only a decade or two after mercenary armies have pacified the local population. How is the ethnographic enterprise timed today? Have we been reduced to the role of somewhat naïve chroniclers of local diversity supplying picturesque material to colour in the outlines of serious ecological operations? Or, might it still be that ethnographic observation could help us get our bearings in this new order of conservation, consumption and new information technologies?

The chapters in this book were each drafted to answer questions such as these. The thirteen scholars printed here, each writing an ethnography of ecological politics in different parts of the world, were participants in a one-day workshop held at Goldsmith's College, University of London, in April 2000. All but one of the participants were anthropologists and all have considerable experience in writing ethnographies with an ecological dimension. Meeting under the banner of writing 'Ethnographies of Ecological Underprivilege', we found ourselves sharing, often for the first time, unvoiced thoughts that had arisen while sometimes sitting politely as observers at environmentalist meetings, as consultants charged with writing background pieces for environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs), or even as active organisers of campaigns to protect special places in the areas where we conduct fieldwork. In trading our stories, we discovered that though employed in somewhat unfamiliar endeavours, we had nevertheless amassed a fair body of observations, questions and often written notes, which were ethnographic in character but somehow did not quite fit the genre of anthropological ethnography. We also identified a troubling convergence of theme, irrespective of whether we were speaking of the former Soviet Union, the United States of America, Papua New Guinea, Namibia, Syria, or Brazil. We were disturbed to find that there is in this century, once again, a happy fit between expressing discourses of primitiveness and historic relationships of disempowerment – only not within colonial offices but within the cafés and meeting rooms where environmental consultants meet. In many cases the slogans of pristine environments and unspoiled places served to deflect attention from the fact that large-scale circuits of capital perpetuate both ecological and economic degradation. The clues to these interests could often be read directly from the environmentalist discourse, but more often than not, the most interesting issues came from comparing the official transcripts of environmentalist literature with concrete observations of these activists at work in their biotic and social environments. The settings of our ethnographies were not only the often rural locations affected by environmentalist

intervention, but the urban offices and park headquarters which themselves thrived upon a complex ecology of government grants, publicity and consistent stereotypes of people and nature 'out there'.

The goal of this volume is to show how an ethnography of environmentalist practice helps to reveal a broader ecology of relationships, such as the fact that ecopolitics involves the redistribution of resources and costs. The chapters document both efforts to address ecological degradation *and* the unequal distribution of environmental hazards. As a collection, they sometimes draw uncomfortable connections between abuses of specific human rights on the one hand, and demands for global ecological health on the other. In this introduction therefore, we take to task the assumptions of virtue embedded in environmentalism, not through a cultural critique of the 'West', but by drawing on the ethnography of environmentally inspired action.

The book is organised into three parts which loosely follow the structure of this introductory chapter. In the first section, ethnographic analyses demonstrate the irreducibly political and distributive dimensions of environmentalist thought and action. In each of the three cases – in Nicaragua (Anja Nygren), Brazil (Cristina Adams) and Indonesia (Nicola Frost and Rachel Wrangham) – the struggle over conservation discourses is inextricably linked to the rights of the people who inhabit the affected regions. The chapters make visible the people marginalised by the 'anti-political' nature of many conservationist accounts.

In the second part, the authors examine how projects to protect spaces are linked to myths of state identity or of national progress and so legitimate differential accumulation of wealth. We learn how conservation invokes metaphors of bounded space to separate people from their lands, but also to discriminate people from people. Bornali Halder and Dawn Chaty examine how, in the United States and in Syria respectively, the state imperative to protect specific spaces for the national good can be used strategically to dispossess aboriginal peoples. Sian Sullivan's account of resistance to conservationist demarcations takes place in Namibia, where the political climate is quite explicitly geared towards nation building. Her empirically rich account clearly demonstrates the complexities and dilemmas involved as globally legitimated conservation projects are translated into everyday practise. David Ellis suggests that conservation in Papua New Guinea actually creates privileged enclaves for consumption at the same time restricting local people's engagements with their environment. Further, his chapter forcefully questions the assumptions of virtue and higher justice embedded in environmentalist rhetoric (Figure 1). All four chapters unfold under the spectre, acknowledged or not, of ethnic discrimination. In this arena anthropology can provide rich insights, valuable precisely because the architects of global conservation would appear to ignore this dimension as troublesome detail, even as their actions are likely to intensify the significance of ethnically based identity politics.

The final section explores the metaphors used in ecological discourses. The first two chapters, by David Anderson and Luna Rolle, analyse the appeal to national myths in post-socialist Russia. In his examination of attempts to restructure hunting economies in Siberia, Anderson shows how urban industrial interests switch metaphoric codes to justify exploitation in a free-market idiom. Rolle's detailed

account of young environmentalists in Tatarstan shows how metaphors of nature can capture and promote simultaneously innovative and conservative social and political messages. Supported further by Nygren's study of post-Sandinista Nicaragua (in the first section), these chapters are a reminder that theorising ecodiscourses from an overly Anglo-American perspective risks undervaluing the potential for lessons to be learned from ethnographic but historically informed analysis. The plea for paying greater attention to the lessons of ethnography is most forcefully articulated by Dario Novellino, who compares the understanding of the forest among Philippine aboriginal peoples and that of the environmental legislators who are trying to act on the forest's behalf. He suggests that ecopolitics needs to open itself up to more radical experiments in how we conceive nature. In the volume's concluding chapter by Stephen Nugent, we are given a rich account of how ecological metaphor has structured the history and development of an entire region. This chapter underscores the value of examining the intellectual and not just the moral sources of the muted role of social science in these issues. He gives us occasion to reflect on the positive role that ethnographers can offer the study of environments and ecopolitical action at the start of this century.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we shall examine the benefits of ethnographic exploration, suggesting that together with an understanding of the historical emergence of powerful political agendas like environmentalism, ethnography can go far beyond efforts to provide local detail. Anthropological work on conservation is hardly limited to the examples in this volume, but we feel there is work to be done in rendering it more confident. Indeed, the transformation of such work into theory has been surprisingly slow, partly because the object of analysis is politically problematic for anthropology. To generate a robust anthropological contribution to ecopolitics, we propose that what needs to be made visible is not only the effects of environmentalism on marginal peoples in a context of economic polarisation, but the lifeworlds of environmentalists themselves, whether they be part of grassroots campaigns or of international environmental non-governmental organisations.

## **Anthropology, ecopolitics and discrimination**

Although anthropology has developed a fine canon of discourse analysis, the pioneers in the analysis of environmentalist discourse have been environmental historians and cultural theorists. The primary insight of a generation of work on this subject is that environmentalist statements, which are pitched at an angle which avoids discussing people, are nevertheless primarily discourses about political power. If so-called mainstream environmentalism speaks 'against people' on behalf of nature, critics point out that what is defined as natural varies immensely from one historical and geographical context to another (Guha 1990, Cronon 1995).

For example, the rhetoric which fuels hyperbole about the power of genes takes for granted the idea that nature is itself, or contains within it, a force for self-organisation, self-preservation and even self-replication which brings about evolutionary change. Yet for intellectuals as recently as the nineteenth century (as for contemporary Creationists) nature by itself without the Creator's power was/is not thought to

have such capacities (Bowler 1993). Nature for gene enthusiasts is hardly the same as it is for Creationists, but nonetheless it is made sacred and essentialised for both. Any effort to save 'it' then is linked to the political question of who should manage it. In the examples provided here, nature becomes the province of experts regardless of who occupies it and, furthermore, provides grounds for discriminating against the very people who do.

For most of our contributors one of the first arenas where environmentalism and discrimination came together was in the creation of protected areas. Indeed fencing off, or otherwise designating places for limited uses, is literally a form of discrimination. Whether these sites are of special scientific interest or royal hunting grounds, the parcelling of the environment differentiates between those with authorised access and those who are excluded.

The first step in discriminating a space is to strip it of human history – to naturalise it. A familiar example is the image of Brazilian rainforests, discussed in this volume by Nugent and Adams, who emphasise that these special spaces have been treated as if they had no politico-economic significance, even though their histories are replete with extreme and expansive violence. They are treated as if they were practically uninhabited except by fauna and by quasi-natural populations of humans. The Amazon in particular is iconic of nature as something sacred and inaccessible. If the image of dense jungle is central to this quintessential nature, so is the idea of the ecologically noble savage. Thus, the Amazonian and Atlantic rainforests provide key examples of how nature, but also primitiveness can be wielded politically, making it easy for any interest – corporate, administrative, but also scholarly (Adams this volume) – to ignore already existing, complex social, ecological and political systems. Although Brazil provides the classic example, this collection shows that locations as varied as Siberia, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea are just as easily made into naïve spaces with local populations, if they are visible at all, expected to either exercise survival skills in perfect harmony with their environment, or to let their homes become biodiversity reserves.

The second step in discrimination is to link spaces to a state myth which legitimates protectionist action. Again, following the lead of our colleagues in environmental history (Nash 1982, Thomas 1983, Harrison 1992), we find that ideas of pristine nature and the moral imperative for conservation are linked to bourgeois ideologies regarding the place of people in society. The classic demonstration of this argument comes from the cultural history of North American environmentalism. It is revealing that the myth of the frontier, which enabled white colonisers to justify the dispossession and slaughter of indigenous populations in the United States, is also the founding myth of American environmentalism (Nash 1982, Cronon et al. 1992). The governing ideologies behind the parks movement were so powerful that most people accepted that the landscapes chosen for protection were in fact natural, pristine and free from human impact. Moreover, the action of creating protected spaces fit easily into familiar models that environments must be appropriated, transformed and altered in order for them to be valuable.

The opening section of the volume clearly illustrates the close links between interventions in the name of conservation and overtly value-laden programmes for the management of peripheral or marginal populations. All three cases are linked to

something usefully thought of as global ecopolitics, but they also insist that the precise forms and effects of these links are matters for concrete investigation. In contrast, much influential social science scholarship starts from the lofty axiom that the 'global environmental crisis' is yet another manifestation of the epistemological chaos unleashed as Euro-American modernity implodes (Giddens 1991, Beck et al. 1994, Latour 1998). Some, still haunted by neo-Malthusian fears of the poor and the backward, consider that a planet-wide institution for protecting nature is the only thing that will prevent catastrophe (Meadows et al. 1992, Sachs 1993). As an empirical truth, the increasing density of global communications networks and circuits of resource exchange is taken to mean that the 'global' is the level from which to start analysis. Yet upon closer investigation the ecological risks which are most obviously inscribed into 'global' institutional arrangements, such as Agenda 21 adopted by the United Nations, are to an alarming extent rooted solidly in elite economic and political preoccupations. Susan George (1998:13) has made the simple but powerful observation that the way by which ecopoliticians approach the environment makes peripheral people increasingly invisible while photogenic mega-fauna are brought increasingly into focus. The most powerful factor which seems to preselect the objects of nature protection, whether they be flood defences for the English countryside or improved 'status' for big-game animals, seems to be the imperative of capital accumulation. As Stephen Nugent (2000: 241) observes, environmental risk is in fact 'not risk: it is business as usual'.

Ethnographic work can do much to demystify naïve yet politically powerful myth-making. However, as anthropologists we must come to terms with the way that our polite silence in political and professional forums might tacitly help this process. In fact we suggest that the subtle way that resolutions concerning power relations work their way into environmental discourse is aided by a certain reticence to take environmentalists to task. Anthropologists are indeed faced with an ethical dilemma when it comes to conducting 'ecocritiques' (Milton 1996, Luke 1997, Brosius 1999). On the one hand, perhaps out of a sense of professional competition, we feel compelled to introduce nuance into the descriptions of environments as 'pristine', 'untouched' and of local people's ideas being reduced to the minor (technical) role of 'stewards' or 'managers'. On the other hand, when we turn our ethnographic craft to writing about the culture of environmentalists (or other protest groups) we risk violating our own ethical creeds by exposing debates or discussions which our new informants would prefer to keep hidden (Brosius 1999). Often one feels that one is attacking the wrong target. After all, wealthy as they may be, we assume that high-profile or transnational environmental organisations will never shape tomorrow's world as powerfully as the alliances of states, corporations and militaries. However, as Sian Sullivan indicates in her ethnography of a protest aimed at an environmental non-governmental organisation (ENGO) in Namibia, in certain sectors non-governmental organisations can wield power disproportionate to their numbers, such that they can confidently threaten local stakeholders and even scholars who offer polite but pointed criticisms of their actions.

One way of respectfully breaking our silence is to try to understand the ecology of the organisations themselves, their internal relationships and the constraints under which they operate. We can question why and how certain forms of biotic but



also social differentiation are invoked in setting the parameters of ecodiscourse (cf. Wilmsen 1996). Thus by applying the same principle that anthropologists have applied to support environmental historians, we can provide an equally valuable service by portraying environmental organisations not as 'naïve organisations' but as relationships shot through with history and politics.

In applying this humanistic perspective, it is easier to recognise that many organisations also have a remarkable capacity for learning, and they respond rapidly to changing political environments. Many major ENGOs have sought ways to incorporate social agendas and nuanced, rather than global, analyses into their actions, albeit with varying degrees of success. However, even where community participation is encouraged ecopolitics nevertheless may have negative political and economic consequences for marginal people. Sullivan, Chatty and Nygren (this volume) show that even in complex and shifting political landscapes, ethnographers can take a stance when ecopolitics ends up legitimating current structures of power. This should, and can be done in a way that opens up a space for dialogue rather than threatening ecopoliticians with censure (cf. Wenzel 1991, Sillitoe 1996, Freeman et al. 1998, Trigger 1998, Robbins 2000).

It is time to provide some provisional definitions. There is a risk that environmentalism may be taken as synonymous with environmentalist discourse. This tendency is amplified by a large literature which seeks to derive the environmentalist interest from a set of core values associated with Western religious traditions, history and economic practices (e.g., Worster 1977, Pepper 1986, Harvey 1993). Here, we are making much more humble claims by striving to make sure that environmentalism has faces, names and biographies. That is, environmentalism, as we use it, refers to a set of practices which flow out of the everyday life of concrete, committed people, many of whom live in the metropolises and not in the hinterlands which they strive to protect.

The term ecopolitics, in contrast, aims to be both broader and narrower in scope. With its prefix 'eco', it draws attention most obviously to both ecological and economic issues. It invokes ideas about the politicisation of physical space (Kuehls 1996), but it also generates a conceptual space (ÓTuathail and Dalby 1998) where ecological and economic agendas are counterpoised using the image of a specific protected area as a battleground. In that sense, where ecopolitics is championed by people with protectionist ideologies, it encompasses environmentalism. In another sense, however, ecopolitics is a narrower term than environmentalism. For unlike environmentalism, ecopolitics refers to something that is always already politicised in an explicit sense. Whether in the World Bank's Global Environmental Facility or in a regional sustainable transport campaign, ecopolitics highlights the question: in whose interest are problems defined as urgent? We would like to see this politicised and conceptual use of the term ecopolitics aligned with our programme of writing ethnographies of ecological practice. After all, the original root of the word ecology – *oekos* – also denotes the household as much as it denotes economy (Goodland 1975). We see it as important that our work specifies for whom economic and ecological issues are dearest and who fights for them from the home-front.

In sorting through these issues on the political meaning of ecology, the insights of anthropologists are useful. Anthropological analysis has suggested that the envi-

ronment is more than ‘all that surrounds’ (Ingold 2000: Ch. 12). It is instead a sphere of life activity – a place where one dwells and makes a life for oneself. The chapters in this book, each of which examines in considerable detail the interplay between power, economics and environmental projects, all take as a given that any park or reserve cannot be a moral good in its own terms, but can only be judged by its success at enabling an integration of human and nonhuman life within a specified region. Taken in this sense, understandings of environmental discrimination, even if necessarily power-laden, can be applied constructively in talking about the world – but only if they include a range of interests wider than those of environmental organisations themselves.

## Distributing justice within protected landscapes

Environmental historians have alerted us to the fact that meditations on space can lead into discourses on political liberty and larger discussions of how to define the ‘good life’. Recent historical research work in the ‘mirror-empire’ to the United States has suggested new ways of thinking about conservation and parks. In light of conventional wisdom about the need for global environmental protection regimes, the idea of state socialist or Soviet environmental movements seems like an oxymoron. However, environmental historians have discovered an interesting contrast to the textbook example of bourgeois nature protectionism in the example of socialist views on the relation between society and nature (Weiner 1988, 1999; Pyne 1997). In Douglas Weiner’s work we learn of a vibrant ecological movement in late Imperial and early Soviet times which fought a spirited but unsuccessful battle against the industrial ‘promethianism’ which came to mark Soviet socialism after the 1930s. The quality of this movement is intriguing for it did not focus upon the contemplation of nature in solely an aesthetic sense, but saw the need for nature (*zapovedniki*) as places where biologists and ecologists could protect baseline examples of ‘pure’ nature before it was transformed by human forces. Early Russian studies, based in these so-called scientific preserves, anticipated what is now regarded as modern thinking about trophic energy transfers and neo-Lamarckian models of adaptation by thirty years. Similarly, many of the main actors who led this programme of scientific protection also led the movement to create autonomous spaces for indigenous people where their economies and cultures could be developed independently along state socialist lines.

These views of directed development have their own ideological element of underprivilege. As most accounts of socialist approaches to nature and to territory tell us, collectivisation economists rode roughshod over local models of how best to relate to nature. However, unlike North American models in which individual emancipation is discovered through aesthetic contemplation on the empty spaces of the frontier, the state socialist models show how the good life could be imagined by studying the ways human agency could be applied to nature. In the words of Douglas Weiner (1988), the nature reserves of the former Soviet Union could be understood as ‘little islands of freedom’ wherein critical discussion on the future could be camouflaged as scientific measurement of biological process.



The habit of imagining the good life through imposing a territorial form upon nature has not been completely silenced in the former Soviet Union. In fact it permeates today's debates and it is at this juncture that ethnography can make an important contribution. As Rolle argues in her highly detailed discourse analysis of the Guard of Nature movement in Tatarstan, its environmental activists see themselves as the vanguards of democratic opposition against the Soviet past. The statements reproduced in her account clearly illustrate the power that the idea of nature has for bracketing discussions on human rights. The history of the region's environmental activism is beyond the scope of Rolle's chapter, but it is significant that Tatarstan established one of the first locally run reserves of the former Soviet Union in 1926 (Weiner 1988: 256). Anderson examines the struggles for survival of hunters and reindeer herders in central Siberia. He relates the story of the rapid and 'successful' disengagement of the Soviet state from any interest whatsoever in the well-being of its rural citizens, citing as its reason the need to return native people to the forest. Left on their own in forests depleted of game and without the most basic inputs needed for hunting, Evenki and Yakut people search for an avenue to advertise their shocking new disempowerment enforced on purely ecological grounds. Their proposals, like so many in the state socialist tradition, show a combination of economically astute ideas for local exchange networks embedded within radical proposals for economically engaged parks and reserves. Here, as in Tatarstan, parks become a metaphor for the discussion of human rights.

Centralised nature management is not only an artefact of Eastern redistributive states. Nygren's analysis (in Part I) of local struggles over nature protection in post-Sandinista Nicaragua shows a similar authorised model of development embedded within an agricultural agency which wields authority for developing peoples and lands. The liberal market economies of the West also provide a fertile environment for redistributing rights to land. If we turn back to the classic examples of protected spaces, North America, numerous scholars have given us rich examples of how supposedly wild places have been managed by people and thus have brought the myth-making process into greater relief. The work of the anthropologist Henry Lewis (1989, 1992) and the environmental historian Stephen Pyne (1997) have demonstrated the various ways that aboriginal peoples have used a simple but effective technique – burning – to 'sweep' the landscape of unwanted and often dangerous tinder. Fire technology, however, was immediately identified by state authorities as the antithesis of good management for the simple fact that in their view it destroyed forest cover in order to regenerate it. Although this management style is muted compared to the boundaries, uniforms and signage common in most national parks, it is extremely effective. In fact, it seems that one of the best ways to change a landscape is to deprive it of human activity. In recent research in Canadian national parks, Eric Higgs (2000) has re-photographed late nineteenth century romantic panoramas to demonstrate that a century of management, suppression of fire and the eviction of mixed-blood farmers has made entire valleys into overgrown caricatures of their former 'pristine beauty'.

The distributive effects of centralised nature protection are not, unfortunately merely a nineteenth-century curiosity. Indeed, as the essays in Part II show, there is evidence that in the past two decades such ideologies of protection have gained a

new lease on life. Chatty recounts how Bedouin herders have been displaced from their lands on the assumption that it was their unregulated land-use practices which were spoiling the landscape. Halder shows the systematic ecological violence perpetrated against the Lakota Indians by the state, which has curtailed access to resources and caused environmental destruction through mining and military use. Whereas the state operates on exclusive boundaries when it suits it, the Lakota organisations refuse the flattening out of all space by criss-crossing it with ever more boundaries. Sullivan documents the increasing control of foreign-based NGOs over indigenous lands which builds on the conviction that spaces and species are more important than the local ecology of human relationships. The Batak of the Philippines, described by Novellino in the book's third section, dwell in a world which is also not divided into exclusively owned spaces. Traced against this ethnographic background, the colonising model of a world with absolute boundaries appears as a hardened tool of a conquering power whose authority must be clearly established or not at all.

Disempowerment can also have more traditional economic and symbolic dimensions. The chapters by Ellis on Papua New Guinea and Anderson on Siberia both focus on how ecologically inspired alterations in consumption patterns often work against the economic interests of local people and threaten the local ecology. By building on what anthropologists have frequently observed as a disjuncture between what people say they are doing and what they actually do, Ellis sketches an all-too-familiar picture of the unsustainable consumption habits set up by ENGO workers in the rainforest of Papua New Guinea. As in Anderson's chapter, such practices by conservationists and administrators are often one of the best clues to the true meaning of environmentally inspired action. It is at such junctures that the critique of statement and of texts relies upon politically evocative ethnography. By writing an ethnography of ecological underprivilege, anthropologists can go beyond simple environmental or historical critique and can help forge a new dialogue on the justice of how people and space are related.

## Writing environmentalism

In his survey of engagements between anthropologists and environmental movements, Peter Brosius (1999: 277) argues, 'If ever there was a rich site of cultural production, it is in the domain of contemporary environmentalism'. All of the chapters here bear out the spirit of this statement. They concur on the need to look at how nature is represented and how people like those we study get caught up and implicate themselves in these processes. As Novellino stressed during the workshop, and as Nugent argues in the volume's concluding chapter, there is a currency of symbols and language which circulates through ecopolitics. The reader first feels the power of words in the disorienting effect created by the strings of environmental acronyms. Once one learns to negotiate the landscape of eco-speak, one must learn to wield the key terms of conservation, protection and sustainability. What then are the links between such languages and symbols, and the circuits of material goods and investment, which provide the conditions for

societies to be reproduced? These are questions that go to the heart of what it means to write an evocative ethnography of ecological relationships.

Each of the volume's chapters takes a unique position on the value of *writing* as a tool for understanding the ecology of environmentalists themselves, suggesting overall that ethnography can help untangle myth-making operations from the unconscious assumptions that guide ecopolitical action. Drawing on a kind of ethnography which has a commitment to long-term exploration of social relations at various scales, each chapter attends to the cultural and ecological context before turning to an analysis of environmentalist discourse. The ethnographic method, we argue, quite simply helps make more transparent the assumptions of ecopolitics. Yet it is difficult for anthropologists to be too righteous about exposing metaphoric operations within environmentalism. After all, modern anthropology grew out of a similar fusion of moral conviction and an engagement with exotic places as does contemporary environmentalism. We would like to think that having come to terms with some of the contradictions in the worldview underlying this moral view, anthropological fieldwork nevertheless offers important nuances. This is demonstrated in the way each chapter here makes use of ethnography's ability to trace metaphors which aptly yet almost imperceptibly capture sets of power relationships.

Nygren's analysis of the environmentalist debate in Nicaragua encourages us to pay attention to the struggles over 'environmental images'. In Río San Juan the way that the jungle was described by different actors either as 'wild' or as 'productive' gives important clues to the pattern of power in a regional setting. Ironic in this case is the fact that both state managers and local *campesinos* described themselves as engaged in a struggle with nature. However, the state managers characteristically saw themselves as the much more virile and powerful actors with a paternal responsibility to act over and above 'their' people on the ground. In the chapter by Frost and Wrangham, the Indonesian forest provides a wealth of symbols which competing political actors struggle to use. In this context, it is those who are able to distribute their ideas most widely, over the Internet or locally in campaign literature, who can win the authority to speak for the forest. The struggle to earn the right to speak about a special place takes on a litigational accent in the chapter by Sullivan. Here ecopolitics is so intensely focussed on authority, that people and places become but faint shadows obscured by ecological concepts. We are reminded of some of the metaphoric limits of ecopolitical discourse in Halder's chapter on the struggle of the Lakota Sioux for control over their site of spiritual renewal – the Black Hills of the north-eastern United States. Here the struggle takes place directly in court – an arena of words and interpretation. Through legal transcripts we learn that Lakota Sioux refuse to accept monetary recompense for damages that are spiritual. Instead, they would prefer to legislate new metaphors for their landscape, ones which would evoke the depth of seven generations of kinsfolk, rather than the shallow values of commodifiable natural resources.

One of the important conclusions that our analyses of metaphor and method have reinforced is that ENGOs are complex and heterogeneous, and one should not assume that the organisational form of an environmental movement, be it an ENGO, part of a donor agency, or a government institution, will determine the out-

come of an intervention in any sense. From an ethnographic perspective organisational form fades into the background. Rather, what is highlighted is the complex way individuals and groups are positioned in matrices which are neither 'progressive' nor 'reactionary' (Fisher 1997, Morris-Suzuki 2000). The analysis of metaphor helps to identify political ideas embedded in ecological agendas, and thus paves the way towards evaluating them. Through studying the way that people describe their ecology and their economy, ethnography allows us to appreciate Dawn Chatty's irony that 'conservation promotes poaching' for Bedouin herders. David Ellis points out more mundanely how 'conservation is about consumption' in the Papua New Guinean rainforest. Anderson and Novellino highlight the various uses of the words 'market' and 'globe' as clues to more complex ecological relationships than those set by politicians. The political question remains, of course, whether those who lose out in ecopolitics-as-usual can make their own practises count so that they might flourish and generate more hopeful practices. An unexpectedly positive example is the case presented by Anderson where the thoroughly corrupt application of the market metaphor in Siberia can nevertheless be shown to create certain new spaces wherein locally meaningful action can be reproduced.

As we noted, the paradoxes which ethnographic analysis brings out are not at all new to social theory. Both the words environment and nature overflow with metaphoric power, and both have been shown to be politically and intellectually troublesome, to put it mildly. Nature's ontological primacy has been shaken in social theory (Strathern 1992, Latour 1993, Descola and Pálsson 1996a, Braun and Castree 1998) as well as in ethnographic accounts (Strathern 1980, Descola 1993, Tsing 1993, Scott 1996, Descola and Pálsson 1996b, Ellen and Fukui 1996). These analyses have shown that both European and North American common-sense definitions of nature posit a sharp division between the manipulating, subjective human and passive, objective nature. Today, however, the distinction between technology as human innovation and nature as pre-cultural seems to have imploded in practice as well as theory. For example, machines now help people live out their 'natural' capacity to be parents (Strathern 1992: 177), plants are valued for their information content – genes – and even more strangely, 'nature' now requires culture in the form of environmentalism simply to continue to exist.

In the practice of conservation but also in technology policy, the nature–culture dichotomy still carries politically crucial moral messages (Hayden 1998, Franklin et al. 2000). One key forum where dualistic metaphors of nature and culture run rampant is in the discussion of global versus local perspectives. As global ecopolitics so often works to the detriment of those whom anthropologists study, our reaction has been to place greater emphasis on local histories and context in our writing. If, however, anthropology confines itself to describing local events, it is in danger of falling into impotent particularism at best, and politically suspect populism at worst. What is needed instead, is an analysis of how local events evoke political narratives of global scope. In this way we can identify the dynamics which promote the ever-intensifying circulation of the goods and the bads of which global ecopolitics is composed. Above all, anthropologists should draw attention to the use of the concept 'global' in a depoliticised or shorthand way such that it is coterminous with a cold concept of 'nature'. After all, in one sense the Batak

described by Novellino too have a global view, but one where connections between different contexts are not made by reference to a nature taken as isomorphic with the 'globe' (cf. Strathern 1995), but rather, they are created through the capacities of beings, human and other, for co-apprehension or mutual recognition. As Novellino demonstrates, thick description can add layers of meaning to concepts which at first glance seem very simple. Nugent gives us another example through his analysis of the slogan that 'nature is out of control'. In his view, such language creates an idiom of quasi-scientific ecologism through which anthropologists too have sought an authoritative voice. Such an idiom may be more tasteful than one of 'civilising the savages', but it nevertheless reproduces a metaphor that people deemed to be 'closer to nature', be they primitives or criminals, must be managed (Luke 1997).

Another danger to which ethnographers can fall victim is to be placed as assessors of 'authenticity' of rural cultures. During the seminar, it came as a surprise to us all how common and pervasive was the idea that only those ecologically 'noble savages' living in a morally strong 'untouched' landscape are entitled to some sort of political support from conservation agencies. We were not so much surprised by the idea itself, which is not new, but by the fact that it is still strong and vital at the start of the twenty-first century. What was also uncomfortable was that many of us felt tempted to encourage this stereotype in the texts of our unpublished reports and 'discussion papers' in order to achieve what we felt to be noble short-term goals of protecting a special place or supporting a movement (cf. Kirsch 2001).

Yet we recognise that the language of authenticity has effects far beyond scholars and activists. Nygren (this volume) reports how difficult it was to persuade local people that an ethnographer was indeed interested in the lives of *campesinos* dressed in polyester.

In thinking about this challenge to sincere ethnography, it is important to recognise that this process is not accidental. The badge of authenticity which comes from protecting a proper natural place or traditional people has been an essential tool to legitimating the services of an ENGO to sponsors (Conklin 1997, Brosius 1999, Anderson and Ikeya 2001). Where more detailed accounts tarnish the prelapsarian credentials of rural people, often environmentalists cease to be interested, continuing to operate instead with stereotyped images of simple peasants or victimised primitives which obscure not only cultural heterogeneity but important political detail. A famous and illuminating example of such simplification are India's Chipko or 'tree-hugging' protesters, made up of heterogeneous constituencies who were nevertheless constructed by admiring Western audiences simply as 'an exemplar of grassroots environmentalism in the Third World' (Rangan 1996: 217). Tragically however, although it was easy for tree-hugging peasants to gain outside support, here as elsewhere, continuing struggles against economic and political marginalisation scarcely register unless the sound of guns can grab the media's attention. There are lessons here about how easy it is to invert politically convenient stereotypes, as yesterday's ecologically noble savages are suddenly turned into murderous ethnic fundamentalists.

Even if it is rare for any one anthropologist to witness such dramatic transformations as they unfold, the power of turns of phrase should never be lost upon us

as writers, and may yet yield important insights into the momentum of global ecopolitics. Ellis' account in this volume is by far the most sobering account of how environmental discourse and practice has become so rationalised that it seems to serve the material interest of its leaders rather than engaging with the specifics of the local ecology. In his radical view, talking about the environment is a weak replacement for living in the environment. However, balancing Ellis' account is Anderson's hopeful attempt to highlight the possibilities for new syncretisms between local values and new free-market and environmentalist ideologies.

Having surveyed some of the pitfalls of ecological discourse, and the deliberate or tangential ways that anthropologists participate in it, is it possible to identify a clear path forward? The seminar convinced us that one way forward would be to do what anthropologists have always done best – to provide detailed and thoughtful accounts of the ways people talk about the world. Unlike our forebearers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, today we recognise the need to analyse not only places far away, but also, and increasingly importantly, cultural milieux like boardrooms, ENGO offices and airport lounges closer to 'home'. Ethnographic thickness and the method's openness to dialogue can render the strange more understandable, but it also helps question, to make strange what is apparently familiar. In a sense, we already know what is needed for such a project: more fieldwork (albeit in different places), an apt lexicon, and a critical eye towards 'new' cultural forms (such as nature 'preserve' or the cosmology of Traditional Ecological Knowledge). Yet we also worry that this might be an easy and self-aggrandizing option. After all, the call for such a renewed ethnographic project carries the implicit message that we must have more grants, more studentships and more publications – maybe even new departments! Does such a productivist philosophy bring us closer to providing influential ethnographies? The answer might lie in anthropology's past.

We argued above that anthropology became estranged from the local ecology of power and action through its professionalisation. This suggests that we should also pay more attention not only to how we write but to the genres we produce. As the examples in this collection show, ethnographies of ecological underprivilege should be reflexive, sensitive to local turns of phrase, and also canny. However, it seems that they should also take calculated risks. All the authors in this volume have made choices about how to name the places they have lived and the people with whom they worked. In qualifying some of their 'data' they implicitly show that their texts engage with real, important and often difficult human dilemmas. Secondly, during the seminar all of the authors in this collection expressed dissatisfaction both with the formal public transcripts that we were taught to write as students and the grey, unpublished texts that we are often contracted to write as collaborators in ecological projects. The texts in this volume include material which is normally not included in the formal, refereed genre of anthropological ethnography. By stretching the genre we hope to give more exposure to these silent texts, as well as give expression to those critical thoughts that we have been led to hide. The reverse project, which is beyond this volume, would be to inject the skill of ethnographic precept and critique into development projects and its 'grey' literature, perhaps making it more reflexive and hopefully making it more



public. Many of the chapters here allude to attempts, successful and unsuccessful, at negotiating such a path.

Perhaps one of the best ways of illustrating our vision of writing ethnographies of ecological underprivilege is to report the challenges which arose in editing this volume. We hope that the reader will agree that the material is rich and diverse, but as such it posed familiar problems in terms of legislating consistency in spelling and style. As is traditional, we as editors take full responsibility for these changes. Some of our contributors ran up against the usual shortcomings of this academic genre in that ethnographic sections had to be edited for length and reworked to make them accessible to readers who may not be expert in each of the four continents considered in this volume (see Figure 2). This we found to be a serious problem, but we hope it is not fatal since there will, we hope, be other volumes and other journal articles by each contributor on the topics dealt with here.

However, we were less well prepared for a challenge that touches directly on the issues we set out to analyse. We were drawn into a pointed electronic mail exchange with an organisation which questioned not only points of fact but also the line of inquiry that the author in question was following. The correspondence even hinted at litigation. In trying to mediate the dispute we discovered that changing the pages in question was not the issue. Instead, the problem appeared to be that our efforts had moved the anthropological gaze towards relatively powerful organisations without giving these organisations the right of veto. Obviously anthropology is always to some extent an intervention that requires the negotiation of awkward relationships of trust, responsibility and power at all stages (Brosius 1999, Kirsch 2001). In unpacking this incident we found out that like other metaphors analysed here, the word 'responsibility' evokes a complex world of fact, interpretation and certain cultural intangibles such as reputation. We have to report that we are not such heroes as to have forged ahead in reproducing the pages in question unchanged. They were subject to no less than ten rounds of editing. We are confident that they represent no prejudice to the persons, places or organisations named herein. However, this caveat does not provide the same security as that offered by complete silence. The fact that these pages appear in print at all is in its own way ethnographic evidence of the significance that this line of inquiry might hold. Indeed, the entire volume is an exploration of the possible impacts of shifting the research focus, and of the surprises ethnography might have in store.

The chapters in this volume all attest, we feel, to the transformative potential of ethnographic work. The influence of political ecology as an academic as well as politically engaged field of enquiry is palpable in this volume, as is the legacy of a post-structuralist sensibility to discourse. Drawing on the best tradition of critical social science, the chapters shed light on hitherto overlooked aspects of environmentalism, making full use of ethnographic objectification. The outcome of all social activity, including anthropological writing as well as environmentalism, is of course contingent and so our objectifications will never remain within our control, nor will they ever, of course, be anything but partial (in both senses). This means that in writing of ecology and conservation as ways of distributing privilege, we should be prepared to enter dialogue with, not just write about, the actors in our ethnographies.