

Foundations of Socio-Environmental Research

This anthology convenes 53 foundational readings that showcase the rich history of socioenvironmental research from the late 1700s onwards. The introduction orients readers to the topic and how it has evolved and describes how to best use the book. The original readings are organized into six sections documenting the emergence of socioenvironmental research first as a shared concern and then as a topic of specific interest to anthropology and geography; economics, sociology, and political science; ecology; ethics, religious studies, and history; and technology, energy, and materials studies. A noted scholar introduces each section, putting the readings into historical and intellectual context. The conclusion links the legacy readings to contemporary approaches to socioenvironmental research and discusses how these links can enrich the reader's understanding and work. Invaluable to students, instructors, and researchers alike, this canonical reference volume illuminates underappreciated linkages across research domains and creates a shared basis for dialogue and collaboration.

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Foundations of Socio-Environmental Research

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We dedicate this book to our families, who have supported us throughout its development and who inspire us deeply.



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Foreword

In 2011, the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC.org) of the University of Maryland opened its doors to the international research community by providing support and space for interdisciplinary teams to undertake projects on complex relationships between people and the natural world. To date, the work of almost 5,000 unique participants, including both academics and individuals from outside the academy, has resulted in over 800 scholarly articles and many opportunities to engage with decision-makers and stakeholders across a variety of sectors. Within a year of opening, SESYNC also launched the "Socio-Environmental Immersion Program" to support early-career scholars in undertaking interdisciplinary postdoctoral research. As I will explain, this program is part of the story behind this book project.

The Immersion Program was designed to foster an interdisciplinary disposition and an appreciation for the breadth of scholarly perspectives and traditions that can be brought to understanding human—nature relationships. My thesis shaping the structure of the Immersion Program was that a certain level of understanding of different disciplinary traditions was essential for truly integrative research on socio-environmental systems. While lexicon differences are often cited as a barrier to interdisciplinary research, there is of course much more. Namely, there can be vast differences among researchers in their epistemic stances that determine what kind of knowledge they consider valid in research. There can be different, if not divergent, methods and methodologies, as well as variation in the extent to which research is theory-based or -motivated.

With this as a backdrop, a key element of the Immersion Program was a series of highly interactive workshops involving the postdoctoral fellows and accomplished visiting scholars. Both groups were diverse, and across the ten-plus years of the Immersion Program's funding, the workshops explored a range of perspectives and methodological "lenses" through which diverse fields and sectors approached the study of socio-environmental systems. Given often high within-discipline diversity, we sought to have multiple scholarly voices in the workshops that over time spanned sociology, anthropology, history, ecology, economics, human and land science geography, political ecology, and political science. During the two- to four-day workshops, the scholars and postdoctoral fellows co-explored the assumptions, approaches, and epistemologies they brought to their work. The fellows, themselves with very different backgrounds, variously probed, sometimes challenged, and sometimes chose to selectively disengage with certain ideas put forward by the visiting scholars.

Two things were obvious from the outset of the program. First, there was no scholarly "source" that covered the range of issues associated with the diversity of socio-environmental research. Second, while some of the Immersion scholars provided a brief historical perspective on their field(s), absent was a sense of the potential linkages across disciplinary histories. Awareness of these voids persistently plagued several of those who



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are now editors of this book. The reading selections and new contributions in this volume are meant to fill some of that void by providing rich accountings of how thinkers from the 1700s until nearly the end of the twentieth century engaged with human—nature relationships. What this volume brings to the fore is that, while cloaked differently, the same questions we ask today have been asked a long time.

As is elegantly argued in the part commentaries, socio-environmental research is not of a discipline nor is it about a problematic. It is of many disciplines, many problematics, and many long histories. While the point of intersection is a focus on human–nature relationships, what that means, what phenomena are explored, and why ideas converge or are discordant is very much a part of how they evolved – they all have histories. Yet, as Pulver et al. (Introduction) and Burnside et al. (Conclusion) remind us, knowledge production in this field today remains fragmented, with researchers applying diverse frameworks or approaches that appeal to distinct communities or theoretical perspectives. These communities largely move forward in confined intellectual spaces not only typically absent divergent voices but absent the history and evolution of thought that has preceded them. The question remains: can deeper knowledge of these histories help move the research community in a more truly integrative direction?

One hopes the answer to that question is yes because, while polyphyletic in its origin, interest in socio-environment research today is mushrooming. While today's work is diverse, this book reveals how the origins of many threads can be traced to early ideas and voices. Even the strong "demand-side" push scholars feel today to find solutions to problems can be seen in early works. To the extent today's research involves a "recoupling of society and nature" (Norgaard, Commentary on Part III) to focus on processes that contribute to the transformation of socio-environmental relationships (York, Commentary on Part I), then perhaps this burgeoning research enterprise could help the global "we" envision paths to better and more ethical social and environmental futures.

Margaret Palmer

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xviii Acknowledgments

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This volume is the product of a fundamentally egalitarian communal effort over a long period. All editors contributed deeply and substantially throughout this time and to all aspects, and this book would not exist without our individual and collective contributions. After Burnside, who conceived the idea for this book, the reverse alphabetical order reflects our recognition of this reality and counters the alpha ordering typically used. We thank each other for the collegiality, commitment, and sacrifices along the way.