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Ecoviolence Studies and Human Security

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1.1 Introduction

Building on a recent publication (Stoett & Omrow, 2021) this edited volume is intended primarily as a contribution to the evolving field that we will refer to as ecoviolence studies. The field covers a wide variety of themes, challenges, questions, issues, policy designs, and theoretical implications. While the term ecoviolence had gained some popularity in a limited fashion in the 1980s and 1990s, referring primarily to violence that erupts over conflicts related to natural resources – in particular, access to resources contested along sectarian grounds – we use it in much broader fashion and argue that its resurgence as a field of social science is as timely as it is unfortunate. The threats to planetary health that animate activists and state diplomats alike today – the interconnected climate, biodiversity, and pollution crises, amongst other manifestations of modern capitalism and colonial histories as well as contemporary paths to violence – are violent affairs.

Readers will find an eclectic collection of chapters that contribute to a contemporary discussion of ecoviolence as an impactful aspect of agential and structural violence. The claim for ecoviolence studies as a distinct area of scholarship is deliberately provocative: we acknowledge that some of the issues dealt with in this book draw upon related green criminology scholarship but hold that this subfield of criminology can also be constructively conceived as a subfield of Ecoviolence Studies. Importantly, all of the chapters that follow can also be situated within a broadly conceived human security framework, one that focuses on the emancipatory project of freeing the individuals and communities from systemic oppression and structural violence. We readily embrace the significance of human–human exploitation in the overall conception of ecoviolence. Many would argue exploitation (and, in the case of some Marxist analyses, [super]exploitation) is the driving cause of scarcity, hunger, and anger in the world today. In line with ecofeminist analysis, we see entwined forms of exploitation (class, racial, and

gender amongst them) as central to the environmental harm perpetrated by both market forces and the state today.

This introductory chapter begins with an exposé of the field of Ecoviolence Studies and then discusses the volume to follow.

1.2 Ecoviolence Studies Revisited

Ecoviolence is conceived here as the confluence of both *agential and structural violence* associated with environmental harm (in its most harmful form, ecocide) and human–human (super)exploitation. We affix the term *studies* to indicate a multidisciplinary field of inquiry, which covers a wide range of thematic issues, linked by the commonality of ecoviolence; many of these themes are also explored under the rubric of other specializations. We are not making the ambitious claim that ecoviolence studies have or will transcend multidisciplinarity to achieve interdisciplinarity or, even more ambitiously, transdisciplinarity, though this is an enticing possibility. But as the diversity of the authors assembled for this edited volume suggests, it is a theme that brings together scholars from a wide variety of disciplines and professions.

Agential violence is perhaps most easily represented by the World Health Organization's definition: violence is "[t]he intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (WHO, 2002). We move toward structural violence at the end of the WHO definition. However, intentionality aside, much of the "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011) experienced by vulnerable populations is beyond the will of any individual. Agential violence is deliberately inflicted by an agent, be that a person or a government or a corporation; it is usually conceived as violence against a human but it can also be violence against the environment, such as warfare-related ecocide, ecological sabotage, environmental crime, and the deliberate harm and neglect of animals (according to some animal rights advocates, all forms of farming, for example, are violent).

Structural violence, a term championed by Johan Galtung (1990) and many others, suggests a much more intractable source of harm: sociopolitical structures that are passed on from generation to generation, that not only ensure millions of humans live in suboptimal conditions, but that perpetuate unsustainable resource use and pollution in the process. Some scholars such as Kurtz (2021) have revisited Galtung's triangular model of violence (comprising direct, structural, and cultural violence), calling for researchers to tear down the disciplinary silos so that Galtung's triangle can be transformed into a diamond with the addition of ecoviolence as a field of study. Kelkar (1992, p. 21) suggests that violence includes

"exploitation, discrimination, unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of religiocultural and political violence," including gender-based violence against women, reinforcing its structural nature.

The distinction between agential and structural violence is all the more complicated when we consider the links between ecocidality and suicidality (an issue further explored in Chapter 5). The World Health Organization has explored the benefits of "greenness" on reducing suicide mortality rates and the data is quite clear: where we live can affect our mental health and exposure to "green spaces" is often limited to many as a result of nature being perceived, accessed, and used differently by people of different socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Suicide, therefore, should be studied from a social, historical, and ecological standpoint (Widger, 2018). If neoliberal, free trade policy is also considered, the distinction between agential and structural violence is further exacerbated. One need only reflect on the proliferation of Western biotechnology in India and the increase of suicides among farmers as a direct result of Monsanto's commercialization of GM seeds; patent control; terminator technology; high-interest loans; and increased production costs for local farmers. Thomas & De Tavernier (2017) argue that there is a link between the economic factors associated with biotechnology cultivation and farmer suicide, as the country has witnessed approximately 300,000 farmer suicides over the past two decades (Mishra, 2014; Philpott, 2015). Critics of biotechnology have dubbed these genetically modified organisms "Seeds of Suicide, Seeds of Slavery, and Seeds of Despair" (Shiva & Jalees, 2006; Shiva, 2013).

In 2017, an Atayal farmer in Taiwan violated the country's Soil and Water Conservation Act by excavating a piece of land and was forced to pay a fine of NT$140,000 (approximately $4,700 USD). Faced with economic hardship and poor physical health, the farmer committed suicide – a practice which is widespread among Indigenous communities in Taiwan. Singer (2016) argues that the relationship the Atayal have with nature is based on what he refers to as "pluralea interactions," which are interactions based on a dynamic system of interwoven environmental crises and their effects on human health. With the Indigenous people of Taiwan being consigned to the margins of society during the country's rapid economic growth and Han-owned corporations embezzling their land, "pluralea interactions" help explain the correlation between the usurpation of Atayal dwelling sites and habitats and suicidality among the local communities (Chen et al., 2008).

Chantal Persad's (2017) analysis of the suicide crisis and state of emergency in the Attawapiskat First Nations community in Ontario, Canada, engages in a critical theoretical discussion of the neoliberal political economy and suicidality among teenagers in Attawapiskat. For Persad, the link between settler-colonial violence (ecocide) and suicide is clearly delineated through the legitimization of neoliberal,

settler-colonial strategies of land theft and dispossession in Canada. Even more, the media's coverage of the tragedy reveals how humanitarian efforts and governance perpetuates tropes of settler colonialism through the pathologization of Indigenous peoples' lived experiences of "trauma" and "mental illness" (Persad, 2017). Murdocca (2020), similarly, examines the political genealogy of humanitarian governance in White settler colonialism, and reveals how racial colonial violence is (re)produced in public and media discourse, with the state ignoring its obligations under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the 94 Calls to Action.

Is the violence resulting from the ecocidality–suicidality nexus agential or structural? Westra (2008) offers a thoughtful articulation of the intersections between the "cultural integrity model" and the "self-determination model" (Anaya, 2004; Metcalf, 2004) in her book *Environmental Justice and The Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Westra revisits both models, asserting that scant attention has been paid to another model which is foundational to the rights of First Nations: "the biological/ecological integrity model." This model addresses the right to life, health and normal functions. In other words, "cultural integrity" and "self-determination," both of which are pivotal in safeguarding Indigenous peoples' inalienable rights, are contingent on the sustainability of "biological/ecological integrity" which aims to bring an end to the (super)exploitation of Indigenous peoples. As the research above demonstrates, "biological/ecological integrity" is impacted by the ecocidality/suicidality nexus and must be integrated into a comprehensive, and intersectional, analysis of Indigenous peoples' connection to land and, more broadly, the geopolitical environment.

The preceding discussion of the ecocidality–suicidality nexus serves to remind us how complicated it is to branch out from more typical perspectives on ecoviolence, even if they were centered to some degree on human security concerns. Obviously, we consider human–human exploitation a form of violence, though of course there are remarkably differing perspectives on just how violent this is. Marxists, for example, remind us that capitalism itself is based on the acceptance of exploitation as the foundation of an entire mode of production. Marxist thought has also undergone many transformations, resulting in nonlinear critiques of capitalism through structural Marxism, neoMarxism, feminist Marxism and postMarxism. Scholars such as Bonds & Inwood (2016), Bosworth (2018), and McCreary & Turner (2018), offer an uncompromising analysis of the relationship between race and capitalism. How might racialized difference and capital accumulation engender ecoviolence, especially in historical and contemporary frameworks of analysis? Ecoviolence studies offers theoretical and political promise to better understand (super)exploitation and its undeniably egregious connotations. Such frameworks denote abject harm; in short, threats to human security, another theme we will return to soon.

In the recent past, ecoviolence referred more generally to conflicts that erupt in protracted violent episodes largely over the distribution of natural resources. This particular form of ecoviolence was seen primarily as a function of scarcity, inept or corrupt governance, and violent cultural trends. Homer-Dixon and Blitt's book (1998) *Ecoviolence: Links Among Environment, Population and Security*, was a clear example – it explored links between environmental scarcities of key renewable resources such as cropland, fresh water, and forests, and violent rebellions, insurgencies, and ethnic clashes in developing countries. Detailed contemporary studies of civil violence in Chiapas, Gaza, South Africa, Pakistan, and Rwanda demonstrated how environmental scarcity has played a limited to significant role in causing social instability in each of these contexts. Indeed, as we write these pages, a real-time catastrophe is unfolding in Sudan, where years of climate change-induced flooding have ravaged rural regions and a near-civil war is breaking out between military factions during the tumultuous climb toward democracy. No doubt there are links between environmental change and conflict and violence that need to be explored if humanitarian efforts are to be based on factual understandings of context.

However, the early Homer-Dixon research (sometimes referred to as the "Toronto School") also demonstrated that the causal relationships between the environment and societal unrest are considerably more complex than is widely presumed, opening new avenues of interrogation into ecoviolence, exploitation, and human security. No doubt natural resources can be the heart of what Le Billon termed the "political ecology of war" (Le Billon, 2001). Yet Conca and Wallace suggest that "much of the eco-conflict literature has invoked 'scarcity' without paying attention to how social relations create the condition for resource capture or other forms of social scarcity . . . the precise mechanisms by which resource wealth may induce or sustain violence remain disputed" (Conca & Wallace, 2009, p. 488; see also Gleditsch & Urdal, 2002). Ezenwa (2022) echoes the nuanced complexities of harm by suggesting that ecoviolence serves as umbrella terminology to gain greater insight into "conflicts in which competition for water and agricultural resources occurs within or between social groups or state actors, often resulting in mass murder and destruction of the environment and properties; such conflicts are exacerbated by the states' failure to address resource redistribution challenges, institutional failures, and environmental and social injustice." According to such an expanded definition, ecoviolence encompasses myriad dimensions of conflict and shifts our focus from the identities of warring social groups to the structural drivers of this type of violence: *state-initiated* and *state-facilitated* forms of state–corporate crime; insecurity, climate change challenges, and "resource captures" – to name a few. This expanded definition forces researchers to consider the links between ecoviolent behavior and mass murder, human displacement, sexual

exploitation, ecological destruction, and social injustice. However, lest we conflate "the state" with governments, we should recall that other actors are also agential. For example, the role of multinational corporations investing in deforestation is depressingly widespread. Even small-time criminals are part of the equation; for example, as discussed in Chapter 3 the increased violence against women perpetrated during natural disasters is largely at the hands of human traffickers. This is not to deny the centrality of the state, as a mechanism of power and control and site of contestation, but to argue that other institutions or even individual agents are often as complicit, and that the pursuit of human security will need to include them in the overall assessment of related praxeology.

Ecoviolence studies as conceived here is animated by concepts and processes that inform policy and galvanize justice-demanding action, but as a multidisciplinary field it also explores explanations of root causes including physical, structural, and cultural forms of harm. Though lessons from historical cases and structures are vital, we are generally concerned with the present situation, and given the urgencies involved (human suffering and ecosystem collapse) it is no surprise that those engaged will seek strategies to prevent, end, and transform ecoviolence, and to present approaches to promote structural, ideological and institutional change at the local, national, and global level. Micro (individual) and macro (state/corporate-centric) ecoviolence warrant a new analytic lens for theorizing ecocide and (super)exploitation.

We borrow liberally from criminology, not only because environmental crime is a foremost form of ecoviolence but because the state–corporate nexus is so prevalent in large scale environmental harm. The most harmful (or in this case, ecoviolent) acts are committed through the exercise of economic, political, or cultural power; even when criminalized, those responsible receive less severe sanctions than "criminals" from less powerful groups (Michalowski, 2018). Michalowski & Kramer's (2007) groundbreaking work on state–corporate crime (or state-facilitated corporate crime) explore how unlawful acts were redefined as permissible ones so that corporate and political actors could threaten the health, well-being, and natural development of both humans and ecosystems. Whether it is through regulatory rollbacks which seek to minimize the regulation of harmful corporate behavior or powerful transnational corporations exercising pressure over nations seeking foreign investment so that they can engage in environmental degradation and forms of labor exploitation, the concept of state–corporate crime serves as an analytic framework for studying violence resulting from the intersection of political and business interests (Michalowski & Brown, 2020). Relatedly, Aulette & Michalowski (1993) highlight instances where government omissions lead to private businesses perpetuating forms of violence – most of which end up fulfilling state policies. Over the years, the concept of state–corporate crime has included both *state-initiated* and *state-facilitated* forms of state–corporate crime, a promising development for explaining micro/macro ecoviolence.

Indeed, extant green criminology scholarship, pioneered by Rob White and others (see White & Heckenberg, 2014) offers fertile ground for developing a framework for ecoviolence studies. For example, Brisman & South (2018) explore the "Anthropocene" and ways in which we understand the relationship between humans and nature. For them, the anthropocentric acceleration of the exploitation and appropriation of the environment must be seen as criminogenic, with implications for what this may mean for the idea of "security". How might this exploitation extend to humans, too? How might an analysis of agential and structural violence aid our theory of the "Anthropocene"? Holley & Shearing (2018) also provide an overview of criminology's contribution to the analysis and debate that flows from the Anthropocene, discussing ecocide in the context of climate change. Drawing on green criminology and regulatory studies, the authors reflect on what the criminalization of business conduct that breaches ecological limits would look like.

Crook et al. (2018) adopt a green criminology lens to explore parallel processes of exploitation and injustice in relation to nonhuman species and/or aspects of the natural environment. Specifically, the authors examine how ecocide, genocide, capitalism, and colonialism impact Indigenous peoples and on local and global ("glocal") ecosystems. However, the structural violence of colonialism and capitalism are not explored, obfuscating historical systems of governance and economic systems have led to systemic harm and inequality. Givens et al. (2019) review the theory of ecologically unequal exchange and its relevance for global environmental injustice, paying particular attention to international trade and how it shapes the unequal distribution of environmental harms and human development. Such a world-systems analysis, however, neglects the human–human (super)exploitation embedded in the ecological unequal exchange theory. Banzhaf et al. (2019) document the correlation between pollution and race and poverty, identifying inequitable exposure to environmental hazards and the implications of modeling choices as they relate to spatial relationships between polluters and residents. Undoubtedly, this type of work is situated in the realm of environmental justice and green criminology; however, the authors do not address the agential and structural violence of disproportionate siting of Black, Indigenous and racialized households, market-like coordination of such zoning, or discriminatory politics and/or enforcement.

Kramer (2020) pursued research on "carbon criminals" from a green criminological perspective. The author asserts that the criminal nature of environmental harms resulting from the release of greenhouse gas demands greater accountability in the fossil fuel industry, but also the US government, and the international political community. One facet of research that Kramer does not engage is an exploration of how agential and structural violence occurs when considering

state–corporate climate crimes, or continued extraction of fossil fuels and the political omission (failure) related to the mitigation of these emissions. Lastly, Nurse (2022) argues that green criminology allows for the study of criminal laws and environmental criminality – including widespread environmental harm and the exploitation of nature. While environmental crimes (and overall harm) produce long-lasting and irreversible effects, the effectiveness of environmental enforcement is brought into question, especially in global neoliberal markets. The author contends that profit-driven economies and anthropocentric attitudes toward the environment lead to the exploitation of natural resources, but does comment on human–human (super)exploitation – an issue we believe to be tied to ecoviolence during the Anthropocene. Indeed, we humans are part of the "earth-system" as a whole and *agential and structural violence* by the hands of a few impacts not only the environment, but millions of peoples across the globe.

On a more theoretical plain, ecoviolence can be linked to different forms of colonial oppression, as evidenced in Agozino's (2005) analysis of colonial legacies in West Africa. Violence in West Africa, along with militarization and social control over people and resources, is a function of the consequences of imperialism in the colonial and postcolonial eras. Parsons & Fisher (2022), on the other hand, examine the history of settler-colonialism and how settler-colonial-led policies and projects led to environmental injustices in New Zealand. Environmental transformation efforts to remove native vegetation, drain wetlands, introduce exotic biota, and re-engineer waterways contribute to intensifying incidence of floods; and while flood risk management regimes were introduced to mitigate floods, the Maori interpret such interventions as far more destructive (socially, economically, and spiritually) than flood events. In fact, the authors argue that the reconfiguration of rivers (and of people) in accordance with settler values and imagined geographies constitute acts of ecoviolence.

In a recent publication, we explored several of what we termed the "spheres of transnational ecoviolence" centered on criminal and noncriminal acts of aggression against the environment that also have a pronounced human exploitation component (Stoett & Omrow, 2021). The book focused mainly on the illegal wildlife trade (animals and plants, two quite diverse fields), toxic waste dumping, oceanic crimes, and climate crimes as examples of transnational ecoviolence; transnational because these acts usually entailed the crossing of borders in the modern international state system. To quote briefly from that book, "transnational ecoviolence is not sporadic or spontaneous; it is agential, but driven by the structural political economy of global markets; it is deliberate and designed and generally profitable with low risk of punishment and it is facilitated by the structural violence of inequity, racism, sustained conflict, and other forms of human insecurity" (Stoett & Omrow, 2021, p. 24). We also looked into various possible responses to transnational ecoviolence,

ranging from state intervention and regulation, militarized responses (the new "green militarization") (Lunstrum, 2014), represented by the "anti-poaching arms race" (Duffy, 2010, 2014) – clearly, human security must be a priority if we are to avoid making a bad situation worse for vulnerable groups caught in the web of transnational ecoviolence (see Duffy et al., 2019); high tech responses, which are often portrayed as the most promising but present their own problems. We also discuss the role of international courts (real, and imagined), and Earth jurisprudence as an emerging approach with an old pedigree. This volume contains case studies that will raise many of these possible coordinated responses, but it is readily apparent that there is no single answer to the multifaceted task of reducing or eliminating ecoviolence in the human future.

While there is no shortage of literature and investigative journalism that examines environmental harm, and similarly there is ample evidence of human rights abuses in all regions of the world today (with the exception perhaps of Antarctica), there are limited efforts to bring these two phenomena together, to explore the intersection between human exploitation and the deliberate harm resulting from illegal ecosystem exploitation, taking place on a transnational scale. And yet it is increasingly obvious that this is a tremendously deleterious and common intersection, and that efforts to stem the tide of climate change, for example, need to consider environmental crime and illicit activity as well as formally registered greenhouse gas emissions. Everyone's human security is therefore threatened by ecoviolence, though some are more directly threatened than others, especially those trapped in cycles of ecoviolence, or in slave or bonded labor on land or sea, or living in Indigenous communities whose way of life is threatened by invasive alien species, resource extraction, overfishing, sea level rise, and other existential threats. Framing this intersection explicitly as a place of violence helps the reader understand both the gravity of the situation, as well as the need to pursue a new green/blue human security in order to achieve transformative change.

Beyond the eco-conflict literature discussed earlier, several strands of inquiry already exist that examine aspects of the ecocide–exploitation confluence. These include forced migration/environmental refugees (see McNamara, Bronen, Fernando, & Klepp, 2018; Afifi & Jager, 2019); human trafficking (Dung & Avwunudiogba, 2021); human rights abuses related to conflict over resources (Oluduro, 2014); gendered violence related to environmental scarcity and forced labour, such as coerced sex work (Kempadoo, 1999); illegal, unreported, unregulated fishing, and sea slavery (Field, 2014; Urbina, 2019); more general patterns of slavery in mining, agriculture, and other industries (Mol, 2017); and toxic waste dumping by organized crime that also exploits local citizens and exposes them to unusual hazards (Kitt, 1995; Peluso, 2016). No doubt, this list of terrors can go on for quite some length before we have exhausted the possibilities.

Bales (2016) may have written one of the more arresting treatments of ecoviolence through his contention that ecocide and slavery are hand-in-hand, contributing vastly to climate change. His book explores how environmental destruction denies people traditional livelihoods, opening them to exploitation. The author outlines a pattern: where slavery exists, so does massive, unchecked environmental destruction. Documenting the lives of modern-day slaves along the global supply chain, the author lays bare lawless zones of activity which perpetuate human exploitation: unfree labor via illegal tropical logging, wildcat mining for gold and other minerals, reckless fishing, etc. Some critics have accused Bales of presenting "naked guesswork" when ascribing 40 percent of global deforestation to slave labor; and he's been (unfairly, as he does not do this) criticized for publicizing the assumption that if modern slavery disappeared, deforestation and other environmental destruction would also end. Nonetheless, the historical and current links between slavery and environmental destruction are a powerful place to start the study of ecoviolence.

Ecoviolence can also include the use of violence by governments or corporations to suppress environmental activism or opposition to environmentally damaging policies or practices. This can take the form of physical violence against activists, harassment, intimidation, or legal action designed to silence dissent. Omrow alludes to this state-led oppression of Indigenous groups opposed to Guyana's current path toward a burgeoning mining economy in Chapter 5 in this volume, and we also stressed this in our co-authored volume (Stoett & Omrow, 2021). The international NGO Global Witness reveals that there is a positive correlation between the climate crisis and violence against those protecting their land. In 2020 alone, 227 lethal attacks were documented in the form of intimidation, surveillance, sexual violence, and criminalization. Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines are overrepresented in the data, with almost 30 percent of the attacks being linked to resource exploitation (logging, mining and large-scale agribusiness), and other development projects (Global Witness, 2021).

This trend shows no signs of abating, unfortunately. According to a 2023 report by Global Witnessentitled *Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis,* at least 177 defenders were murdered in 2022. This brings the total number of documented killings to 1,910 since 2012, the year the organization started to investigate this matter. What is more unnerving is the fact that 1,390 of these murders occurred during the time the Paris Agreement was adopted and the end of 2022. When we disaggregate the data through an intersectional lens, women were subjected to 11 percent of the reported attacks, while 36 percent of those murdered were Indigenous peoples. Seven percent were Afro-descendants and more than 22 percent were small-scale farmers. Lastly, at