The Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Sociology Volume 1

The Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Sociology is a go-to resource for cutting-edge research in the field. This two-volume work covers the rich theoretic foundations of the sub-discipline, as well as novel approaches and emerging areas of research that add vitality and momentum to the discipline. Over the course of sixty chapters, the authors featured in this work reach new levels of theoretical depth, incorporating a global breadth and diversity of cases. This book explores the broad scope of crucial disciplinary ideas and areas of research, extending its investigation to the trajectories of thought that led to their unfolding. This unique work serves as an invaluable tool for all those working in the nexus of environment and society.

KATHARINE LEGUN is Assistant Professor in Communication, Philosophy and Technology at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. Her work considers how plants, measurement systems, and new artificial intelligence technology shapes ecological and economic agency in agri-food systems and the political dynamics of farming.

JULIE C. KELLER is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Rhode Island. Her research and teaching focus on rural inequality, agricultural labor, farmers, and immigration. She is the author of *Milking in the Shadows: Migrants and Mobility in America's Dairyland* (Rutgers University Press, 2019).

MICHAEL CAROLAN is Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Affairs at Colorado State University. His research focuses on issues related to food, agriculture, sustainability, and justice. Some of his recent books include *Society and the Environment: Pragmatic Solutions to Ecological Issues*, third edition (Routledge, 2020) and *The Food Sharing Revolution: How Start-Ups, Pop-Ups, and Co-Ops are Changing the Way We Eat* (Island Press, 2018).

MICHAEL M. BELL is Chair and Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is the author of *City of the Good: Nature, Religion, and the Ancient Search for What Is Right* (Princeton, 2018) and the widely used environmental sociology textbook, *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, now in its sixth edition.

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Edited by Katharine Legun , Julie Keller , Michael Bell , Michael Carolan
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Volume 1

Edited by

Katharine Legun
Wageningen University

Julie C. Keller
University of Rhode Island

Michael Carolan
Colorado State University

Michael M. Bell
University of Wisconsin–Madison

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Contributors

HENRI ACSELRAD holds a PhD in Public Economics and Spatial Organization at Paris I University. He is Full Professor at the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning and Research of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (IPPUR/UFRJ) and a researcher at the National Research Council (CNPq). His current research focuses on environmental conflicts, social appropriations of sustainability, and the implications of corporate policies for local communities' rights. Recent text published in English: "Deregulation, Relocation and Environmental Conflict: Considerations on the Control of Social Demands in Contemporary Brazil" in L. R. Issberner and P. Léna (eds.) *Brazil in the Anthropocene: Conflicts between Predatory Development and Environmental Policies* (Routledge, 2017).

JULIA N. ALBRECHT is a senior lecturer at the University of Otago (New Zealand). She is an editor of *Pacific Geographies* and has recently joined the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*. Much of her recent research concerns visitor management, nature-based attractions and tourism in winegrowing regions.

LOKA ASHWOOD is an assistant professor at Auburn University in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. Her research tackles the inner workings of the state and economy that leave many rural people on the margins of formal politics and drives inequality. She recently published the book *For-Profit Democracy: Why the Government Is Losing the Trust of Rural America* (Yale, 2018).

MICHAEL M. BELL is Chair and Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he is also a faculty associate in Environmental Studies, Religious Studies, and Agroecology. He has published more than ten books, including *City of the Good: Nature, Religion, and the Ancient Search for What Is Right* and the widely used environmental sociology textbook *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, now in its sixth edition. Mike is as well a prolific composer and performer of grassroots and classical music. For more on his work and passions, see his website: www.michael-bell.net.

ELIZABETH S. BARRON is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Dr. Barron's research interests are in understanding different knowledge systems for addressing human–environment challenges in the areas of conservation and resource management,

alternative economics, and sustainability. Her current research project is on developing the concept of emplaced sustainability. From 2018 to 2021 she is serving as a coordinating lead author for an IPBES Assessment on the Sustainable Use of Wild Species.

PATRICK BRESNIHAN is a lecturer in the Department of Geography at Maynooth University. He works across the interdisciplinary fields of political ecology, science and technology studies, and environmental humanities. He has published extensively, including articles on water infrastructure, urban commons in post-crash Dublin, and the poetics of John Clare. His book *Transforming the Fisheries: Neoliberalism, Nature and the Commons* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016) won the Geography Society of Ireland Book of the Year in 2018.

BRADLEY H. BREWSTER earned his PhD from University of Wisconsin-Madison where his dissertation explored the value of classical microsociological theories for environmental sociology. He has published on the same theme, developing, with co-author Michael M. Bell, Erving Goffman's frame analysis for "an environmentalsociology of everyday life" (2010) and, with co-author Antony J. Puddephatt, excavating the socio-environmental dimensions of George Herbert Mead's thinking (2016). He also conceived and was lead editor of *Microsociological Perspectives for Environmental Sociology* (Routledge, 2017).

HUGH CAMPBELL is Professor of Sociology at the University of Otago. Previously he was the Director of the Centre for the Study of Agriculture, Food and Environment (CSAFE) at the University of Otago where he led a series of research programs investigating the effects of new sustainability auditing on farms and orchards in New Zealand. He publishes on neoliberalization and farming, environmental governance in agriculture, and the social dynamics of sustainable farming.

JOHN C. CANFIELD, JR. is a PhD student in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He received an MS in rural sociology from Auburn University, where he researched the financialization of farmland. He holds a BA from Sewanee: The University of the South, double majoring in philosophy and environmental studies.

MICHAEL CAROLAN is Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Affairs at Colorado State University. His research focuses on issues related to food, agriculture, sustainability, and justice. Some of his recent books include Society and the Environment: Pragmatic Solutions to Ecological Issues, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2020) and The Food Sharing Revolution: How Start-Ups, Pop-Ups, and Co-Ops are Changing the Way We Eat (Island Press, 2018).

JACKLYN COCK is a professor emeritus in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and an honorary research professor in the Society, Work and Development (SWOP) Institute. Her best known books are *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* and *The War against Ourselves: Nature, Power and Justice*. Her most recent book is *Writing the Ancestral River: A Biography of the Kowie* (2018).

NOAH WEETH FEINSTEIN is Associate Professor of Community & Environmental Sociology and Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He studies how people find meaning and value in science as they confront health and sustainability challenges in their personal, social, and political lives. His current projects focus on the multifaceted challenge of equity in science museums and other public science settings, and on the roles of education and learning in adaptation to climate change.

KARL GALLOWAY holds an MS from Auburn University, where his thesis was titled "Policing Poultry: State and Market Interplay and Its Ramifications in the Rural South." His work examines understandings of immigration-driven revitalization in Northeast Alabama and encourages dialogue surrounding the region's recent history. He is passionate about innovative community-building initiatives and has participated in rural eco-tourism and small-scale agricultural initiatives both domestically and abroad. Currently, he is pursuing a career in public history in Montgomery, Alabama.

GUSTAVO A. GARCÍA-LÓPEZ is Assistant Professor of Environmental Planning at the Graduate School of Planning, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras. His work focuses on governance of the commons, analyzing the linkages between state rule, social mobilization, and the emergence, scaling-up, and transformative potential of commons initiatives. He is the lead editor of the recent special issue "Rethinking Power and Institutions" in the journal *World Development* and the book *Ambiente y Democracia: Experiencias de Gestión Colaborativa Ambiental en Puerto Rico* (University of Puerto Rico Press, 2018).

GARY PAUL GREEN is a professor emeritus in the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research, teaching, and outreach focus on the relationship between economic development and community change. Green's current research projects focus on the deindustrialization and the retail apocalypse in rural America. His recent books include *Handbook of Rural Development, Asset Building and Community Development*, fourth edition, and *Workforce Development Networks in Rural Areas: Building the High Road*.

JAMES HALE is a sociologist who specializes in studying the socio-cultural, community, and governance dimensions of food, agriculture, and environment improvement efforts. He has spent time in both practitioner and research settings including working as a Peace Corps agroforestry agent in Malawi, helping spearhead alternative food projects in Colorado, and leading related research projects at Colorado State University and the Colorado School of Public Health. More recently, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Sustainability at the University of Otago in New Zealand.

JOHN HANNIGAN is Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto where he teaches courses in environmental sociology, urban political economy, and cultural policies. He has published five books: *Environmental Sociology* (1995, 2006, 2014), translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese; *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit*

in the Postmodern Metropolis (1998); *Disasters without Borders: The International Politics of Natural Disasters* (2012); *The Geopolitics of Deep Oceans* (2015); and *The SAGE Handbook of New Urban Studies* (2017), co-edited with Greg Richards.

JAMES E. S. HIGHAM is Professor of Tourism at the University of Otago (New Zealand) and Visiting Professor of Sustainable Tourism at the University of Stavanger (Norway). His research addresses tourism and global environmental change at a range of spatio-temporal scales. He is the co-editor of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (Routledge).

HANNAH HOLLEMAN is author of *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of "Green" Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), among other works, and Associate Professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

JULIE C. KELLER is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Rhode Island. Her research and teaching focus on rural inequality, agricultural labor, farmers, and immigration. She is the author of *Milking in the Shadows: Migrants and Mobility in America's Dairyland* (Rutgers University Press, 2019).

LESLIE KING is Professor of Sociology and Environmental Science and Policy at Smith College. Her areas of interest include population studies, environmental sociology, and social movements. Much of her research has focused on how ideologies of nationalism, gender, race/ethnicity, and class are implicated in the construction and implementation of population policies. Her recent research investigates corporatization of social movement activism.

KATHARINE LEGUN is Assistant Professor in Communication, Philosophy and Technology at the University of Wageningen. Her work considers more-than-human approaches to understanding economic and environmental practice, focusing particularly on the role of plants and technology in shaping human agency within agriculture. Her work has looked at aesthetics and politics in the apple industry, hop geopolitics and craft beer, digital sustainability programs in wine and dairying, and the social implications of automation in horticulture. She has published in *Society and Natural Resources*, *Economy and Society*, *Geoforum*, *The Journal of Rural Studies*, *Agriculture and Human Values*, and *Environment and Planning A*, and has co-edited a special issue of the *Journal or Rural Studies* on the post-human turn in agri-food research.

YIFEI LI is Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at New York University (NYU) Shanghai, and Global Network Assistant Professor at NYU. His research examines the environment and the city in China, focusing on questions about state bureaucracy, urban sustainability, and disaster resilience. His recent work appears in *Current Sociology*, *Environmental Sociology*, *Journal of Environmental Management*, and other scholarly outlets. He received his PhD in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

ROLF LIDSKOG is Professor of Sociology and coordinator of the Environmental Sociology Section at Örebro University, Sweden. His research interest is environmental policy and politics on an international and national level, especially the role of expertise in environmental politics. He has published extensively in journals on topics such as environmental sociology, environmental politics and policy, risk regulation, and science–policy relations. He is co-author of the book *Transboundary Risk Governance* (2009) and co-editor of *Governing the Air: The Dynamics of Science, Policy, and Citizen Interaction* (2011).

STEWART LOCKIE is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Director of the Cairns Institute at James Cook University. His research addresses environmental governance, food and agriculture, climate adaptation, and the science–policy interface. Professor Lockie is Foundation Editor of *Environmental Sociology*, official journal of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Environment and Society, and author of *Failure or Reform? Market-Based Policy Instruments for Sustainable Agriculture and Resource Management* (2019).

MICHAEL A. LONG is Associate Professor of Sociology at Oklahoma State University. His research addresses social inequality using political economic theory as applied within the areas of environmental sociology, green criminology, food insecurity, corporate crime, among others.

STEFANO B. LONGO is Associate Professor of Sociology at North Carolina State University. His research examines the social drivers of environmental change and the potential for socio-ecological sustainability. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and the book *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture*.

MICHAEL LÖWY was born in Brazil in 1938 and has lived in Paris since 1969. He is Emeritus Research Director at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research). His books and articles have been translated into twenty-nine languages. He is co-author, with Joel Kovel, of the *International Ecosocialist Manifesto* (2001). His main publications include *Romanticism against the Current of Modernity* (with Robert Sayre, Duke University Press, 2001); *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History"* (Verso, 2005); *On Changing the World: Essays in Political Philosophy from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin* (Haymarket, 2013); and *Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to the Capitalist Ecological Catastrophe* (Haymarket, 2015).

MICHAEL J. LYNCH is Professor of Criminology at the University of South Florida. His research focuses on the following subjects: green criminology, environmental sociology, ecological Marxism, radical criminology, environmental justice, among others. He is a co-editor (with Paul Stretesky) of the CRC Press Green Criminology book series.

PHIL MACNAGHTEN is Professor of Technology and International Development at the Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI) group at Wageningen University. His PhD is from Exeter and he has held appointments at Lancaster, Durham, and Campinas before joining Wageningen in 2015. His research background is in science and technology studies (STS) and sociology. He has developed

in-depth qualitative methodologies for researching controversial technologies which, in turn, have informed policy approaches to dialogue and public engagement. His current research focus on responsible innovation, gene editing, and the governance of emerging technology.

JAMES S. ORMROD is Principal Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Brighton, UK. His research is concerned with how humans relate to their environments, and in particular it has focused on the contested nature of our relationship with outer space. He is the author of *Fantasy and Social Movements* and (with Peter Dickens) *Cosmic Society: Towards a Sociology of the Universe*, and editor of *Changing Our Environment, Changing Ourselves* and (with Peter Dickens) *The Palgrave Handbook of Society, Culture and Outer Space*.

DAVID N. PELLOW is the Dehlsen Chair and Professor of Environmental Studies and Director of the Global Environmental Justice Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His teaching and research focus on environmental and ecological justice in the USA and globally. He has served on the Boards of Directors for the Center for Urban Transformation, Greenpeace USA, and International Rivers.

ANTONY J. PUDDEPHATT is Professor of Sociology at Lakehead University in Canada. He has studied the pragmatist social theory of George Herbert Mead, as it informs topics such as language, meaning, social action, science and technology, and environmental sociology. He has also researched the institutional culture of sociology in Canada, the world of amateur chess, and open-access publishing in Canada. With William Shaffir and Steven Kleinknecht, he is co-editor of *Ethnographies Revisited* (Routledge, 2009), and with Bradley H. Brewster, he is co-editor of *Microsociological Perspectives for Environmental Sociology* (Routledge, 2017).

MAANO RAMUTSINDELA is Professor in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science and Dean of Science at the University of Cape Town. His current research focuses on land claims in South Africa's protected areas and on the intersection of politics, economics, and nature conservation in Africa. He is co-editor, with David Mickler, of a book on *Africa and the Sustainable Development Goals* (Springer, 2020).

J. TIMMONS ROBERTS is Ittleson Professor of Environmental Studies and Sociology at the Institute for Environment and Society, Brown University. He has directed environmental science and policy programs at Tulane University, at the College of William and Mary, and at Brown. He has published twelve books/special issues and over ninety scholarly articles and policy briefings. His engaged research on climate change spans from the local to the global. His co-authored books include *Chronicles from the Environmental Justice Frontline* (Cambridge, 2001), *Trouble in Paradise* (Routledge, 2003), *A Climate of Injustice* (MIT, 2007), *Greening Aid?* (Oxford, 2008), *Power in a Warming World* (MIT, 2015), and *Fragmented Continent* (MIT, 2015). He has two edited volumes from Wiley/Blackwell: *The Globalization and Development Reader* and *The Globalization and Environment Reader*.

ARIEL SALLEH is Visiting Professor in Culture, Philosophy and Environment, Nelson Mandela University; Senior Fellow in Post-Growth Societies, Friedrich Schiller University Jena; and Honorary Associate in Political Economy, University of Sydney. Her "embodied materialism," emphasizing the role of regenerative labor in the world system, is seminal to political ecology as a reformulation of humanity–nature relations. Salleh's theoretical work is developed in *Ecofeminism as Politics* (2017/1997); *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice* (2009); *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary,* co-edited with Kothari and Escobar (2019); and some 200 chapters and articles at www.arielsalleh.info. She has served on ISA RC 24, several journal boards, and was a founding editor of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

PAUL B. STRETESKY is Professor of Criminology at Northumbria University. His primary areas of research include green criminology, environmental sociology, and environmental and food justice. He is a co-editor (with Michael J. Lynch) of the CRC Press Green Criminology book series.

PHILLIP WARSAW is an assistant professor in the Department of Community Sustainability at Michigan State University. His research centers the economics of sustainability, particularly as it relates to environmental and economic justice. More specifically, his current scholarship investigates the intersections between local food access and affordable housing in densely populated urban areas.

DAMIAN WHITE is Professor of Social Theory and Environmental Studies and Dean of Liberal Arts at the Rhode Island School of Design. White has published four books to date in the fields of environmental design studies: *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisa*l (Pluto Press, UK/University of Michigan Press USA, 2008); *Technonatures: Environments, Technologies, Spaces and Places in the Twenty-First Century* (Wilfred Laurier Press, 2009); *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader* (AK Press, 2011); and *The Environment, Nature and Social Theory: Hybrid Approaches* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), with Alan Rudy and Brian Gareau.

RICHARD YORK is Professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon. His research focuses on environmental sociology, animal studies, and the sociology of science. He has over 100 publications and has received numerous awards for scholarship and teaching.

GUOJIE ZHANG is a PhD candidate at the University of Otago, New Zealand. He received a master's degree in Tourism from the University of Otago. Guojie's current research interests lie in the areas of nature-based tourism, tourist experiences, cultural difference, and the sharing economy.

JOHN ZINDA is Assistant Professor in the Department of Global Development at Cornell University. He studies how people respond to environmental and developmental interventions, and the consequences for social and ecological change, with a focus on land management in China.

Foreword

The Evolving Field of Environmental Sociology

Riley E. Dunlap

Although it had predecessors in sociological work on natural resources, primarily by rural sociologists, and on housing and the built environment, primarily by urban sociologists, environmental sociology as a distinct field emerged in the 1970s in the United States. It arose in the midst of high societal interest in environmental matters prompted by mobilization for the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970), which put environmental quality firmly on the nation's agenda. By the mid-1970s sociologists were engaged in a wide variety of work on environmental issues, from studying public opinion and environmentalism to exploring the social impacts of energy shortages and the possibility of "limits to growth," while also engaged in a range of applied work such as conducting social impact assessments. These diverse interests coalesced with the formation of the Section on Environmental Sociology within the American Sociological Association, established in 1976 and often viewed as the "official" birth of the field.

While it has had some ups and downs, environmental sociology has clearly grown into an established and reputable sociological specialty, with undergraduate courses commonly taught across the nation, graduate training programs established in several universities, and scholarship appearing in leading disciplinary journals. Importantly, it has also spread well beyond its early North American confines, now reaching large parts of the world and institutionalized within the International Sociological Association with the Research Committee on Environment and Society. Along the way, it has become far more diverse, as the range of topics investigated and theoretical and methodological perspectives employed have expanded rapidly and continues to do so.

Early on William Catton and I defined environmental sociology narrowly as the "study of societal-environmental interactions," distinguishing it from a "sociology of environmental issues" that studied phenomena such as environmentalism and environmental attitudes employing traditional sociological perspectives. We did so purposefully to create intellectual space and justification for studying such interactions (e.g., the impacts of resource scarcities on society), because doing so was rather problematic given conditions in the larger discipline. In the 1970s mainstream sociology tended to view the biophysical environment as little more than a (non-significant) context for the study of modern human societies and had an understandable hesitancy to invoke environmental conditions given past uses of

environmental, geographical, and biological factors to justify racist, sexist, and nationalist ideologies. Avoiding these prior excesses, however, led sociology to endorse a sociocultural determinism which looked askance at consideration of environmental conditions.

So strong was the "taboo" against considering biophysical conditions, that as late as 1980 sociologists of agriculture were arguing that *sociological* analyses of energy intensity of farms and farmers' adoption of innovations ought not take into account aridity and soil type when criticized for ignoring such biophysical conditions. Echoing a Durkheimian emphasis on explaining social facts with other social facts, they suggested that broadening their focus beyond social factors such as farm structure (size and ownership) and farmer characteristics by including biophysical conditions as explanatory variables was "non-sociological."

Disciplinary neglect of the biophysical environment began to change rapidly in the 1980s when environmental hazards attracted sociological attention, including their impacts on community dynamics, on residents' health, and, especially, their unequal distribution across racial and socioeconomic sectors. These negative impacts of environmental pollution and contamination were observable (albeit sometimes only with the help of scientific measurements), and typically inequitably distributed across social strata, making them ideal topics for a discipline long concerned with inequality. The emergence of global environmental problems in the 1990s, and the growing availability of national-level data on deforestation, air and water pollution, energy consumption, pesticide use, greenhouse gas emissions, and ecological footprints sparked cross-national analyses of the societal factors (or "driving forces") giving rise to these environmental conditions. These studies, often highlighting disparities between rich and poor nations, have rapidly proliferated, and combined with continued work on environmental justice at the community level have helped make the sociological investigation of environmental conditions commonplace. Indeed, both qualitative and quantitative studies of the social processes that generate environmental problems and the societal impacts of these problems now abound – and researchers need not fear having such work labeled as non-sociological.

Of course, there was always far more going on within environmental sociology than empirical studies of societal–environmental interactions, as research on topics such as environmental attitudes, environmental movements, environmental politics and governance, sustainability, and resistance to environmental reforms – among others – continued and evolved. In particular, such work has often broadened from a local or national focus to the cross-national and international levels, as with multinational comparisons of environmental attitudes and investigations of Northern versus Southern hemisphere and even global environmental movements.

Furthermore, new conceptual and theoretical perspectives have arisen, often induced by intellectual trends (in sociology and beyond), perhaps most notably the "cultural turn" stimulated by postmodernism. This led some environmental sociologists to problematize environmental conditions, highlighting the societal processes that led to some being labeled as problems while others were neglected, and others to interrogate the scientific practices and knowledge giving rise to "environmental problems." Even more fundamentally, the concepts of "environment" and "nature"

attracted scrutiny, with analysts emphasizing their inherent ambiguities, cultural contingencies, gendered natures, and the like. Work along the above lines provided vital insights, such as the importance of examining the discourse, narratives, and frames employed in environmental controversies. Yet, such work sometimes attracted criticism from those who felt that "relativizing" scientific knowledge of environmental problems played into the hands of powerful interests opposed to ameliorating them, and that erasing (or at least blurring) the human–environment distinction made empirical analyses of the causes of such problems impossible. While the vigorous "constructivist-realist" debates of the 1990s have largely subsided, schisms persist – including over the role of scientific knowledge in our field (a topic of increasing complexity given the growing dismissal of such knowledge in our "post-truth" era).

In short, the evolution of environmental sociology over the past four-plus decades has been influenced by changes in real-world conditions – from the continual emergence of new environmental problems often, as in the case of climate change, at larger geographical scales, to changing societal conditions such as globalization, the rise of social media, and the spread of neoliberal hegemony – and by intellectual and disciplinary trends. The latter include new theoretical perspectives (postmodernism, feminist theory, intersectionality, etc.), methodological tools (Discourse Analysis, Geographic Information Systems, Multi-Level Modeling, Computational Topic Modeling, etc.) and ever-growing data sets on environmental conditions. It is little wonder then that the environmental sociology of today differs substantially from that of the early days, and is constantly changing.

The diverse and evolving nature of environmental sociology is captured by this large, two-volume handbook. Indeed, the editors have taken an exceptionally expansive view of environmental sociology, referring to it as a "careful, committed conversation" about matters concerning the intersection of society and the environment – rather than a field with readily discernible characteristics that can be clearly distinguished from other fields. They have ensured the implementation of their expansive perspective in several ways: (1) by soliciting contributions from scholars in a range of environmental fields beyond sociology per se, capturing the inherent, interdisciplinary nature of environmental sociology; (2) by inviting contributions from scholars at various career stages to capture intergenerational variation in perspectives and ensure new voices are being heard; (3) by soliciting contributions that focus on the Southern hemisphere to ensure geographical variation (although Asian environmental sociology, due to linguistic barriers, is under-represented); and (4) by covering a vast range of topics, from well-established concerns in the field (e.g., economy and environment, environmental politics, social justice, and sustainability) to newer foci (e.g., sexuality, bodies, animals, plants, and even outer space).

The result departs from the traditional notion of handbooks as summaries of existing knowledge about a set of key topics deemed central to an area of inquiry, including a prior handbook focused on US environmental sociology (R. E. Dunlap and W. Michelson, eds., *Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, Greenwood Press, 2002) and two editions of another with a more international focus (M. R. Redclift and G. Woodgate, eds., *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*,

Edward Elgar, 1997, 2010). I believe many scholars will welcome this new, more expansive perspective on environmental sociology, as it certainly captures the rapid diversification and permeability of the field. Some of the newer, as yet less central, concerns will no doubt blossom into productive lines of inquiry – just as rather recent work on food systems and food justice has done and gender and the environment appears to be doing. Some others may prove to have been rather short-lived intellectual explorations that fail to spark sustained attention and research. While the academic marketplace of ideas is far from perfect, with many built-in inequities, it does over time nonetheless tend to sort out those that prove especially insightful. Only time will tell which of the many newer topics and perspectives offered in these two volumes will "catch on," and the editors are to be congratulated for giving them a chance to do so by inclusion in this significant platform.

As far back at the 1980s, during the Ronald Reagan era, I was fond of saying "this is a bad time for the environment, but a good time for environmental sociology" (the latter in the sense that our work was highly relevant). I could never have imagined then that we would be looking back at the anti-environmental actions of the Reagan Administration as moderate compared to those of the George W. Bush Administration, nor as meager relative to the current Trump Administration's all-out assault on environmental science and regulations. Nor could I have imagined that the successful diffusion of neoliberal ideology and more recent rise of right-wing populism (itself spawned in large part by the success of neoliberalism in undermining economic progress for the working class) would spread anti-environmentalism to many parts of the world, including Northern Europe where a decade ago some sociologists were proclaiming the success of ecological modernization in creating more sustainable nations.

Clearly the need is now greater than ever for environmental sociology to both shed light on the nature of our environmental predicaments and offer insights for trying to move beyond them into a more just and sustainable future. Our field has a long history of engaging with society at large, nowadays labeled "public sociology," most obvious in the work of environmental justice scholars but increasingly apparent in other emphases from environmental health to climate change. Coupled with an ever-growing knowledge base, and continually expanding theoretical and methodological tools, environmental sociology is poised to help overcome current threats and barriers to sustainability while also pointing to alternative, more ecologically sustainable, futures. Many will find the wide range of insights offered in this handbook of considerable help in these endeavors.