

## The Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Sociology Volume 2

*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.

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Edited by Katharine Legun , Julie Keller , Michael Bell , Michael Carolan  
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# The Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Sociology

## Volume 2

Edited by

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## 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 continue 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 socio-cultural 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 multi-national 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 U.S. 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.