

Progress in Human Geography

<http://phg.sagepub.com>

Political ecology: where is the politics?

Peter A. Walker

Prog Hum Geogr 2007; 31; 363

DOI: 10.1177/0309132507077086

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://phg.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Progress in Human Geography* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://phg.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations (this article cites 13 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):

<http://phg.sagepub.com#BIBL>



Political ecology: where is the politics?

Peter A. Walker*

Department of Geography, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403

I Introduction

I do think political ecology could have something serious to contribute at the very least to publicly questioning this pillage [of Latin America], and that we might even have insights helpful for activists - and we don't do as much as we could in either of these regards. (Anthony Bebbington!)

To political ecologists today, it might seem odd – ridiculous perhaps – to ask whether political ecology is sufficiently *political*. It has been the better part of two decades since Michael Watts complained that the dominant expressions of political ecology of the 1980s displayed ‘a remarkable lack of politics . . . There is almost no sense of contest, struggle, and conflict and how the rough and tumble of everyday life’ shapes human relations with the environment (Watts, 1990: 128–29). Since then, there has been a veritable explosion of scholarship (far too numerous to cite) in political ecology that has taken up the challenge to deal in a more sophisticated way with the role of politics in shaping human-environment relations. In comparing political ecology to other intellectual traditions that attempt to explain environmental problems (such as ecoscarcity and environmental modernization), Robbins (2004) notes that the defining characteristic of the field today is ‘the difference between a *political* and an

apolitical ecology’. So central has politics become in the field that serious critiques have been made that political ecology has become ‘politics without ecology’ (Vayda and Walters, 1999).

Yet, it is possible to question whether, by its own definitions of the word ‘politics’, political ecology fully lives up to its promise to take politics seriously. In their article ‘Locating the political in political ecology’, Paulson *et al.* (2003: 209, emphasis added), define politics as ‘the practices and processes through which power, in its multiple forms, is *wielded* and negotiated’. The authors observe that one of the key challenges of political ecology is ‘to develop ways to *apply* the methods and findings [from political ecology research] in addressing social-environmental concerns’ (p. 208). Indeed, this concern to make politics not only a research subject but a *practice* has long been an explicit and central goal of political ecology. Peet and Watts (1996: xi), for example, state that political ecology ‘is driven naturally in our case by a normative and political commitment to the liberatory potential of environmental concerns’. Similarly, Robbins (2004: 13) observes that political ecology is explicitly and unapologetically normative, seeking ‘to plant the seeds for reclaiming and asserting alternative ways of managing [resources] . . . The goal . . . is preserving

*Email: pwalker@uoregon.edu

and developing specific, manageable, and appropriate ways to make a living'. The verbal commitment in political ecology to not only study but to *wield* political power – to make a difference, to 'plant a seed' – for both humans and nature appears not to be in question.

But how much practical difference does political ecology actually make? What might be the obstacles to a more constructively engaged political ecology – to a more fully *political* political ecology? These are the questions that this essay raises briefly, but does not pretend to answer in any substantial way. Rather, it is hoped and believed that these questions will be discussed at length in future venues. It seems generally agreed that the 'liberatory potential' of this field is, to a large degree, its *raison d'être* – even if it is not fully realized in practice. If so, even the possibility that political ecology, with all its enormous intellectual strides, might be largely desk-bound, and, ultimately, *apolitical* and *powerless* in practice merits considering these questions seriously. Clear guidelines for what constitutes ethical political ecology practices and power are needed. The following sections consider some of the challenges, achievements, and possibilities.

II The achievements

It has been observed that political ecology has collectively demonstrated a surprising sort of ambivalence toward environmental policy, construed as formal programs and institutions of environmental management (Walker, 2006). This essay considers the engagement of political ecology with politics in a broader sense: politics as the panoply of 'processes and mechanisms' through which power is circulated and wielded. With roots in peasant and development studies, social movements theory, and studies of indigenous knowledge and symbolic and discursive struggles over resources (Watts, 2000), one might expect political ecology to be more at home and engaged in these realms of relatively informal, non-institutional politics and power. Indeed, many political ecologists can and do

engage in this kind of politics – a 'popular political ecology' that ties research directly to activist efforts to improve human well-being and environmental sustainability through various forms of local, grassroots activism and organization.

Piers Blaikie has observed that political ecology has become so vast and sprawling that citation is largely a random affair, and selection of a few examples of political ecology in action necessarily does injustice to the great many unmentioned scholars doing similar excellent work. Nevertheless, some examples of such work include Tony Bebbington's work with indigenous people's movements, democratic politics, and non-governmental organizations in Latin America (see Bebbington, 2007); Simon Batterbury's efforts to turn the rhetoric of local 'empowerment' into on-the-ground change in West Africa and elsewhere (see Bebbington *et al.*, 2007); the works of feminist geographers, such as Diane Rocheleau's voluminous work on gendered resource management and the role of 'participatory' versus 'formal' science in Kenya and elsewhere (see Rocheleau, 2007); Nathan Sayre's pioneering collaboration with grassroots organizations to build ecologically informed and socially sustainable alliances between ranchers and environmentalists and bring peace to the so-called 'range wars' in the American West (Sayre, 2005); Tim Forsyth's (and others') work to promote 'hybrid science' that combines oral histories and other forms of local knowledge with formal science to empower people usually left out of the formal scientific process, often by reframing questions and challenging existing orthodoxies (see Forsyth, 2003; Forsyth and Walker, 2007). Many other political ecologists today are engaging in multiple forms of 'popular political ecology', sometimes literally in their own back yards, in ways that make important practical contributions, but are nearly invisible within academic institutions. The examples could go on and on. Suffice it to say that these clearly illustrate that many political ecologists can and do put their ideas into action; they deliberately put

the ideas of political ecology into practice to exert power to effect real changes for good – a political ecology that is *political* in the fullest and most positive sense.

III The silences

Despite these achievements, there is nevertheless wide concern among political ecologists that the field as a whole remains largely focused inward, confined to academic publications that are unavailable or unintelligible to those who might benefit from the research, and restricted to conferences and seminars attended almost exclusively by like-minded, privileged academic elites who do not themselves directly experience the hunger, disease, poverty, and environmental hazards and degradation that they study, write, and speak about. Some political ecologists have begun to question the implicit institutional ethics of the ‘ivory tower’: no matter how brilliant, a light in a sealed box does not illuminate. And it consumes resources, energy, and space in the process. Moreover, political ecology research is not neutral or costless to the people who provide the stories and information that are the raw materials of relatively affluent and comfortable academic careers. For example, for many research subjects, especially in less developed societies, time spent in interviews, focus groups, and so on comes at significant cost to vital productive activities, often with few tangible benefits in return. As one eminent political ecologist complained, ‘fly-by-night researchers take the most and give the least – I’ve seen colleagues pitch up for 3 weeks’ field work, single author 3-4 papers and never go back again’.

In other words, the broad moral turn in contemporary geography (Sayer and Storper, 1997; Smith, 2000) has not yet fully penetrated and matured into an examined ethics of political ecology methods and practice. In conjunction with more general expressions of accountability in research to others in near and distant places and environments (Driver, 1991; Corbridge, 1993; Cloke, 2002), political ecology has adopted a position ‘that privileges

the rights and concerns (often livelihood-based) of the poor over those of powerful political and economic elites’ (Bryant and Jarosz, 2004: 808). Yet, curiously, this concern to protect subaltern groups from extractive behavior by political and economic elites has not been extended to a fully developed self-critique of political ecologists *themselves* as academic (as well as social and economic) elites – albeit with laudable exceptions, especially among feminist political ecologists (eg, Rocheleau *et al.*, 1996; Jarosz, 2004). In a field that is fundamentally normative and places social ethics at the core of its agenda, the ethics of political ecology research itself as processes and practices of power remains surprisingly underexamined. Curiously, no field has done more to demonstrate that science and research are expressions of power and politics (Leach and Mearns, 1996; Stott and Sullivan, 2000; Forsyth, 2003), yet on the whole political ecology has done relatively little to examine its own house.

It should be said that much of the ethical practices of ‘giving back’ by political ecologists are largely invisible and difficult to measure. Many researchers can and do make efforts to provide tangible benefits to the countries, communities, and individuals whose stories, time, and knowledge provide political ecologists with their careers. Yet, in the formal institutions and products of political ecology as a profession (conferences, specialty groups, publications, and so on), this act of giving back – the act of a self-conscious, ethical *politics* of research – is often not particularly visible.

As a very crude measure, consider the research presentations at the 2006 annual conference of the Association of American Geographers in Chicago. Of 79 paper and poster abstracts identified by the key words ‘political ecology’, virtually all expressed an ethical or justice-based concern for their research subjects (although some are more or less ‘pure theory’). However, only seven (9%) identified practical efforts to augment livelihoods, politically empower, give greater ‘voice’, secure cultural survival, or reduce

risks for people who are the subjects of research as a central part of the research project. It can be inferred that the intent of the remaining 91% of political ecology research in this sample was to enhance knowledge in ways that will, at some time in the future and in an unspecified manner, provide tangible benefits to research subjects. Alternatively, and more cynically, it might be inferred that as an institutional formation political ecology does not place an especially high priority on 'giving back' to its research subjects – perhaps, even, that much of political ecology has no articulated guidelines to effect positive change; that it is largely extractive as well as ineffectual, powerless, *apolitical*.

As described earlier in this essay, such an inference clearly does *not* reflect political ecology as a whole. It does, however, suggest the need for vigilant, critical self-awareness. To paraphrase Dickens' ghost of things yet to come, these are shadows of things that may be only – not shadows of things that will be. Yet, if these concerns have any validity at all, how can we explain the uncertainty of political ecology's ethical practices when a normative, liberatory political ethic is at the very core of the field?

IV Institutional challenges

This essay does not pretend to have the answers, but it does offer a few ideas that might help to stimulate a fuller discussion elsewhere. To begin, political ecologists polled for this essay suggested that there are significant institutional constraints within academia that limit the capacity of scholars to engage in more applied or activist work.² For example, one prominent political ecologist describes working with both domestic and foreign non-governmental humanitarian organizations and publishing a book intended for a broad public audience. This scholar also noted, however, that: 'This reaching out to a broader audience is linked, I believe, to the fact that I am a full Professor and am no longer being evaluated by a campus [promotion

and tenure] committee on the nature of my scholarly contribution. That is, I think our position in the academy constrains our "applied" (read policy) work which is not regarded highly by [promotion and tenure] committees.' Another eminent political ecologist commented on the 'the frantic character of accelerated academic life': 'in the past few years, the [academy] has shifted to the model of a newspaper. I work to a constant deadline. Every day is a matter of getting things off my desk and out of my Inbox, the machine is churning along and I have little time to think' – much less change the world. Yet another prominent political ecologist observed that in discussions about academic promotion, 'foreign language, in-country publications [are] considered as service not research – how's that for an obstacle to engagement, and particularly to engagement in public and political debate in countries in which we work'. In addition, graduate curricula rarely require or even provide instruction on the ethics or skills of 'giving back'.

This concern with institutional barriers to engaged scholarship has become an important emerging theme in political ecology, reflected in a forthcoming book by Simon Batterbury and colleagues (Batterbury and Horowitz, 2007) and a related major conference session. These authors suggest that the engagement of political ecology with different audiences 'outside the academy' will require accepting possible professional risks as well as taking responsibility for how the work of political ecology is translated into action. The authors also observe the challenge of working constructively with policy-makers who are often the subject of criticism in political ecology, as well as the frustration of even sympathetic audiences that political ecology too often offers *only* critique – and even that is served up in language that is frequently unintelligible even to well-educated professionals. The authors express concern as well that intellectual purity and inaccessible language may constitute a retreat from responsibility

for the implications of research, since their work is unlikely to be read and understood, much less acted upon.

These constraints are, of course, not at all unique to political ecology – these are problems for geography and academic scholarship in general. However, because of its subject matter and its strong normative stance, it can be argued that political ecology has a special position and a special kind of ethical obligation.

V Conclusions: the special challenge of political ecology as ethical practice

Despite some laudable efforts (eg, Jarosz, 2004), there is as yet no clearly articulated ethics of political ecology methods and practice. As Paul Robbins has observed, political ecologists are ‘forced to ask who gains and who loses from research, and to think hard about how one ought to act in a political ecological landscape’ (Robbins, 2004: 201). How do we know which ‘seeds’ we are, or *should be*, planting? Yet, in political ecology these questions tend to be addressed in a rather ad hoc manner by the individual researcher. The field as a whole provides few guidelines. As political ecologist Eric Perramond has observed, the trend toward more self-reflective ethical practices by political ecologists has begun, but remains weakly developed:

involving international colleagues, and locally-based knowledge agents will become the [mode of operation] for nearly all field-based political ecologists [in geography] as it has become in most anthropological and archaeological projects. While this is the direction, political ecology will be better served and yes, useful, if there are clear ethical guidelines for conducting and concluding such initiatives . . . the methods and field operations of political ecology will be dramatically different from past practices. (Eric Perramond³)

This lack of clear ethical guidelines for research is hardly unique among academic communities. Nevertheless, political ecology would appear to have a special obligation to establish such guidelines for at least three reasons. First, the subject matter of political ecology is typically poverty,

hunger, social or environmental injustice, and resource degradation. With respect to famine, philosopher Peter Singer (1972) has argued that if the world’s privileged can significantly improve the well-being of others in distress without undue harm to themselves it is not a choice but an ethical obligation to do so. Philosopher Arne Naess (1973) and many others have made similar arguments regarding ethical obligations with respect to nature. Although some political ecologists dispute some interpretations of these philosophical positions (Guha, 1989), virtually all political ecologists share the core philosophical concern for social and environmental justice – for a ‘liberation ecology’ (Peet and Watts, 1996). As the field has matured and prospered, political ecologists are uniquely well-positioned to contribute to this liberation, to ‘give back’ to their research subjects – albeit potentially at a non-negligible cost to their own careers. Second, a non-engaged political ecology is not morally neutral: political ecologists ‘take’ from their research subjects. The great majority of political ecology research consists of studies of the poor and disadvantaged, often in the third world. Political ecologists make their careers from the world’s poor and disadvantaged – either as information collected through research and turned into professional commodities (journal publications, etc); or through grants from public revenue that is (increasingly) taxed from the poor in the first world; or through funding from a limited pool of private philanthropy that could be used in other ways. Thus, the sources of political ecologists’ *own* livelihoods would seem to incur special obligations. Finally, political ecology has so clearly signalled its own normative stance in defense of the world’s disadvantaged that a choice, implicit or explicit, to put aside these questions of ethical obligation would appear at best inconsistent.

In the social sciences it has become widely accepted (thanks in no small part to political ecologists) that research is a political act. Yet, in failing to more rigorously examine the

ethics of its own practices, political ecology opens itself to the very charge it has leveled at other fields of study: of too often ignoring the *political* and therefore ethical dimensions of its own actions or inactions. Again, it should be emphasized strongly that if 'giving back' is the appropriate gauge of ethical practice, there are *many* political ecologists whose practices meet this definition by any measure. However, there is also a significant proportion of political ecology research that provides deeply insightful critique, but with few obvious links to tangible material or social progress for those who are the subjects of study. The ever-present danger that concepts in political ecology may be co-opted to reinforce old exploitative practices (Bebbington *et al.*, 2003; Ribot, 1996) raises the disturbing question of whether critique and theory without engagement can be assumed to be socially and environmentally benign; or whether such research can also be potentially malignant. Even more fundamentally, perhaps, the crux of much of the debate so far is whether scholarly critique itself is engagement – a question that is largely a matter of personal philosophy. Thus, whether political ecologists 'give' more than they 'take' may remain always to some extent in the eye of the beholder. If places were changed and poor Africans, Latin Americans, South Asians, or disadvantaged North American minorities were to research the tribal practices and material and symbolic struggles over resources among privileged, elite North American and European political ecologists, their conclusions on this question might be revealing.

Acknowledgements

This essay would not have been possible without insightful comments from Tom Bassett, Simon Batterbury, Tony Bebbington, Piers Blaikie, Julia Haggerty, James McCarthy, Brent McCusker, Rod Neumann, Karl Offen, Eric Perramond, Paul Robbins, Farhana Sultana, and Karl Zimmerer. All errors, omissions, or offenses are solely the fault of the author.

Notes

1. Personal communication, 20 August 2006.
2. On 8 August 2006, this author submitted a question to the Association of American Geographers' Cultural and Political Ecology list serve asking for impressions of the degree to which political ecologists 'give back' to their research subjects. The question elicited 19 responses to the author (ie, 'off the list') from 14 geographers. No claim can be made that this was a scientifically valid representative sample, but it does reflect the views of some well-recognized individuals in the field. It should be noted that many of the institutional constraints noted were specific to United States academic institutions. A related discussion on the same list serve was initiated by William Moseley on 8 August 2006, in which several political ecologists noted that better institutional opportunities for applied research exist in the United Kingdom.
3. Personal communication, 17 July 2006, cited with permission.

References

- Batterbury, S. and Horowitz, L.** 2007: *Engaged political ecology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, in press.
- Bebbington, A.** 2007: Livelihoods and resource accessing in the Andes: desencuentros in theory and practice. In Gough, I. and McGregor, J.A., editors, *Well-being in development countries: new approaches and research strategies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in press.
- Bebbington, A., Lewis, D., Batterbury, S. and Olson, E.** 2003: Of texts and practices: organizational cultures and the practice of empowerment in World Bank funded programmes. Paper read at Order and Disjuncture: The Organization of Aid and Development, 26–27 September, at SOAS London.
- Bebbington, A., Lewis, D., Batterbury, S., Olson, E. and Sidiqi, S.** 2007: Of texts and practices: organizational cultures and the practice of empowerment in World Bank-funded programmes. *Journal of Development Studies*, in press.
- Blaikie, P. and Brookfield, H.**, editors 1987: *Land degradation and society*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Bryant, R.L. and Jarosz, L.** 2004: Ethics in political ecology: a special issue of *Political Geography*. Introduction: thinking about ethics in political ecology. *Political Geography* 23, 807–12.
- Cloke, P.** 2002: Deliver us from evil? Prospects for living ethically and acting politically in human geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 26, 587–604.

- Corbridge, S.** 1993: Marxisms, modernities, and moralities – development praxis and the claims of distant strangers. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11, 449–72.
- Driver, F.** 1991: Morality, politics, geography: brave new words. In Phiilo, C., editor, *New words, new worlds: reconceptualising social and cultural geography*, Lampeter: St David's University College.
- Forsyth, T.** 2003: *Critical political ecology: the politics of environmental science*. London: Routledge.
- Forsyth, T.** and **Walker, A.** 2007: *Crisis? The politics of environmental knowledge in northern Thailand*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, in press.
- Guha, R.** 1989: Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation: a Third World critique. *Environmental Ethics* 11, 71–83.
- Jaros, L.** 2004: Political ecology as ethical practice. *Political Geography* 23, 917–27.
- Leach, M.** and **Mearns, R.** 1996: *The lie of the land: challenging received wisdom on the African environment*. London: James Currey.
- Naess, A.** 1973: The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movements: a summary. *Inquiry* 1(16), 95–100.
- Paulson, S., Gezon, L.L.** and **Watts, M.** 2003: Locating the political in political ecology: an introduction. *Human Organization* 62, 205–17.
- Peet, R.** and **Watts, M.** 1996: *Liberation ecologies: environment, development, social movements*. London: Routledge.
- Ribot, J.** 1996: Participation without representation: chiefs, councils, and forestry law in the West African Sahel. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 30, 40–44.
- Robbins, P.** 2004: *Political ecology: a critical introduction*. Critical introductions to geography. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Rocheleau, D.** 2007: *The invisible ecologies of Machakos: landscape, livelihoods, and life stories 1890–1990*. New York: United Nations University Press, in press.
- Rocheleau, D.E., Thomas-Slayter, B.P.** and **Wangari, E.** 1996: *Feminist political ecology: global issues and local experience*. International studies of women and place. London and New York: Routledge.
- Sayer, A.** and **Storper, M.** 1997: Ethics unbound: For a normative turn in social theory. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15, 1–17.
- Sayre, N.F.** 2005: *Working wilderness: the Malpai Borderlands Group and the future of the western range*. Tucson, AZ: Rio Nuevo Publishers.
- Singer, P.** 1972: Famine, affluence, and morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, 229–43.
- Smith, D.M.** 2000: *Moral geographies: ethics in a world of difference*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Stott, P.A.** and **Sullivan, S.** 2000: *Political ecology: science, myth and power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vayda, A.P.** and **Walters, B.B.** 1999: Against political ecology. *Human Ecology* 27, 167–79.
- Walker, P.A.** 2006: Political ecology: where is the policy? *Progress in Human Geography* 30, 382–95.
- Watts, M.J.** 1990: Review of *Land degradation and society*, by Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield, 1987. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 4, 123–31.
- 2000: Political ecology. In Sheppard, E. and Barnes, T., editors, *A companion to economic geography*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 590–93.