

# Reconsidering ‘regional’ political ecologies: toward a political ecology of the rural American West

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**Abstract:** Political ecology has recently seen a long-overdue movement toward studies of environmental conflicts in advanced capitalist societies, far from the rural African, Latin American, and Asian societies that constitute the great majority of studies in the field. This shift has raised questions about the commonalities and differences between ‘first-world’ and ‘third-world’ political ecologies – questions that present broader challenges and opportunities for the field. The question of commonalities and difference in ‘first-world’ and ‘third-world’ political ecologies is *hemispheric*; recent research in political ecology consists primarily of *local*-scale studies, leaving the field poorly positioned to address such broad-scale comparative questions. Appropriately, local political ecology studies challenge the stability of the ‘first-world’ and ‘third-world’ as meaningful geographic frames posed in these questions; but in dismantling these frames without suggesting alternatives for broader-scale analysis there is danger of moving political ecology toward even greater emphasis on specificity and difference and pushing consideration of broader-scale processes farther into the background. This is a serious challenge in a field already criticized for sprawling incoherence. This article argues that one response to these challenges is to reconsider the concept of ‘regional’ political ecologies. Regional approaches can retain the greatest strengths of recent political ecology in revealing the importance of local-scale social dynamics while situating these dynamics within broader scales of regional (and global) processes – providing greater coherence while avoiding such problematic frames as the ‘first’ and ‘third’ world. To illustrate, a brief case study and discussion are presented that consider a regional political ecology of the rural American West.

**Key words:** environmental conflicts, geographic scale, political ecology, regional geography.

## I Introduction

Political ecology has recently seen a long-overdue movement toward studies of industrialized societies and urban places long neglected in favor of research on the rural

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third-world. Recent discussion and a small body of literature has made the important observation that most of the approaches of political ecology are no less relevant in many industrialized and urban places. In the realms of moral economy, cultural politics, discursive struggles – the bread and butter of today's political ecology – assumed differences appear, on closer examination, to melt away, making the stability of the 'first' and 'third' worlds as geographic frames in political ecology appear questionable. In this article, however, I argue that the claim that 'first-world' political ecologies are not so very different from 'third-world' political ecologies is itself problematic in that it remains, paradoxically, trapped within the very binary geographic framework that it calls into question; worse, it raises the danger of further retreat in political ecology away from examination of large-scale processes. Clearly, the separation of first- and third-world political ecologies is deeply problematic, yet the dismantling of these geographic frames without providing alternative larger-scale frames would seem to lead toward a political ecology still more focused on specificity and contingency – a serious matter in a field that already lacks coherence and in which large-scale processes have receded into the background. Conversely, the dismantling of the first and third worlds as geographic frames could be seen as promoting a kind of globalized political ecology project, subject to the formulaic application of universal orthodoxies. Further, the emphasis on commonalities – e.g., the increasing integration of third-world peasants into modern capitalism – has a whiff of a teleology in which individual places across the globe merely occupy different positions along a single historical trajectory of modernization.

Thus, in challenging the usefulness of the concepts of the first and third worlds without proposing better geographic frames, we risk throwing the 'baby' of real and important distinctiveness out with the 'bathwater' of the unhelpful binary frame. In this article I examine one possible solution: a reconsideration of the concept of *regional* political ecologies first raised by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987). A focus on the 'region' avoids the obvious problems of such frames as the first and third worlds while retaining a scale of analysis that enables examination of both commonalities and the equally important and interesting *distinctiveness* of environmental politics in the industrialized and non-industrialized worlds that merit serious attention.

In the first section below, I discuss the problem of defining political ecology. I then examine recent applications of political ecology approaches in places beyond the rural third world. The following section explores the concept of the 'region' as it might be applied in political ecology. I then sketch a brief case study of the political ecology of a rural area in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. In the final section, I use the case study and other recent political ecology literature to draw a tentative framework for a regional political ecology of the rural American West. I conclude by arguing that a regional approach can contribute to the continued vitality of political ecology as it expands across borders by revealing commonalities and differences across scales.

### **II The problem of defining political ecology**

Before beginning, it is useful to consider one of the enduring challenges of political ecology – the absence of a generally recognized definition of the term. A number of

distinct realms of scholarship have laid claim to this term to refer to areas of research distant from the use in this article. Some sociologists, for example, use the term to refer to a very broad body of critical literature examining the role of modern capitalism and the nation state as driving forces of ecological problems, with foundational texts that date to Kropotkin (1899) and Bookchin (1971). Other more recent literature has also applied the label of political ecology in ways remote from the use in this article – such as Anderson’s (1994) use of the term to explain the selection of political strategies by Central American peasants as a function of an ‘ecological’ web of political interdependencies; or Stott’s and Sullivan’s use of the term to describe environmental science as political ‘legitimization and contestation of environmental narratives’ within ‘reified’ institutional science (2000: 1).

In this article, I deliberately engage a fairly narrowly circumscribed body of political ecology literature following from Blaikie’s and Brookfield’s (1987: 17) famous call to combine ‘the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy . . . encompass[ing] the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources’ with particular attention to the role of ‘marginalized’ peasants (p. 19) and the *interactions of scales* – or, ‘chains of explanation’ (p. 27) that radiate outward from individual ‘resource users’ to peasant communities and to regional, national and global political and economic relations. In this Marxist-inspired tradition, the environmental behavior of the peasant – at the scale ‘where the plow meets the earth’ – is explained in terms of social relations of exploitation and surplus extraction at scales extending to the global political economy (see also Blaikie, 1985; Hecht, 1985; Watts, 1987). Recent ‘poststructural’ political ecology focuses more closely on the broadly defined *politics* (and ‘micropolitics’) within this ‘shifting dialectic’ – examining the role of culture, discourse, moral economy, ‘community’ management and indigenous knowledge, social constructions of scientific knowledge, and issues of gender, race and ethnicity as they shape contests over resources (Moore, 1993; Peet and Watts, 1996; Neumann, 1998).

### III Political ecology without borders

Recent political ecology studies in industrialized societies challenge many key assumptions about ‘inherent’ differences between the first and third worlds, and at the same time raise important comparative questions. There is growing recognition that the tools of social analysis developed for resource conflicts in non-industrialized places are often more sophisticated than approaches used in the advanced capitalist societies (Fortmann, 1996), and are more relevant to first-world contexts than often assumed. The seemingly very different (e.g., more formal and legal) institutions that govern resource use in industrialized societies conceal many expressions of moral economy, cultural politics, discursive struggles and strategic uses of history and social identity (Fairfax *et al.* 1999) – much like the political ecologies of non-industrialized societies. While it is true that advanced industrialized societies often have more centralized and institutionalized rules of resource use (centered largely upon property laws), these laws are nonetheless expressions of *social relationships* and consist of ‘bundles’ of separable rights (Macpherson, 1978) that are fluid and negotiable in practice, and are themselves constructed through particular social narratives (Rose, 1994). Rules may be ignored,

reinterpreted or selectively enforced according to culturally or historically defined customary rights or privileges. In short, the formalized and institutionalized rules and practices of resource use in industrialized societies quietly share many features in common with complex, socially embedded resource politics in non-industrialized societies.

These commonalities are explored in a small but expanding body of literature focused on environmental politics in the first world, particularly in North America, that applies almost all of the major themes in political ecology. In a study of forest conflicts in British Columbia, Willems-Braun (1997) discusses the 'buried' colonial epistemologies that continue to infuse scientific narratives and marginalize the voices of Native Americans. In studies of the 'Wise Use' movement in the American West, McCarthy (1998; 2001) illustrates how 'local' ranchers and loggers deploy cultural politics and ideas of moral economy, with emphasis on alleged 'enclosures' and marginalization of rural working-class people. In a study of the apple industry in Washington State, Jarosz and Qazi (2000) explain the transformation of rural and agricultural landscapes in terms that resonate with Blaikie's and Brookfield's (1987: 27) 'chains of explanation', but also illustrate that the 'globalization' of local landscapes is embedded in local social relations shaped by gender, race and ethnicity. In fishing communities in New England, St Martin (2001) describes how dominant scientific narratives fail to value 'local' knowledge and 'traditional' systems of community resource management. These are only a few representative studies – other first-world political ecology studies include Emel (1995), Emel and Roberts (1995), Burwell (1995), Sayre (1999), Wilson (1999) and Sheridan (2001). These show that there is no reason we should not bring political ecology 'home' – and that there is every reason to believe that it can reveal key dimensions of resource conflicts too often ignored at the expense of continuing conflict, wasted effort and lost opportunities. Moreover, political ecology research in industrialized societies opens opportunities for important comparative studies – for example, on the role of community in marine fisheries in New England (St Martin, 2001) compared to, say, eastern India (Bavinck, 2001).

In two important recent articles, McCarthy (2002) and Paul Robbins (2002) examine the theoretical implications of first-world political ecologies. In his comprehensive review, McCarthy notes that many leading scholars define political ecology as an approach specific to the third world. Yet, along each major axis of political-ecological analysis, McCarthy argues that characteristics presumed to be specific to the third world (e.g., weak state management capacity, the centrality of moral economies, norms of communal management) also exist in certain places in the first world. Conversely, McCarthy argues that characteristics thought to be exclusive to the first world (e.g., aesthetic preservationism, strong integration into capitalist markets) are also present in some third-world societies. McCarthy concludes that, 'there is more ambiguity, porosity, and commonality' within and between the categories of 'first' and 'third' worlds than much work in the field has reflected, making the distinction between first and third-world political ecologies 'highly unstable'.

However, Robbins (2002) observes that when political ecology crosses the divide between the third and first worlds we are reminded of the need (in both contexts) to look 'up'. Political ecology has typically focused on arenas of 'local' political contestation, outside formal institutions, including cultural and symbolic contests and everyday resistance within the household, the community and civil society. In part, this reflects

the genesis of political ecology (and related areas of study such as social movements theory) in typically authoritarian third-world societies where formal political institutions are often relatively inaccessible. Thus, the arenas of contestation in political ecology are typically those informal political spaces with greatest room for maneuvering. Less literature in political ecology (as defined in this article) has focused on the *formal* political institutions of the state as arenas of environmental contestation. Robbins, citing Dove (1999), argues that the movement toward political ecology research in the first world should draw our attention to a need to ‘invert the preoccupation with “indigenous movements and NGOs rather than government ministries” and the obsession with “local organizations of resistance rather than central organizations of oppression”’. More broadly, Robbins’ argument suggests there are significant differences in certain first-world political contexts that require adjustments in the conventional approaches of political ecology. McCarthy, too, while challenging certain assumed distinctions, acknowledges that significant and generalizable differences between the first and third worlds exist, but does not elaborate.

In this sense, the movement toward a political ecology unbounded by presumed distinctions between the first and third worlds represents an important milestone, but it also presents an important challenge to understand which differences actually *are* important, and in what ways. In his call to ‘look up’, Robbins opens the door to a much wider reassessment of how first-world political ecologies really *are* different from third-world political ecologies. More broadly, one could take any of the main analytical approaches of political ecology identified by McCarthy or others (McCarthy, 2002; Neumann, 1992; Peet and Watts, 1996; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Blaikie, 1999) and ask how they might be reassessed in first-world contexts, and what might be the implications for political ecology more broadly. For example, how are moral economies in rural places of industrialized societies shaped by the (arguably) greater exposure and manipulation of mass media culture (e.g., environmentalists and anti-environmentalists who use ‘guerilla theater’ to attract media to convey strategic discourses)? How can, or should, we modify our understandings of indigeneity or ‘local’-ness in neo-European cultures of North America, Australia or Latin America with relatively shallow historical roots? How is poverty (or ‘marginality’) different in societies with state-managed social safety nets? As political ecology crosses the boundaries from the third world to the first, these are among the many productive comparative questions that can and should be asked.

Indeed, as we observe the march of political ecology from the global South to the global North, these are questions that inevitably *will* be asked. How we set about answering them may be critically important to the future of political ecology. This field has been identified as an ‘emergent core’ area of study (Turner, 1997: 205), and some argue it is positioned to become the status quo in human-environment research in geography. Yet political ecology is also threatened by its own success: as it has thrived, it has expanded in so many directions simultaneously that its coherence as a field of study – on shaky ground from the start – has been called again into question. Indeed, some argue that political ecology has ‘almost dissolved itself over the last 15 years as scholars have sought to extend its reach’ (Watts, 2000: 592). As it positions itself to expand beyond its roots in the rural third world to become a global project, the challenges of sprawl in political ecology are only likely to be multiplied. The migration of political ecology to the first world is already well under way; bringing some kind of

order to this transition may be critical to maintaining the viability of political ecology as a coherent field of study.

#### IV Reconsidering 'regional' political ecologies

One response to the challenge of bringing greater coherence to political ecology as it expands its geographic reach is to reconsider the long-neglected adjective 'regional' in political ecology. In their early seminal work, Blaikie and Brookfield stressed the importance of '*regional* political ecology' (emphasis added; 1987: 17). Since that early statement, the term 'regional' all but disappeared from the political ecology literature. As political ecology has begun its migration to the first world, it has retained the focus on local-scale studies that it acquired in research on the third world – retaining, as well, the analytical strength that local-scale approaches provide. Yet, the focus on local studies puts political ecology in a weak position to answer the important comparative, large-scale questions that arise as political ecology expands into the global North.

Perhaps most importantly, a regional approach can help political ecology to move beyond the deeply problematic binary of 'first-world' and 'third-world' political ecologies. Clearly, neither the 'first world' nor the 'third world' constitutes a useful geographic frame in political ecology. If political ecology had developed primarily in urban North America and Europe, and one asked whether there might be such a thing as a distinctive 'third-world' political ecology, critics would be quick to point out that the question is premised on the false assumption that the term 'third world' describes societies with sufficiently like features to merit agglomeration into a single conceptually coherent and valid category. Critics would be right to challenge this premise; and it would be no less appropriate to challenge the question of what constitutes a 'first-world' political ecology. After all, no serious scholar would presume that the political ecology of urban lawns in Ohio could be meaningfully grouped together with forest conflicts in British Columbia. Yet, we continue to use the first world/third world binary when we ask whether there are meaningful differences between political ecologies in these geographic areas.

A better question, I submit, is whether there are meaningful differences between particular places, framed within distinctive *regions*. Indeed, I submit that our best efforts to address these questions are already based primarily upon regional analysis. In McCarthy's (2002) critique of presumed differences between first- and third-world political ecology, the scale of analysis is regional – based on his pioneering research in the rural American West. Nothing is said, however, about the urban political ecologies of Australia; nor, say, rural Japan; nor even the eastern USA – for these are distinctively different *regions*.

The argument for a renewed focus on regional political ecology parallels the broader debate about regional geography. Rejecting its descriptive rather than theoretical past, many have celebrated regional geography's demise, or at least comatose state (Thrift, 1994). Others, advocating a 'new regional geography', have asked whether geographers abandoned the region too quickly, and argue that the region remains an important *mesoscale* that mediates between local and global processes. In defense of the region as a theoretical and analytical construct, Alexander Murphy (1999: 166) argues that '... understanding the geographical complexity of regions is critical to any effort to

explain local outcomes, for those outcomes are often the result of the intersection of broader structural forces with regionally distinctive social histories, cultures, environments, and institutions'. There are other reasons that political ecology may benefit from a more regional approach. Since the early works in what might be called the 'structural' period in political ecology (e.g., Hecht, 1985; Watts, 1987), the field has swung so far toward local-scale studies that some have asked whether political ecology left the broader structural approaches behind too quickly. A key challenge for political ecology in the future will be to integrate its well-established skills of local-scale analysis with a renewed focus on large-scale, structural factors – factors strongly mediated by regional processes. Thus, any attempt to plug the local into the global in political ecology with no serious attention to the region as a mediating scale seems almost inconceivable. Another benefit of a renewed focus on regional political ecology is that many of the key theoretical and policy discussions that could benefit from political ecology perspectives are commonly expressed in regional terms (the 'Pacific Northwest salmon crisis', the 'California energy crisis'). Certainly, particular regional frames should not be merely accepted as given (Murphy, 1991; Lewis and Wigen, 1997), but that is precisely the kind of critical perspective that political ecology could bring to these questions. There is debate among some political ecologists about whether the field should aspire to be 'useful', but certainly there should be room in such a broad field for those who wish to engage with discussions of specific problems and policy issues. A more regional approach in political ecology seems an important step in this direction. Moreover, a movement toward a more regional political ecology also holds the potential for *comparative* approaches. Very few efforts have been made to explore the benefits of comparative political ecology (an exception is Beinart and Coates, 1995). Comparative approaches are hardly rearguard movements away from theory – they hold the capacity to reveal *why* particular social and environmental outcomes of, say, global processes are seen in one place but not another i.e., fundamentally *theoretical* questions.

To illustrate, in the following sections I make my own offering toward the building of a regional political ecology – in this case, of the rural American West. More specifically, I examine the political dimensions of the processes of gentrification that are transforming many areas of the rural American West from resource-dependent communities and economies into more diversified economies and cultures where the cultural values and economic power of 'exurban' migrants are becoming increasingly dominant. My case study is from Nevada County in the foothills of the central Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. I then use this case study in combination with other recent political ecology research to briefly sketch what I believe may be some of the distinctive features of a regional political ecology of the rural American West.

## **V Power and the ideologies of 'rural quality' in the Sierra**

Farmer Ernie Bierwagen walks through the hills of southwestern Nevada County, California – an area once dominated by ranches and orchards – and explains why he helped recently to form a local property rights group called Protect Your Property Rights. 'We're out to take our county back, or at least get some balance' (Karpa 2000). Farms and ranches capable of supporting a family have all but disappeared from the area – replaced by the homes of 'exurban' commuters, retirees and others attracted by

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the rural lifestyle and beauty of this part of the Sierra Nevada foothills, only an hour's commute to Sacramento and 2.5 hours to the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>1</sup> Changes in labor markets, relocation of high-tech industries to rural areas, and high urban real estate values have encouraged urban people to relocate to attractive areas like Nevada County.

The precipitating factor that motivated Bierwagen and other long-time 'locals'<sup>2</sup> to form their property rights groups is a measure approved in May 2000 by the Nevada County Board of Supervisors to integrate landscape-scale conservation into county planning. Called Natural Heritage 2020 (NH 2020), the measure seeks to identify and protect critical habitat and culturally important open spaces. The objective of the project, as defined by the county government, is to protect the 'quality of life' of the region, which has become the mainstay of the residential-recreational and retirement economy in a region that was only a few decades earlier dominated by natural resource production (Duane, 1999). By 2000, farm, timber and mining employment together accounted for less than 5% of jobs in Nevada County (CEDD, 2000). Reflecting these shifts, the Sierra Business Council, which claims to represent a broad spectrum of business interests in the region, has stated (Sierra Business Council, 1977):

The dramatic beauty and majesty of the Sierra landscape define our region in the public's imagination and in the minds of business owners . . . In a recent survey of Sierra Nevada business owners, 82 percent identified 'the high quality of life' as one of the most significant advantages of doing business in the region . . . When asked to define 'quality of life,' business owners identified 'the rural character of the overall region,' 'access to high quality wildlands,' and 'the landscape surrounding my immediate community.'

This effort to promote local business through environmental amenities and 'quality of life' has been successful. Today, 66 high-tech companies have operations in Nevada County, including well-known companies such as 3Com, Tektronix and TDK (Nieves, 2000). In turn, this valorization of 'rural quality' has transformed local politics. Of Nevada County's \$800,000 budget for Natural Heritage 2020, \$600,000 was provided by the Sierra Business Council through a grant from the Packard Foundation. To the environmentally minded County Board of Supervisors and the Board of the Sierra Business Council (which does not include any representatives of extractive industries), protecting rural and scenic qualities is simply good business. The importance of the environment to local business is illustrated, for example, by the plethora of real estate advertisements pronouncing, among other exuberant claims, that buyers will get an 'Escape to the Forest', '15 Acres of Beauty!', a place that is 'Just like the Ponderosa Ranch!'

However, not all county residents are so keen on the 'new economy'. When farmer Ernie Bierwagen speaks of 'taking back our county', he is referring to a time less than a decade ago when farmers, ranchers and timber owners largely controlled county politics. Control of county government shifted dramatically in 1998, when elections brought four environmentalist growth-control advocates to power on a five-member board (in a discursive ploy with obvious cultural resonance, these supervisors are referred to by opponents as the 'Gang of Four'). The election caught the county's conservative, pro-growth political establishment by surprise. After all, the county had long been and remains overwhelmingly Republican and conservative. The new county Board of Supervisors, while officially non-partisan, is composed mainly of left-leaning Democrats and even one former member of the Green Party.

This surprising electoral shift was brought about in large part by the Rural Quality Coalition (RQC). Formed in 1993 in response to the failure of the then growth orientated county board to include citizens' environmental concerns in the county's proposed 1995 General Plan, the RQC is composed of predominantly (ex)urban professionals with strong preservationist ideologies. The RQC's success in promoting and electing environmentalist candidates resulted from the professional and financial resources it controlled, but also from an unusual political alliance: left-leaning environmentalists discovered that ideologically conservative and Republican exurbanites tend to vote pragmatically, not for the candidate most aligned with them ideologically, but for the candidate most likely to protect property values and prevent rampant development that threatens the rural qualities that attracted them to the county.

However, the old-guard political conservatives (known by environmentalists as 'good old boys') who previously dominated county politics recognize a weakness in this political alliance: many ideologically conservative voters feel uncomfortable with a strongly liberal county leadership. Thus, the county's conservative activists paint NH 2020 with the usual array of conservative bogeymen of government arrogance and overreaching, including allegations of secret long-term plans for government confiscation of private property, communism and global governance under the auspices of the United Nations – themes with strong resonance in the American West.

However, this cultural and ideological campaign is not an altogether easy sell. While symbols of government arrogance and overreaching are powerful among conservative voters, these voters are not unaware of the economic motives of the county's property rights and anti-environmental activists. While ideological conservatives who claim that NH 2020 is a first step toward 'eco-Bolshevism'<sup>3</sup> are on the front lines of the battle, behind-the-scenes financial and political support comes from an array of conservative groups and individuals with strong ties to developers who have profited for generations from projects now considered the greatest threats to the county's rural qualities. Thus, many conservative voters are skeptical about the motives of the anti-NH 2020 campaign and about much of its rhetoric. One property rights group, Citizens for Property Rights, circulated a letter with the heading 'Don't let them take your property without a fight!' A long-time conservative Republican rancher pronounced this literature 'crap', and cited names of developers said to be funding the anti-NH 2020 campaign.<sup>4</sup> The same rancher had few kind words for environmentalists, but felt that the liberal supervisors are doing a good job of preventing the kind of runaway development that threatens agriculture.

This case study illustrates political dynamics characteristic of many areas in the contemporary rural American West. At stake are at least three different expressions of modern capitalism: the older resource-based economy (ranching, timber); a development industry; and the newer rural-residential, amenity-based economy. Each has a distinctive relationship with nature: developers see a landscape of growth and financial opportunity; farmers and even timber owners see in development a threat to their livelihoods but are generally not preservationists; and environmentalists see in the landscape a range of qualities from aesthetic amenities to deep spiritual values. Each has a corresponding set of ideologies, ranging from deep suspicion and hostility toward any increase in government control, to those who see in government control the key to preserving economic and cultural, or even spiritual, values. In the next section, I

consider how the politics of these competing economic and ideological positions reflect a distinctive regional political ecology of the rural American West.

## VI Toward a political ecology of the rural American West

The somewhat incoherent state of political ecology today reflects, in certain ways, the broader condition of human geography in the aftermath of postmodernism. More than a decade ago, Harvey (1990: 9) warned that postmodernity has privileged specificity and difference and devalued efforts toward broader synthesis or metanarratives, leaving behind only 'fragmentation, indeterminacy, and distrust of all universal . . . discourses'. In political ecology, enormous benefits have been gained from the turn toward the study of 'micropolitics' in 'local' places; yet with this shift some of the strength of earlier political ecology in examining broad political-economic processes as forces of environmental change has been lost. As political ecology stands today poised to show its capacity to reveal the 'shifting dialectic' of society and nature in the advanced capitalist societies far from the third-world locations that nurtured it in its youth, this may be an appropriate time to ask whether an expanding political ecology requires a framework for greater coherency, lest this expansion merely add to the fragmentation that already threatens to 'dissolve' the field.

A regional frame can provide an antidote to postmodern diffusion while retaining much of recent political ecology's greatest strengths in emphasizing the importance of local specificity and difference. For example, I argue that the conflicts over Natural Heritage 2020 in Nevada County cannot be meaningfully understood without understanding the *regional* context that has shaped these conflicts, and many similar ones, in the American West.

The American West seems a logical starting-point to reconsider 'regional' political ecologies because there is now a considerable body of political ecology research on this region – probably more than any other single region in the first world. The term 'American West' is used here to refer to the 13 American states west of the 100th meridian – a conventional demarcation recognized as constituting a distinctive region in a number of important ways, including the presence of large areas of public land and the centrality of water scarcity as an axis of ecological and political dynamics (e.g., Worster, 1985; Wilkinson, 1992). The distinctive regional character of this area is most clearly viewed in contrast to the eastern USA, with its very different environments and history of resource use, law and culture (for example, the very different system of water rights in the eastern USA). The discussion here does not pretend to reveal 'the' defining characteristics of the region; rather, this is an initial inquiry that invites other regionally focused studies that may collectively build an understanding of the political ecology of the rural American West.

### 1 Shifting capitalisms: from production to consumption landscapes

William Robbins (1999) argues that 'capitalism . . . provides an appropriate and valuable conceptual tool, a coherent analytical strategy for understanding the *regional* West since 1800' (Robins, 1999: 281, emphasis in original), and an indispensable tool for under-

standing how regional forces set the stage for the local environmental conflicts. Thus, conflicts such as the struggle over the Natural Heritage 2020 project in Nevada County can be understood as, in part, manifestations of broader transformations of capitalism in the American West. Specifically, these struggles can be seen as local expressions of regional changes that have brought into competition distinctive forms of capitalism with quite different relations to local environments – most broadly, an older resource-based ‘production’ economy and a newer amenity-based ‘consumption’ economy.

In the period after the second world war, the West played a central role as the USA became an increasingly dominant global power. Defense industries clustered along the Pacific coast from San Diego to Seattle became focal points of massive state-subsidized capitalism. The defense economy contributed significantly to the emergence of a major electronics industry that survived, and eventually thrived, even after the de-escalation of defense spending that followed the end of the cold war (Robbins, 1999; Hobsbawm, 1994). The defense and electronics industries, in turn, contributed significantly to a boom in urban real estate prices that drove large-scale ‘equity migration’ among retirees and long-distance commuters who sold their homes in inflated urban markets to buy land and homes cheaply in rural areas, often living comfortably from the net gains. As technologies and labor markets changed, some of these industries themselves joined the migration to rural areas, relocating facilities to rural areas with a high ‘quality of life’ to help recruit highly skilled workers. In the mean time, those dependent on rural production economies experienced major challenges resulting from broader horizontal integrations of agriculture (Lowe *et al.*, 1993; Marsden, 1995), declining commodity prices and skyrocketing taxes and opportunity costs as land once used for ranching or timber production became valued primarily in relation to its development potential.

Robbins (1999: 285) observes further that: ‘With the decline of the old primary products economy and with its still vast open spaces, the West – more than any other section of the country – has become the spatial investment arena for the affluent, the rich, and the super-rich.’ Western landscapes shifted from landscapes of natural resource production to landscapes of aesthetic consumption – places where ‘locals’ still tied to the natural resource economy fear they will be squeezed out. Thus, the desire among ‘locals’ to ‘take back’ their communities reflects not just personal experiences but also reflects experiences that are manifestations of regional processes. The literature of the ‘New West’ that frames the resulting conflicts as clashes of cultures or ideologies misses the point that these conflicts reflect underlying tensions between competing capitalisms that commodify nature in incompatible ways. For example, well-heeled exurbanites seeking closeness to ‘pristine’ nature will naturally not wish to see from their living-room windows timber clear-cuts that provide jobs for less educated ‘locals’.

Thus, in consumption-based rural capitalism, crucial local industries such as tourism, recreation and real estate all depend for their livelihoods upon the existence of landscapes that fit the primarily urban environmental aesthetics of (an imagined) ‘pristine’ nature that attracts migrants and tourists. As such, aesthetic environmental ideologies are not ‘obstacles’ to capitalist accumulation (McCarthy and Guthman, 1998); rather, they are at the core of a new kind of capitalism. The inevitable local conflicts that emerge as this capitalism clashes with older, production-based capitalisms, are, thus, central elements in a distinctive *regional* political ecology of the rural American West.

## 2 Exurbanization, gentrification and rural differentiation

One result of these shifting capitalisms in the American West has been the process of rapid 'exurbanization' and gentrification of rural communities (Beyers and Nelson, 2000). Exurbanization (broadly defined as large-scale permanent settlement by urban people in non-metropolitan areas beyond typical suburban commuting distances) is neither new nor limited to the American West. However, exurbanization has been especially dramatic in this region, in many respects fundamentally defining the 'New West' (Riebsame and Robb, 1997). The average growth in 'New West' counties (defined as dominated by college-educated professionals or service workers) between 1950 and 2000 was 420%, compared to 108% in 'Old West' counties; the ratio of 'Old West' counties to 'New West' counties has been declining steadily since 1950.<sup>5</sup>

A regional political ecology approach would direct our attention to the ways that this exurbanization process, driven by regional economic shifts, generates conflicts between social classes that are simultaneously material and cultural. The mobility of capital in the contemporary West – with its capacity to find and create new markets and services in once remote areas – has created in many areas an increasingly uneven development and a sharpening of class differences (Smith, 1984). From billionaires to the merely well-to-do, the ranchettes and 'private parks' of newcomers in the rural West are displacing jobs in timber, ranching and mining – jobs that are typically replaced with low-paid service employment. Many 'locals' can no longer afford to live in the communities where they work. Moreover, the ranchers and timber operators who survived increased property taxes and development pressures meet increasing challenges from neighbors who object to the sounds and smells of a production-based rural economy. The irony of the New West is that newcomers attracted by diverse imaginaries of rural lifestyles often make *real* rural livelihoods unviable.

This transition has often fundamentally changed local politics in the rural West. In places such as Nevada County, newcomers have become not only economically dominant but also now represent the overwhelming demographic majority, and have penetrated once firmly 'local' political institutions. This shift has also reconfigured political identities and ideas of 'local'-ness. The political importance of 'being local' has received a great deal of attention in political ecology, but it is almost always reserved for indigenous groups and people with multigenerational roots in place. In the New West, the large-scale infusion of exurban migrants challenges this paradigm. One prominent environmentalist in Nevada County who migrated from San Francisco in the late 1960s argues that 'local'-ness should not be defined by the length of time spent in a place but by how well one *knows* a place – its ecology and history – and becomes *part* of it. Conversely, 'if you're still ignorant of [the environment] and mistreating the land in various ways, no matter how many generations you've been there, you're still a carpetbagger.'<sup>6</sup> Other newcomers simply dismiss the political significance of being 'local,' arguing that the will of the new majority should prevail.<sup>7</sup> This represents a radical departure from the principle of "first in time, first in right" – perhaps the most entrenched of all Western ideologies – and a dramatic remaking of a distinctive regional political ecology of the American West.

### 3 The role of ideologies

This radical shift also illustrates the role of changing ideologies as both a reflection of broader economic and social changes and as a force with power to shape particular outcomes. Political ecology brings to the discussion of the changing ideologies of the New West (e.g., Limerick, 1997) a view of ideologies as key material forces with the capacity to open or close paths for particular expressions of shifting capitalisms and social relations. In much of the West, the deep and enduring hostility to government, for example, is a powerful force. In Nevada County, ideological conservatives are able to draw on this ideological reservoir in a campaign that ultimately represents a material contest between competing capitalisms. If groups that use allegations of land confiscation and ‘eco-Bolshevism’ ultimately prevail, this ideological reservoir may have provided the political weapons that will pave the way for a victory of pro-development interests. At the same time, however, conservatives do not monopolize ideological weapons in the New West. Powerful ideologies are wielded by communities influenced by ‘deep ecology’, ‘bioregionalism’ and a wide array of other New Age and counterculture philosophies. A political ecology of the rural American West, with its emphasis on cultural and discursive politics, is well positioned to reveal the diversity of these ideologies and their interplay with social and economic change.

### 4 The importance of federal lands

No discussion of the American West could be complete without considering the importance of the immense amount of land owned by the federal government. Not including Hawaii, the federal government controls more than 50% of the land west of the Rocky Mountains, and ‘the role of the federal government has washed across almost every aspect of western life’ (Robbins and Foster, 2000: 12). McCarthy (2001; 2002) has thoroughly examined the implications from a political ecology perspective, arguing that federal lands in the West become a key contested terrain where rural communities use the full range of resistance strategies described in political ecology to defend perceived ‘traditional’ rights to resources on federal land.

I will add only a minor observation: there are also important political spillover effects from public lands that shape the politics of *private* land in the West. It is by and large the federal lands, with large areas of protected wildlands, that, in the public imagination, constitute the ‘beauty and majesty’ that are key to the region’s new economy. An indication of the importance of these federal lands is the high financial premium placed on real estate adjacent to National Forest or BLM land, with its aesthetic and recreational spillover benefits. The presence of public lands largely drives the migration, tourism and recreation that are central to the regional economy, and thus transforms local politics. As described above, this transformation has fundamentally reshaped the politics of *private* land in much of the rural West.

### 5 The importance of looking up

The call to ‘look up’ in political ecology recognizes that informal politics are often inextricably interwoven with formal political institutions at multiple scales. In the American

West, these interactions are often framed in relation to federal policies, especially those governing public lands. These local-federal interactions are a powerful driver of political-ecological dynamics. I argue, however, that another critically important scale, less often examined, is the meso-scale of regional and especially county-level political institutions. Perhaps less glamorous than national-scale conflicts, these are nonetheless key arenas of environmental politics. County governments in the West are often portrayed as rather one-dimensional bastions of conservative (even reactionary and violent) politics (Brick and Cawley, 1996; McCarthy, 2001). Violent and reactionary movements are, however, the exception rather than the rule. County and regional-level institutions are in fact far more politically diverse and complex, and, thus, more important as focal points for political ecology research.

As the case of Nevada County illustrates, the infusion of exurban migrants may challenge the conservative or reactionary model of county-level politics. In other examples, such as the famously restrictive Tahoe Regional Planning Authority in Nevada and California, regional-scale institutions increasingly reflect the priorities of a more diversified 'New' economy and culture of the West. The gun-slinging violence of reactionary movements may appeal to Old West imaginaries, but it may also be an increasingly poor reflection of the quieter yet pervasive changes occurring in county and regional-level politics throughout the region. County planning processes, in particular, represent a key arena in which competing social groups, reflecting quite diverse economic and cultural interests, compete over the future of the West (Beatley, 1994). Such seemingly mundane matters as drafting county General Plans and decisions on minimum parcel sizes represent not just bureaucratic technicalities but struggles over competing imaginaries of the Western landscape and contested local rights, claims and moral economies. Banal tasks of planning are infused with the politics of power and culture. Again, however, looking 'up' at these formal institutions does not negate the importance of informal politics: parallel struggles often emerge, for example, over the appropriate venues – formal or informal – of debate, as 'locals', 'exurbanites,' and others compete to situate environmental contests on terrain best suited to their respective political assets.

## 6 Re-thinking the 'local'

As political ecology increasingly focuses on politics in the advanced capitalist societies, orthodoxies of the 'local' are called into question. McCarthy (2001; 2002) has noted the discomfort among political ecologists, who have almost always defended 'local' people in struggles against rapacious capitalism, as they wrestle with the incongruity of their generally unsympathetic views of 'local' movements, such as 'Wise Use', in the American West. McCarthy argues that this apparent contradiction occurs because political ecologists unconsciously evaluate first-world 'locals' according to different assumptions and norms, and that the commonalities between local peoples in the first and third worlds are, in actuality, greater than commonly assumed.

I argue, however, that in important respects ideas of 'local'-ness in the contemporary American West are distinctive. The tendency in political ecology to project a certain legitimacy and benign ecological wisdom on 'local' populations can be questioned in a region where 'local' people have a history in place typically dating back no more than

150 years. In the Sierra Nevada, the pioneer ancestors of today's Euro-American 'locals' arrived as key players in the Gold Rush economy that laid ecological waste to much of the Sierra region (Brechin, 1999). Today's 'locals' are for the most part fully integrated into capitalist modes of production, *unlike* many African, Asian or Latin American peasants only partly integrated into global capitalism and tied to place by histories of sustained practices. Indeed, today's 'locals' in the American West could plausibly be argued to be 'carpetbaggers' stripping the land slowly over several generations and moving on. At the same time, 'outsiders' are not necessarily the 'cut-and-run' capitalists of conventional political ecology. Exurban migrants, for example, are not typically there for the commodity value of resources, and are not fully mobile. Indeed, some recent migrants claim to be the true 'locals' by virtue of superior local ecological knowledge. Yet, these claims, too, should not be taken at face value – not least because newcomers may be tied to economies that exact significant ecological tolls at the regional rather than local scale. These statements may be provocative and debatable. The key point, however, is that any debate on these arguments would surely have to be tied to *regional* history, culture and ecology.

## VII Conclusions

A regional approach in political ecology, long neglected in favor of a focus on local studies, may provide a solution to several key challenges faced by this expanding field of study. As political ecology migrates from the global South to the global North, it faces an apparent paradox: the central axes of analysis in political ecology appear equally relevant in first-world and third-world contexts, calling into question the stability of these geographic frames; yet, despite these commonalities few would suggest there are no important differences between places in the 'first' and 'third' worlds. However, political ecology in its present form is ill equipped to explore or reveal these differences and their meanings. This article has argued that the problem, at least in part, is one of scale: the local-scale focus of most political ecology research tends to reveal commonalities, while important *differences* are visible largely at the *meso*-scale of the region.

In the case of the American West, the massive state-led capitalism of the post-war US economy, the boom in urban real estate markets, the restructuring of regional labor markets and high-tech industries, and new communications technologies are key *regional* factors. Such regional factors shape the manifestations of global processes and local politics in ways that are distinctive, whether in the first or the third world. These regional factors explain, for example, the large-scale exurban migration that has fundamentally changed the environmental politics of many rural areas in the American West in distinctive ways. A political ecology focused almost wholly on individual, local-scale studies is poorly positioned to examine these differences, as none of the characteristics that shape a regional political ecology is necessarily unique to a particular location. Elements of the 'gentrification' characteristic of the rural American West, for example, may be present in some places in rural Latin America or Asia. A political ecology focused exclusively on individual 'local' places could thus find limitless commonalities; a political ecology that bridges scales, including *regional* processes, would be better equipped to reveal how the aggregate distinctiveness of regions can coexist with the commonalities of individual places.

## 22 Reconsidering 'regional' political ecologies

Thus, as political ecology expands, we certainly need to rethink the problematic categories of the 'first' and 'third' worlds. Yet, in its present, incoherent state, political ecology appears equipped only to dismantle these clumsy categories of analysis without at the same time building better ones. We should thus seek other geographic frames that allow us to comparatively explore similarities and differences across large distances that link local to global in nuanced ways – a project in which analysis at the regional scale or meso-scale would seem indispensable, yet is, at present, largely neglected in political ecology.

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### Notes

1. Research for this case study included five months of fieldwork in Nevada County over a period of three years. Over 150 persons were interviewed by the author, and a mail-in survey was conducted which collected information from more than 350 persons in the county about their reasons for moving to the county and their views on issues of environmental protection, rural quality, property rights and related topics.

2. In this article, the term 'local' is used to denote persons who have lived in the area all or most of their lives, or have multigenerational roots in the area (even though many have been in the area only one or two generations). It is a contested term: many urban migrants who arrived in the 1960s or 70s argue that they too qualify as 'local'.

3. Interview, Chicago Park, California, 25 June 2001.

4. Interview, Penn Valley, California, 24 June 2001.

5. <http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/cowboys.pdf> (accessed 5 December 2001).

6. Interview, Nevada City, California, 25 June 2001.

7. Interview, Nevada City, California, 8 September 2000.

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