

Political Ecology

Overview

Political Ecology studies human-environment interactions. It aims to examine how political, economic and social factors are linked to environmental problems, changes, and conflicts by exploring power structures. A central premise in political ecology is that changes in the access, management and control of environmental resources result in the uneven distributions of costs and benefits along the lines of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Political ecology has, according to Robbins a “normative understanding that there are very likely better, less coercive, less exploitative and more sustainable ways of doing things” (Robbins 2004, p.12)¹⁾.

The term political ecology was first coined by anthropologist Erik Wolfe in the 1970's. Classic works in Political Ecology include among others *Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (1985) by Piers Blaikie²⁾ and *Land Degradation and Society* (1987) by Piers Blaikie & Harold Brookfield³⁾.

Topics in Political Ecology range from environmental degradation and marginalization, environmental conflict, environmental identities, to social movements. Political ecology does not have a coherent theory of the interplay between the environment and social, political and economic factors, but draws theoretical insights from among others political economy, Marxism, critical theory, and post-structural theories. Political ecology scholars come from a variety of fields such as geography, cultural ecology, environmental history, ecological economics, and forestry. The geographical focus of early political ecology studies on rural, non-western areas has in more recent political ecology studies expanded to urban areas in the Global North.

Political Ecology and Environmental Services

C. Kull provides interesting insights on the topic of ecosystem services in his article “The political ecology of ecosystem services” (2015)⁴⁾. Through an investigation of the social deconstruction and application of the term ecosystem services, it is made clear that term ‘ecosystem services’ appears to be neutral and technical, but in fact implies significant choices that have various political outcomes. Since the term ‘ecosystem services’ does not have a straightforward application it can be used in various ways to justify a multitude of actions leading to very complex and political outcomes.

More info

<http://www.politicalecology.eu/>

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Robbins, P. 2004. *Political ecology: a critical introduction*. Blackwell Publishing

²⁾

Blaikie, P. 1985. *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*. London: Longman

³⁾

Blaikie, P. and H. Brookfield. 1987. *Land Degradation and Society*. London: Methuen

⁴⁾

Kull, C.A., X. Arnauld de Sartre and M. Castro-Larrañaga. 2015. The political ecology of ecosystem

services. *Geoforum* 61: 122-134 <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.03.004>

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