

Sub-theme 16: Discursive and Material Struggles over the Natural Environment

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Convenors:

Daniel Nyberg

University of Newcastle, Australia
daniel.nyberg@newcastle.edu.au

Christopher Wright

University of Sydney, Australia
christopher.wright@sydney.edu.au

George Ferns

Cardiff University, United Kingdom
fernsg@cardiff.ac.uk

Call for Papers

We now live in a new epoch – the *Anthropocene* – where humanity itself has become a force of nature. As a consequence, various planetary boundaries have been breached including, amongst others: human-induced global warming of 3–5°C this century, the sixth great mass extinction of animal and plant species, the acidification of oceans, disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, and ever-growing toxic pollution (Steffen et al., 2015). Two centuries of industrial development have led us to a watershed moment: the realisation that our assumptions of human mastery over nature are in fact a mirage. Rather than bending nature to our will, the systemic character of the ecological crisis reveals that human civilization is inherently tied to a material reality, a reality that is now ‘biting back’.

However, despite the alarming urgency of these challenges, political and economic decision makers continue to do down on a dangerous bet – that business-as-usual must continue (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). For example, the celebrated Paris Climate Agreement is dependent on as yet untested techniques of carbon capture and storage to limit global warming under 2°C. Additionally, although the vast majority of companies publically support the Paris Climate Agreement, only a small fraction have put in place science-based targets that are in line with holding warming to no more than 2°C. These inconsistencies stress the need for organization scholars to further explore the conflicted intersection between what is said about the ecological crisis, what is actually done to stop it, and the material impacts of doing so.

In this sub-theme, we are interested in exploring this gap between discourses surrounding environmental challenge and their often-overlooked material impacts. Possible topics and questions include, but are not limited to:

(1) Discursive struggles over the natural environment

The use of language is central to the political and popular discussion about accelerated environmental degradation. This is evident in ‘post-truth’ struggles over fact and authority (e.g. the political debate over climate science) as well

fantasy-like proposals for planetary geo-engineering, calculations of how to optimize the environment as a 'service' 'asset' to the economy, and even the growing genre of Hollywood disaster blockbusters. In this way, the environment increasingly anthropomorphised and hyped to the point of becoming apolitical. In exploring this theme, possible topics include:

The representation of the environment as a spectacle (Debord, 1992) – e.g., corporate reporting and activism surrounding environmental disasters, organizational use of iconic environmental imagery, the growing genre of climate fiction (cli-fi).

How hyper-real representations of the environment are upheld by different organizations with different levels of authority, celebrity, and/or status.

The dramaturgy of ecological events, disasters, and scandals. How are these events, among other dynamics, forgotten by stakeholders as organizations employ strategies to reduce the 'issue-attention-cycle' (Mena et al., 2016)?

(2) The materiality of environmental challenges and struggles

Juxtaposing the above emphasis on language and discourse is the materiality of the natural environment, including embeddedness of organizations within social-ecological systems (Whiteman et al., 2013). For example, scholars within New Materialism provide novel accounts of agency, nature and relationships by questioning established hierarchies and causations (Coole & Frost, 2010). Possible topics within this area include:

The materiality of the natural environment. How does human and non-human interaction shape struggles over the natural environment?

Material interests and effects. What are the material impacts of environmental struggles and how do organizations and communities cope with these impacts?

The body in environmental struggles (Alaimo, 2010). For instance, how is the physical body used as a form of resistance?

(3) Combining discursive and material approaches to understand environmental challenges and struggles

The final area of interest involves combining material and discursive approaches to understand environmental challenges and struggles. Here, we envision submissions interested in socio-materiality and performativity to better understand environmental contestation. Possible topics within this area include:

The environment 'biting back'. How do environmental impacts challenge our framings and assumptions of organizations, including the taken-for-grantedness of progress and human mastery over 'nature'?

The performativity of discourse (Nyberg & Wright, 2016). How do our dominant discourses and framings impact material aspects of the physical world?

Socio-materiality and the natural environment. How are struggles over the natural environment shaped by the mutual constitution of the social and physical worlds – e.g., how does the socio-materiality of time and space constitute struggles over the natural environment?

This sub-theme is open to submissions that focus on a variety of organizations and social actors involved in struggles over environmental challenges including, amongst others: major corporations; national and regional governments, intergovernmental bodies such as the UN, NGOs, grassroots organizations, resistance movements. We intend to facilitate a multi-disciplinary exchange of ideas and research. Bounded by an interest in environmental challenges and struggles we invite both empirical and theoretical contributions for an inclusive sub-theme discussion.

References

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Daniel Nyberg is Professor of Management at Newcastle University Business School, Australia. His research focuses on political activities and by organisations. He is pursuing this interest in projects on how corporations respond to climate change, the politics of 'fracking', and corporate influence on democracy.

Christopher Wright is Professor of Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney Business School, Australia. His research explores the political economy of corporate and managerial work with a specific focus on how business organizations interpret and respond to climate change.

George Ferns is a Lecturer in Management, Employment and Organization at Cardiff University Business School, UK. His concerns how organizations engage with issues surrounding the natural environment, focusing on topics such as corporate sustainability, sustainable development, CSR, and environmental activism.
