

Doing political ecology inside and outside the academy

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Abstract

The chapter presents a survey of political ecology (PE) scholarship in, and beyond, academic institutions. This interdisciplinary field makes a contribution to understanding environmental and social justice issues, that require explanations at multiple scales, often challenging powerful state and corporate actors. Radical and critical scholarship like PE survives because of sustained student demand, but in neoliberal universities battling financial shortfalls and sometimes a reluctance to invest in research areas that offer critique of powerful institutions and of injustice. Political ecologists have a substantial presence in North America and Europe, either as individual scholars or in small research clusters, but are found across the world and are networked virtually and through key events and collaborative ventures. Publishing outlets include at least three dedicated journals. The extent to which academic political ecology can, and should, make a contribution to engaged scholarship, stepping beyond the boundaries of academic investigation into the messy world of environmental politics is debated, but embraced by some academics, numerous NGOs, and civil society organizations. The future of the field is assured if environmental despoliation, denial of access to resources, and inequality continues; and if its hopes for better world are not extinguished by much more powerful actors in and outside the university system.

Figures

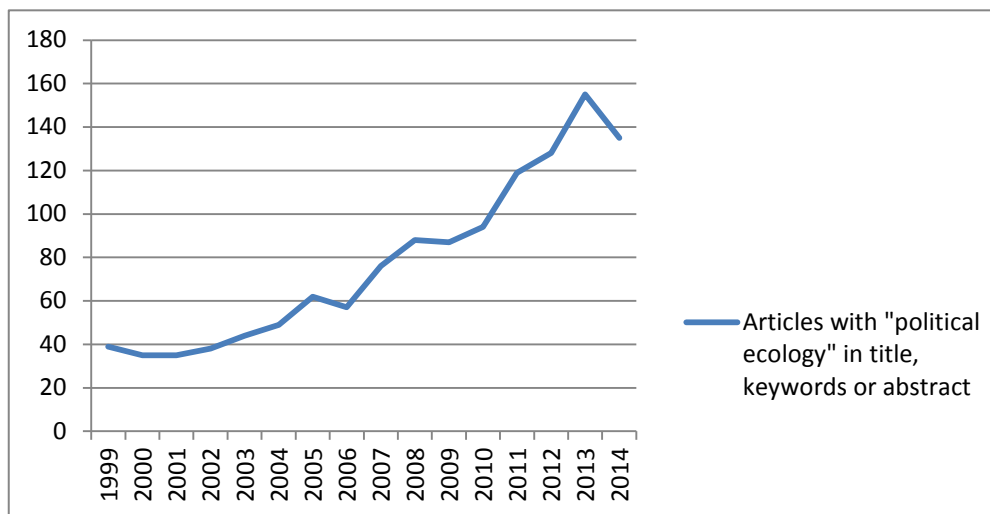


Figure 1: Growth in political ecology articles referenced in Scopus, 1999-Oct. 2014. Many journals are not yet included in Scopus, and the *Journal of Political Ecology* was only counted after 2011. Source: Scopus

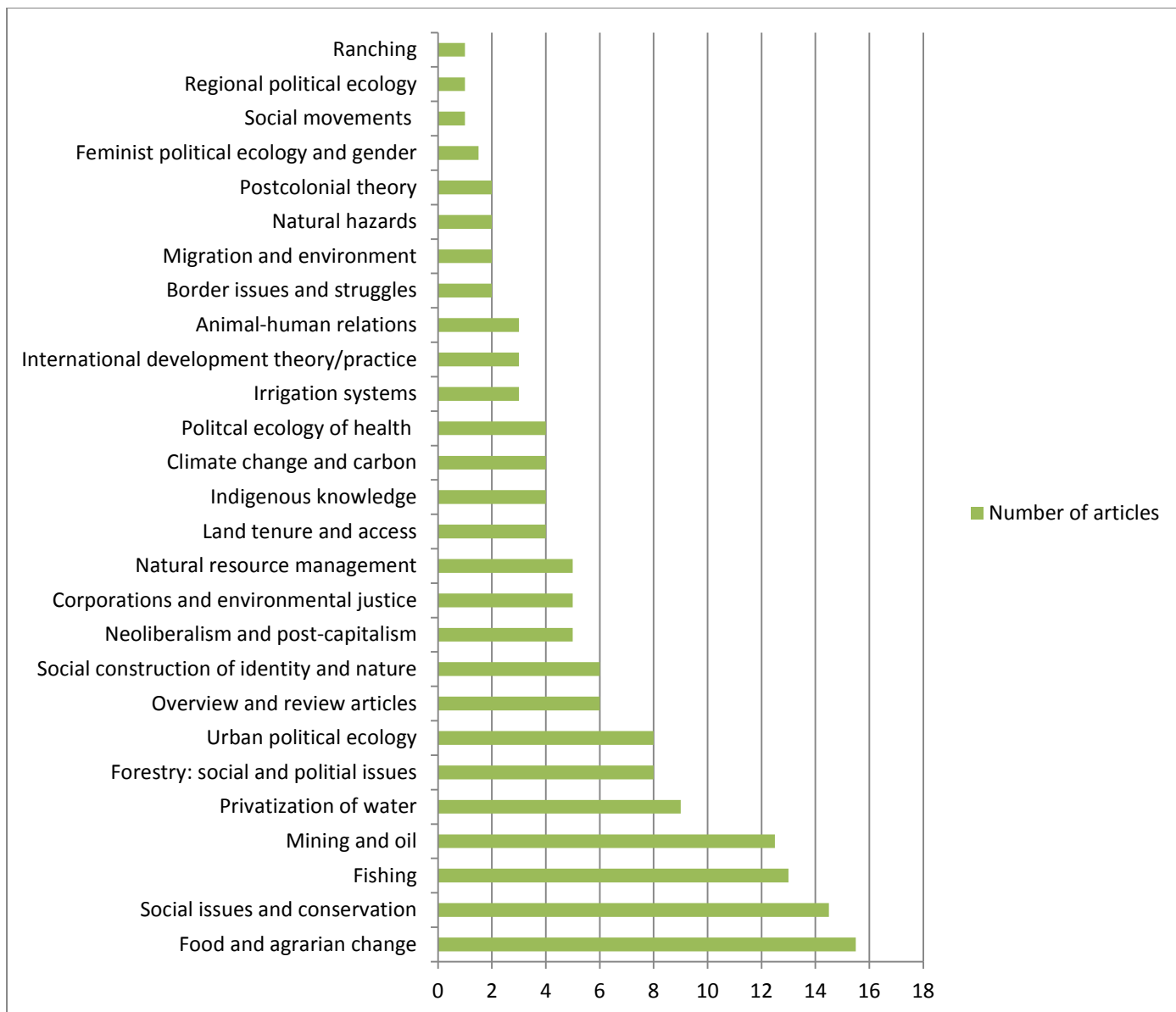


Figure 2: Articles published in the *Journal of Political Ecology* 1994-2014 (October), by main theme. N=145.

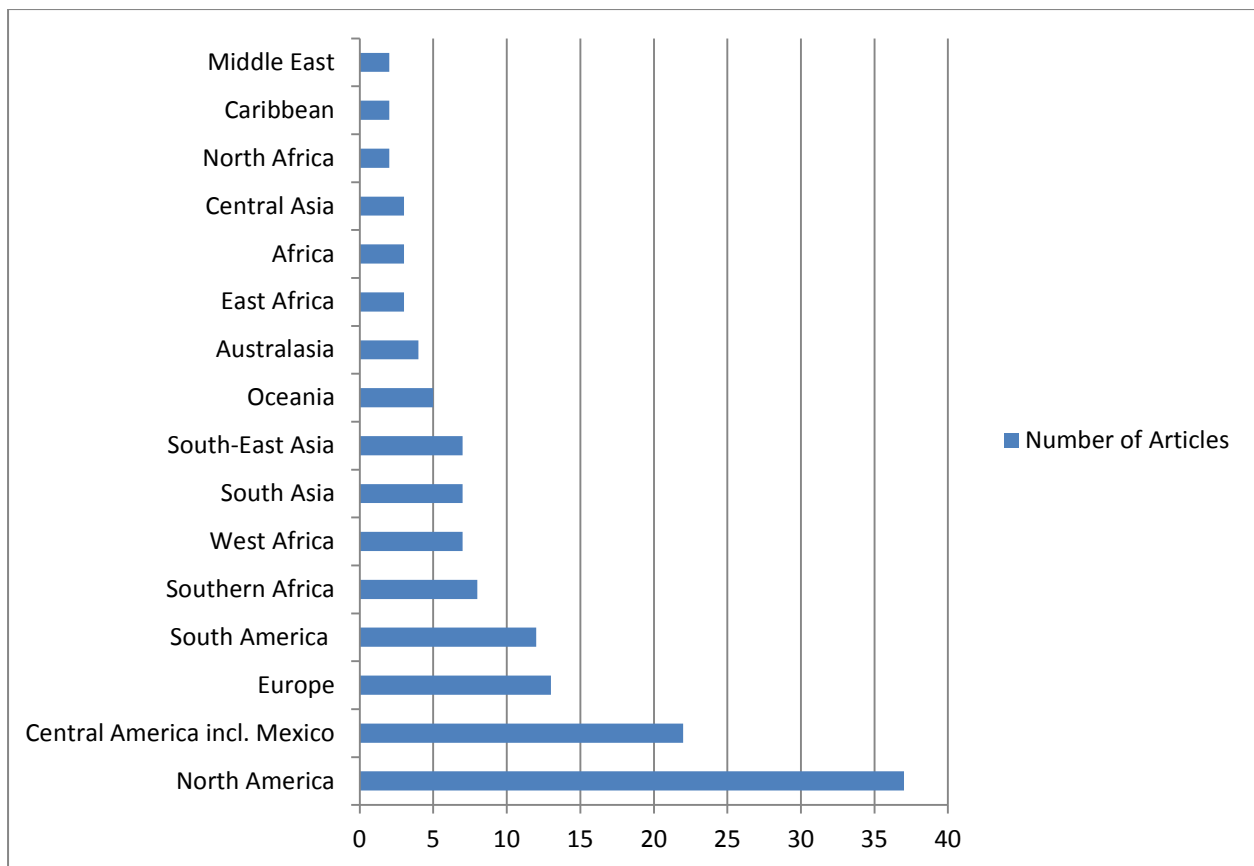


Figure 3: Regional focus of articles published in the *Journal of Political Ecology* 1994- October 2014. N=137.

Conclusion

I have argued that political ecology is a 'field' with many personal and political dimensions. Deliberately conceived as a multi-disciplinary enterprise, it is found in the scholarship of individuals that often transcend the quotidian hierarchies and structures of universities and academic disciplines. Its key findings transcend the social and natural sciences, while zeroing in on social and ecological injustices: for example, evictions resulting from protected area management and land grabbing.

Political ecology is broad in scope. There are no university departments of political ecology with core funding and a legacy of staff and PhD students to sustain them; instead there are clusters and individuals scattered across the world. Research output is plentiful, widely read and published in a range of outlets, but so far it has lacked a natural centre of gravity (although the 'DIY' *Journal of Political Ecology* may be starting to fill this gap). It has not always penetrated more mainstream thinking on environmental issues directly, including the 'human dimensions of global environmental change', despite the complex and cutting explanations offered by its practitioners (Castree *et al.* 2014). Teaching is largely conducted as 'bolt-on' classes in existing programs, with 'optional' status in courses. But these classes are proving increasingly popular with students and contribute to a burning sense of injustice and a desire to right at least some of the wrongs of untrammelled greed and inequality in the world.

Given that it is a field rowing against the very strong neoliberal current of our times, it is only to be expected that political ecology will remain a marginal part of the academy in the short and medium term (despite its increasing prominence in human geography and anthropology). This is also true outside western academic institutions. While it might root in different national and regional academic cultures (as this *International Handbook* explores), the general consensus is that political ecology must address and fight political, economic, social and ecological inequities. This means that it will never be popular with universities that are fully beholden to political and economic power-brokers. Indeed, and as scholars join forces with political ecologists 'out there' in civil society, the stage is set for an even greater oppositional politics both inside and beyond the academy (e.g. Willow and Wylie, 2014). Political ecologists will not shy away from such

confrontation as they join wider struggles that seek to 'speak truth to power', as they look for ways to influence policy and organisations. This task will not be easy, but then they have known that all along.

Notes

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2) This is not an exclusive list of key individuals and institutions, and it is a snapshot as of late 2014. Of course, many political ecologists work outside such groupings.

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