Panelist Remarks
"Cultural and Political Ecology at the AAG Century: Application and Impact in the World".
Association of American Geographers meetings, 15-19 March 2004, Philadelphia

Simon Batterbury,
University of Melbourne simonpjb "at" unimelb.edu.au

Simon Batterbury teaches geography and environmental studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He was formerly at the University of Arizona, the London School of Economics, and at Brunel University, and edited the *Cultural & Political Ecology Newsletter* from 1998 until 2004. He edits the *Journal of Political Ecology*. www.simonbatterbury.net

Published in *Cultural and Political Ecology Newsletter 2004*, site was deleted, archived at www.simonbatterbury.net

Cultural and political ecology is a rather unwieldy title for a sub-field of geography and anthropology that examines the human-environment relationship, typically involving hybrid research methodologies, and attention to the different scales at which processes of change are generated. Efforts by its practitioners have exposed how human-environment relationships *work* (initially in agricultural societies, and with a focus on food systems and material resource use, but now extending to urban and manufactured environments). They have shown *who really controls* access to resources, and they have elucidated how societal views of the natural world color human relationships to nature, and how these are expressed in land and marine environments in landscapes and as policy. The focus is increasingly worldwide, and the remit broad. Although there is no hard and fast data it appears that the number of practitioners in universities and research-policy organizations is at least holding level – rising in some counties and sectors, falling in others.

I have been working in this field since attending Clark University (USA) as a geography grad student in 1987. I soon embraced – and have never seriously wavered – from the view that human-environment studies are the core of the discipline of geography, even if they are rarely recognized as such given the paradigm shifts and changing fortunes that have privileged geographical work on spatial relationships, environmental processes 'without the humans', and variants of political, urban, and economic geography that are non-environmental in their leanings. The subfield is analytically challenging, requiring the mastery (or at least a stumbling familiarity with) a range of methodologies, and should (but often does not) step outside the

classroom and conference circuit to find application in environmental campaigns and livelihood struggles of various types.

Working in the field is frustrating as a teacher and as a practicing environmentalist. Undergraduate students, especially in the USA, are resistant to some of the core tenets of environmentally responsible and sustainable development, and are not always anxious to engage the key environmental issues, to learn about the personalities in our field, or to participate as environmental advocates. Many find the plight of ecosystems, even those close to their homes and neighborhoods, to be too challenging or even irrelevant to the ascendant “SUV and MTV culture”. This indifference should come as no surprise. Yet the work of graduate students using cultural and political ecology approaches, at my own university at least, is consistently strong and their numbers show no sign of falling. Among colleagues and faculty members, the story is different. Political ecology in particular has some caché but it is rare to find much interest in Sauer, the San Bushmen, and Sustainability among your faculty colleagues, unless you are very lucky indeed. Human geography has broadly embraced *social* justice (on the academic left), but an explicit commitment to *environmental* justice, and resource conservation and sustainability, can receive a frostier reception (but see Harvey 1996).

The subfield has had some sparkling achievements:

1) The classic work of cultural ecologists has exposed the varieties of human adaptation to the environment and the strength of indigenous technical knowledge worldwide and through the ages. This work often challenges dominant ideas about the desirability of modernist technical interventions in agriculture, the decline of traditional land use systems, and the necessity of large scale interventions by the state or international agencies in rural areas. The work of Bob Netting, Harold Brookfield, Paul Richards, and Mike Mortimore has been particularly important to me personally, and to the subfield more generally.

2) In marked contrast to the “cultural turn’ in social sciences and in human geography that was marked since the late 1980s, cultural and political ecology makes explicit statements about resource access questions, and these generally employ *some* scientific techniques in answering those questions. This “bridging” role is important, since it produces good answers – if humans are transforming nature, it is important to know how, and why. The analytical lens has been successfully broadened over the last twenty years to encompass the full range of forces that early cultural ecology was often less good at identifying – now stressing, for example, the important role of colonial policy on food systems (as in the work of Watts, O’Keefe, Wisner), and how changing state, development, and international financial policies may influence resource use and livelihood outcomes (Blaikie, Bebbington).

3) The combined efforts of cultural and political ecologists have much to say to the vast network of international development research conducted by academics, think tanks, consultants and aid agencies. It is a necessary antidote to the often-cursory studies conducted prior to a proposed development project; and it has helped to elaborate

"livelihood analysis" and other approaches now in common use in the international development community. Cultural and political ecology has also offered strident post-hoc critiques of such development efforts. It is present in the work of institutes that talk directly to policymakers, shaping their ideas and theories – for example at the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex, where Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones have done much to convince development agencies that resource management is more complex than it seems; at the World Resources Institute (Jesse Ribot's work on environmental governance for example), and in the International Institute for Environment and Development, where geographers like John Thompson are (were) active, and there are a multitude of applied research programs (see Batterbury 2004). As Bill Turner has noted, the subfield can also offer much to the emerging research on global change and sustainability science. Here the field has attracted strong research funding, although research questions are often written to appeal more readily to the scientific agencies, not to development agencies or critical scholars.

4) As Tim Forsyth and I noted back in 1997 in our *Geographical Journal* collection on the sub-field (Batterbury and Forsyth 1997), there is a plethora of methodological enhancements and innovations that accompany cultural and political ecology. To do this type of research effectively requires the researcher to handle a suite of *hybrid methods* – from soil science to historical demography to the deconstruction of dominant environmental narratives – that make students of the approach skilled in several analytical approaches, open to methodological surprise, reflexive – and often participatory - in their analytical techniques. This can only be a good thing, and it encourages methodological eclecticism.

Some failures:

1) Cultural and political ecology has not offered a strong and unified response to the major environmental debates and challenges of our time. Our own Specialty Group - perhaps by choice, perhaps because of our multiple foci and research objectives – does not engage in programmatic statements, lobbying, or coordinated research efforts. Colleagues in anthropology have perhaps been better at these activities. Nonetheless, individual geographers have made huge contributions: e.g. Ben Wisner's work on environmental hazard mitigation, which has involved United Nations commissions and work with numerous NGOs and grass roots organizations (see his contribution to this collection), and Piers Blaikie's consistent engagement with resource management questions and international development through his research and consultancies at UEA. Although the emergence of a coherent approach to pressing environmental concerns is perhaps unlikely given the disparate individuals and disciplines involved in what is essentially an academic sub-field rather than a fully-fledged professional body (involving everybody from 'big scientists' to lone critics of specific development projects), this lack of unity reduces our visibility, and allows analytical perspectives with narrower methods to be more readily embraced by policymakers. These include approached that have different epistemologies - environmental economics, and the conservation-focused resource and ecological sciences. Although some political ecologists do not really *want* to advise or work with

policymakers (as Mike Watts said this at the 2000 Pittsburgh AAG meetings) I think the role of the "analytical critic", which many of us adopt, works best when it at least provides *some* tractable alternative proposals to the environmental and social problems that our research uncovers. For example, I think the detailed analytical challenges to "fortress conservation" and "community based resource management" efforts in Africa need to be counterbalanced with well-researched workable alternatives that still treat ecosystem degradation as a concern (see, for example, Alex Clapp's or Lisa Naughton's work on this). To deem wildlife conservation or resource management as inimical to the interests of local people (which is sometimes is) goes part-way – what alternative institutional arrangements work instead, and, indeed, can people's marginality be subverted by their own innovations and networks? We also need to usurp and challenge the many non-political resource inventories conducted by resource scientists, that use little more than GIS data layers and some limited field survey, and that result in management schemes for resources that are wholly unrealistic in terms of local politics and culture. Political ecology has an edge, and an opening here – it can be a critical "hatchet" but also a "seed" for new patterns of resource conservation (Robbins 2004). Consider also, at a different scale, the disgraceful actions of the US government to deny the severity of global warming and the American consumer's 25% contribution to it – we need to expose the free-market, anti-environmental agenda behind such actions, but also to conduct the careful work that people like Diana Liverman have been doing with researchers and policymakers in the USA, prefiguring more sustainable alternatives (Liverman 2004).

2) Within the manifest methodological possibilities for conducting our investigations, there is a vigorous debate over the precise methodological stance of the researcher, and over the relative merits of inductive vs. deductive methods. Should we be trying to understand the causes of environmental change "events", as Andrew Vayda has argued? Can we assume inimical power relations and political "processes" are always important, when corporations and the state are involved, as Ray Bryant has suggested? For me, a multitude of approaches are vital to fit the individual research questions and cases. Programmatic statements about methods and explanations – those of Vayda and Bryant but also the different topical agendas and methodological approaches for the subfield proposed by Billie Lee Turner, Piers Blaikie, and Karl Butzer (all speakers at AAG 2000, where we held an earlier round of panel deliberations) - are far apart in their intentions and chosen focus, and thus all of them have their supporters and critics. Agreement is unlikely. Again, this feeds into my assertion that our contributions are less targeted and more diffuse than some other approaches to environmental issues.

3) In the discipline of geography, there is insufficient recognition that other disciplines have an equal, if not greater commitment to political and cultural ecology. It is easy to forget the role of people like Julian Steward, an anthropologist, in the early development of materialist analysis of environmental relationships in human societies - and for that matter the presence of hundreds of ecological anthropologists – larger in number and equally professionally active - across the world. But disciplinary origins divert attention from the issues being analyzed. The "anthropology of..." or "political

ecology of..." a certain issue is really of far less consequence than the issue or 'event' itself. In a practical sense, graduate students should at least be exposed to the cognate work in anthropology *and* geography - and where possible, be thrown together in seminars and reading groups. There are Departments and interdisciplinary Schools than *do* bridge the disciplinary divide – for example at Michigan, Rutgers, UCL, Columbia, UEA and my new home from 2004, the School of Anthropology, Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Melbourne in Australia – but is this enough?

4) There is a failure in some quarters to acknowledge that cultural and political anthropology is not an "American" field. Never was, never will be. It is international in its subject matter, its centers of scholarly activity, and its outlook. It is regretful when some of the recent synthesis volumes in the field choose to anchor themselves firmly to North American (or sometimes also to British) authors, implicitly denying the vital role of scholars in Australasia, Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Mexico, Brazil, Spain, Thailand, Kenya, South Africa and many other countries. And while political ecology is largely a 'child of the West' it is not tied to it exclusively. An international history of the field has yet to be written.

5) Internal to our academic Departments, there is a continuing crisis of conviction with regards to human-environment scholarship more generally. Although one can find many excellent groups of faculty members working at Clark, Wisconsin-Madison, Berkeley and Texas; at UBC in Canada; at UCL, Sussex and UEA in Britain; and at Monash, Melbourne, and ANU in Australia, these are exceptions to the norm. Normally, there is one person in a medium sized academic department of geography teaching human-environment topics, and this person may not necessarily have research experience outside their own country. In the smaller departments (the non-PhD granting departments in North America for example, and some liberal arts colleges) there may be nobody at all. This reflects disciplinary and institutional histories, which have sometimes worked against the meeting of real *demand* for the services of environmentalists and cultural/political ecologists. It also renders some political and cultural ecologists short of a teaching job, often for several years, since the numbers of positions are insufficient. Yarnal and Neff's discussion of the unrealized potential of human-environment research in geography is disturbing (Yarnal and Neff 2004). They discuss the human-environment curriculum in American geography departments, and find it terribly weak at undergraduate level. They argue that in order to place the sub-discipline on an equal footing with physical and human geography, and with the teaching of techniques like GIS, at least a quarter of all faculty members and course offerings should be in human-environment areas. This is almost never achieved, at least at the institutions I have worked at.[1] Yet

[1] At the University of Colorado, the resignation of two top faculty members in the early 2000s diminished expertise; a similar situation has only narrowly been averted at Arizona through new hiring. At Brunel University, UK where I worked in the 1990s, the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences is now faced with total closure, pushed through under a cynical university restructuring effort. Elsewhere the Department of Geography at SOAS, University of London, which had a whole political ecology research group, was disbanded and then merged into King's College, in 2000/1 (note: they were hiring a political

> "important as jobs are, it is also important to create an informed citizenry capable of engaging scientific knowledge and political processes that affect its environment and its communities" and to do this, "Geography Departments must make a major commitment to hiring human-environment faculty members and….to developing the human-environment curriculum" (Yarnal and Neff 2004:33).

The same could be said of anthropology, of course –and of some other sub-areas within geography.

The present distribution of faculty expertise in geography is cause for concern, if there really are so few centers of teaching and research that can offer more than one or two faculty members in this area. There are few teaching positions advertised in this field, and a few research jobs advertised every year, and many people standing in line to apply for them. To do this kind of work in a PhD-granting department is a rare privilege, one I have been thankful for over the years. A substantial increase in staffing over a short period at a single institution is a rare event – it is restricted to just a couple of universities at any given time who have ambitious plans and a budget to meet them (for example the University of Oxford and Texas A&M, who are both investing heavily in environmental research as of 2004, and perhaps the newly enlarged University of Manchester). Geography Departments need to – and can - make greater commitments to human-environment research, in partnership with the Faculties and Schools in which they are located, not only because of the urgency of environmental problems that I have referred to above - which transcend cultural or political ecology and to which the discipline could speak much more than it does - but also for reasons of academic balance. Initiating international environmental research centers on campus is one way forward – Clark, Arizona, Oxford, York in Canada, and Wisconsin-Madison have followed this path. But this requires central investment or financial endowment. "If we build it, they will come", to misquote Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams*. If we don't build programs with environmental and social commitment, they won't.

To modify the less-than-satisfactory relationship between the human-environment specialists and their own disciplines, and the academic departments in which they work, a special collective effort is required of us. Let me be blunt. This will not be achieved by brilliant but individualistic and focused political ecologists pursuing their own intellectual projects in the search for tenure, recognition, and rapid ascent up the academic pyramid. This is a model of the past: it benefits nobody but the individual. Of course, we need to show our graduate students how to use the system effectively enough to succeed in their chosen careers, and occasionally we are competing against each other for the same grant monies or jobs, or fighting a corner in a university battle, and might put friendship aside. But being open and supportive with fellow political and cultural ecologists, building bridges both privately and openly across academia, nonprofits, and implementing agencies, and sharing data and opportunities with all of these is more important than self-advancement, especially with such big environmental

---

ecologist again in 2013!). Nonetheless the number of "Environment and Development" Masters programs offered in Britain, and the growth of Development Studies as an academic field, is positive.

questions at stake in our research[2]. The sorry state of social capital in Britain's universities, where a lucrative national research ranking exercise has pitted academics against each other to ascend and stay atop a pyramid, is a sobering lesson of how competition destroys more than it creates in an academic culture. Agile activism is sometimes required of us; so is good scholarship; and so is partnership. The sterling work of the Specialty Group in America needs extending, perhaps worldwide, and a sense of shared ownership needs to be increased. Ways to do this, I think, include greater publicity for our key initiatives and achievements: a better media presence: active collaborations to get the right people into the right faculty and research positions: greater internationalization of our curricula and in our research linkages; better collaborations (with anthropologists in particular, but also with the research institutes and between geographers); and the more explicit linking of the subfield to the study of environmental problems and pressing concerns outside the university. This last issue is the one that is occupying me most at present, and I think it is the one that could both haunt us, and excite us, in future decades.

Batterbury, S.P.J. 2004. The International Institute for Environment and Development: notes on a small office. Global Environmental Change (forthcoming)

Batterbury, S.P.J. & T.J Forsyth 1997 (eds.). Environmental transformations in developing countries. The Geographical Journal 163 (2):126-224 (11 papers)

Harvey, D. 1996. Justice, nature, and the geography of difference. Oxford: Blackwell.

Liverman, D.M. 2004. Careful with that planet, Mr President. The Guardian. February 19. London. http://www.guardian.co.uk/climatechange/story/0,12374,1150894,00.html

Robbins P. 2004. Political ecology: a critical introduction. Oxford: Blackwell.

Yarnal B and Neff R. 2004. Wither parity? The need for a comprehensive curriculum in human-environment geography. Professional Geographer 56(1): 28-36

[2] My conversations with Diane Austin, Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, and Jude Fernando, both at the University of Arizona, both of whom show exemplary commitment to scholarship and community issues, lead me to believe there are a few kindred scholars out there!