

Cultural Ecology Newsletter

(CEN #30 -- Fall '97)

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Fort Worth Business Meeting Minutes

Karl Zimmerer conducted our annual business meeting held this year on April 3. Initial discussions focused on the continuing slate of officers (Karl introduces everyone) and the requirements and flexible deadlines for the student paper awards. B.L. Turner II suggests congratulations are in order to Karl Butzer for his recent election to the AAAS. The following other agenda items were discussed by the approximately 35 members of the specialty group in attendance.

1. Student Field study Award. Applications are invited for this award of up to \$500.
2. The Robert McC. Netting Award. This year's recipient is Australian geographer Harold Brookfield.
3. A suggestion that the CESG draft a resolution honoring the memory of the late Jim Parsons.
4. Secretary-Treasurer's financial report.
5. Newsletter/Web page editor's report.
6. Next year's AAG meetings in Boston, possible CESG-sponsored sessions and invited speakers.

Suggestions should be forwarded by e-mail to Karl Zimmerer.

7. There is a need for one or more author(s) to write a new description of the specialty group and its activities and research for the planned revision of *Geography in America*. Bill Denevan suggests forming an advisory committee to identify capable candidates. Names of individuals who might serve on that committee include Karl Zimmerer, Tom Bassett, Bill Denevan, Karl Butzer, B.L. Turner II, Oliver Coomes, Tony Bebbington, Judy Carney, Emily Young, and Phil Porter. Bill Denevan agreed to chair the committee. Further suggestions or nominations may be sent in to Karl Zimmerer.

8. Upcoming CLAG conference in Arequipa, Peru.

9. Need to assist students in travel costs for the 1999 AAG meetings in Honolulu.

- **Oliver Coomes, Secretary-Treasurer of the CESG.**

Call for papers for the Boston meetings

Several CESG members expressed interest in developing themes for sessions at the 1998 AAG meetings in Boston:

CESG Student member session (C. Kull);

Women, environment, and development (E. Young);

Use of history in cultural ecology (K. Zimmerer and J. Carney);

Regional cultural ecologies in South Asia.

Access to resources, environmental history, and landscape change (T. Bebbington and S. Batterbury).

In addition, we have this missive from Simon Batterbury:

Access to Resources and Environmental Histories in Africa and Latin America

Proposed AAG session to be sponsored by the CESG.

Organized by; Tony Bebbington (University of Colorado, Boulder)

Simon Batterbury (Brunel University, UK)

This session will bring together diverse perspectives to allow for exchange of theory and method, as well as empirical advances. It focusses on two aspects of current work in cultural and political ecology, although these are not exclusive; new debates over rural resource access, and the current interest in developing "regional environmental histories". Resource access is a broad theme, that includes work on gender relations, household and micro-politics, resource use, and the role of institutions and development policy. Environmental histories set resource use and resource access in historical context, and provide detailed assessments of pre- and post-colonial human impacts. Environmental history is most often associated with a North American "school" built around Donald Worster and colleagues. But in Africa, Latin America and Asia it has charted a different course; for example, providing new techniques for long-term studies of single localities, re-stating orthodox views on bio-physical change and its role in creating vulnerability, and challenging cultural ecologists working on contemporary resource management issues to consider the historical dimension of production systems and ecological diversity. Papers may address one, or both, of the resource access and environmental history themes.

We hope to offer two sessions of four papers each, plus discussion time. One session will focus on Latin American and one on Africa, and we are exploring publications plans for the session.

More information may be obtained from Simon Batterbury - papers were later published in *Land Degradation and Development* 10(4) 1999.

Harold Brookfield receives 1997 Netting Award

Harold C. Brookfield (The Australian National University) was named recipient of the 1997 Robert McC. Netting Award. I have asked one of his most renowned students, Eric Waddell, to write a testimonial to Professor Brookfield's scholarship and contributions to our field.

- R. Kuhlken

Book Reviews

Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements. Edited by

Richard Peet and Michael Watts. London: Routledge, 1996 .

Review by Simon Batterbury, LSE

In the years since Piers Blaikie published his radical studies of soil erosion in the mid 1980s and coined the term "regional political ecology" with Harold Brookfield, human- environmental interactions in developing countries have become increasingly sophisticated. Geographers have taken a central role in debates about the social and economic causation of land degradation and hazards, and explored environmentally-inspired social movements, NGOs, and other resource management institutions. One landmark contribution was a special issue of *Economic Geography* on the theme of "Environment and Development", published in 1993. The papers from that journal issue helped to inspire a healthy debate that has echoed through the left-environmental journals and conference networks.

In this edited volume, Dick Peet and Michael Watts have taken several re-worked papers from that special issue, and added new contributions. Their aim in *Liberation Ecologies* is to "integrate critical approaches to political economy with notions derived from post-structural philosophy" (p260), thereby critiquing and extending the political ecology framework. The book offers ten chapters, and an introduction and a conclusion by the editors. All the contributors are academics teaching in the United States, although at least seven are non-Americans. All but two (Escobar and Moore) were trained as geographers. All have some connection with the universities of Clark and Berkeley, and some with both. Four studies deal with Asia: three with Latin America, and four with Africa, with a strong bias towards rural environments. The long gestation period of the book, the theoretical mastery of its editors, and the credentials of its contributors add up to a polished and wide ranging survey of a vibrant and challenging field. In their Introduction, Peet and Watts provide an interesting reading of current debates in environment and development theory. They also criticize Blaikie's political ecology for its "plurality" (p7), and they see its "voluntarist" explanations as largely "without politics or an explicit sensitivity to class interest and social struggle" (p8). Their own Liberation Ecology approach should operate from a wider epistemological base. It should tackle politics, including the actions of peoples' movements built around environmental justice and land rights. It should also show how local environmental knowledge is incorporated into alternative development strategies, look at the social construction of environment and development language and debates, and forge new forms of environmental history and ecology. It is a "discursive arena" (p38) which broadens debates about the environment to tackle the three domains of livelihood, entitlement, and social justice. Liberation ecology, therefore, adds neglected components to a "regional political ecology" analysis.

Each chapter differs in its adoption of Peet and Watts' agenda, and none embraces every aspect of Liberation Ecology. The first two papers show how established environmental debates are socially constructed, emerging from established, commercialized western orthodoxy. Escobar demolishes the aims and methods of sustainable development and biodiversity conservation, approaches that view the

environment as a relatively unproblematic arena for technical interventions. Instead he promotes a postmodern view which sees nature as "socially constructed" by people and their intellectual and technical labors. Yapa's paper places the scientific response to poverty, and particularly Green Revolution improved seed varieties, as a reaction to another "construct" - an erroneous view of poverty. Poverty, he argues, resulted from these programs, rather than being solved by them. Bebbington takes on this line of thinking to challenge the vague support given by western writers to alternative development and indigenous organizations. His work in highland Ecuador shows how indigenous organizations are choosing to adopt and adapt modernizing technologies (fertilizer inputs, and improved seeds). Modernization is seen as "form of cultural survival" (p101) protecting rural communities from out-migration in search of work. Challenging Yapa, he believes we should not write off technological modernization, nor romanticize indigenous technical practices by uncritical support to "social movements" or "grassroots development". Zimmerer, working in Bolivia, suggests peasant farmers have been intensifying their agriculture, but without soil and water conservation. Rather than blaming farmers for this, he demonstrates the plurality of viewpoints on the resultant erosion problems in Bolivia and urges the need for accommodation between the views of aid agencies, the government, rural trade unions, NGOs and peasant farmers. Knowledge may indeed be socially constructed, but like Bebbington, he thinks a middle ground of shared views is needed for problem-solving.

Moore's work is an ethnographic study conducted in Eastern Zimbabwe, that uses a variety of techniques to elicit how land conflicts occur between, but also within, groups of peasant farmers, settlers, and the state. This is an ambitious attempt to show how "struggles over land and environmental resources are simultaneously struggles over cultural meanings" (p127), and how these meanings matter in everyday life. Jarosz's study of Malagasy deforestation stays close to Blaikie's regional political ecology framework, blaming a hostile political economy for widespread forest loss and persecution of shifting cultivators. In a long chapter, Carney presents her familiar work on Gambian rice farming, reminds us that the "politics" of land rights and land use must include detailed understanding of gender relations, in this case in irrigated wetlands. As environments have been transformed, so have social relations. This theme also emerges in the work of Schroeder and Suryanata, who look at the potential of agroforestry to change the economic landscape and tenure relations. Agroforestry receives international praise, but can be wholly inappropriate to local needs, as in the case of pesticide-laden apple orchards in Java. Rangan takes on an example of what Robin Mearns and Melissa Leach call an "environmental orthodoxy" - the widespread belief in the successes of the Indian Chipko movement. She argues this movement is, unwittingly, a part of western development discourse, and it has held back social development by insisting on forest extraction legislation to the benefit of a small minority of traders and loggers. Other voices calling for tree-felling to supply

local fuelwood, rather than tree-hugging, have been drowned out. Muldavin shows how Chinese agrarian restructuring now involves similar processes to capitalist industrial restructuring - "communal capital" is being destroyed under the new Chinese regime, and there are many localized environmental effects resulting from commercial agro-complexes.

Three issues emerged in my reading of the book. Firstly, in attempting to re-fashion political ecology as a research tool and an epistemology, theoretical coherence is proposed around the notion of liberation ecology. Yet the contributors show great variety in research styles and in their conceptions of justice and development scenarios, and they are less strong in their support of post-structural theory and discourse analysis than the editors. The papers by Bebbington and Escobar, for example, sit far apart in their methods and their implications for policy. The editors never insisted on a unified voice, and recognise this eclecticism in the closing chapter (p262). However it is evident that the contributors' theoretical approaches are as diverse as the locations and societies they have investigated. This leads me to wonder if "liberation ecology" is actually an umbrella for disparate analytical forms. Secondly, despite promoting new and better forms of ecological analysis and environmental history in the Introduction (p12), few of the contributors then document, or explain, bio-physical processes or discuss recent advances in scientific or ethno-scientific evidence for environmental transformations. I think it is legitimate to ask why ecological analysis is lacking in this important book, especially since papers with a systems framework or natural science component did appear in the original 1993 Economic Geography collection. Writers in the "new ecology" tradition including Leach, Rocheleau and Scoones are well aware of the need to understand non-equilibrium ecological systems alongside the social, political and economic issues stressed in Liberation Ecologies. Instead, "environmental imaginaries", a term drawn from the work of Castoriadis, is used approvingly by Peet and Watts to describe the unique world-views of particular societies. These collective visions, or "social constructions" of nature, frame social action and development. But they do not, I would argue, provide the hard evidence needed to challenge competing discourses on environmental change. Ecological scientists, and some geographers, are increasingly troubled by this literature, while recognising its validity. It would not surprise me if we now see a counter-attack from cultural ecologists who, after all, look explicitly at the ecological foundations of production systems and social relations. Thirdly, although several contributors look carefully at gender relations, substantive discussion is confined to the chapters by Moore, Schroeder and Carney. Fortunately, another Routledge volume, *Feminist Political Ecology* edited at Clark University at the same time as this book, covers this ground {1}. It is not referenced in Liberation Ecologies. The two volumes, both suitable for upper level classes and graduate students, adopt quite different positions on the social relations of environmental protest, and should be read together.

To be able to reflect on the problems faced by about third world peoples, as Liberation Ecologies does, is important and valuable, and the editors and contributors are to be congratulated on a fine volume. It will carve out a vital place for geographers involved in these debates and be remembered for years as a benchmark text that offers significant breakthroughs for political ecology. To take this work forward, I think, an ecologically-aware "liberation policy" is now required, built upon the editors' passionate interests in justice and fairer entitlements. It is not clear from the volume what form this might take, especially since local environmental movements are quite heavily criticized by the contributors. Could the answer lie in pluralist, locally-adapted approaches to development policy, and an end to western-domination of development agendas? Or, perhaps, in re-directing aid money to support indigenous NGOs, local institutions, or even public-private partnerships? While the answers to these questions may not be forthcoming in the book, this volume will nonetheless inspire its readership (as it has for my own students) to dirty their hands in the complex, frustrating and sometimes dangerous world of liberation struggles.

{1} Rocheleau D, Thomas-Slayter B, and Wangari E. 1996. *Feminist Political Ecology: global issues and local experiences*. London: Routledge.

Call for manuscripts for *Journal of Cultural Geography*

Dale Lightfoot announces an upcoming special issue of the *Journal of Cultural Geography* to focus on cultural ecology. Co-editors of this volume will be Lightfoot and Kent Mathewson. Submissions of manuscripts are invited up until the April, 1998 deadline. More information may be obtained from the web pages at Oklahoma State University: <http://www.geog.okstate.edu/users/culture/culture.htm>.

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