

Sustainable development and ‘warm fuzzy feelings’: discourse and nature within Australian environmental imaginaries

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Abstract

This paper adopts the concept of ‘environmental imaginaries’ to explore the influence of environmental discourses upon supporters of Australian environmental movements. Rather than investigate knowledge, values, attitudes or behaviour, as is often the focus of research into public environmentalism, this study analyses the presence, absence, influence and interactions of different environmental discourses at the interpersonal scale. The relative acceptability and familiarity of different environmental philosophies, with their radically different approaches to nature, has important impacts upon the political strategies, actions and directions adopted by environmental movements. Through conducting a series of ongoing discussion groups with self-identifying ‘environmentalists’ it is found that nature is constructed predominantly through the language and concepts of sustainable development, although this discourse coexists with a number of concurrent and oppositional viewpoints. The power of sustainable development is self-sustained through the normalisation of particular languages and modes of expression. Alternative ideas and discourses are inhibited by a lack of language and familiarity and consequently disempowered and relegated to subordinate positions within discussions. The paper concludes by arguing that the lack of acceptance of alternative ecocentric ideas within the environmental community risks de-radicalising the movement and limits the diversity of political strategies and options that it could potentially adopt.

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1. Introduction

The rapid rise to prominence of environmental movements and associated environmental concerns within Western societies is a well-known and well-researched phenomenon. Earlier conceptions of human/nature relationships have been problematised and politicised as new knowledges, languages and ways of seeing have propelled nature from the boardrooms, laboratories and experiences of specialists into the domain of wider public consumption. Since the publication of Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1963) and subsequent popular ‘prophets of doom’ texts (e.g. Ehrlich, 1969; Meadows et al., 1972) nature has been reconstituted as ‘the environment’ and therefore of interest to everyone it supports, rather than just to obscure and eccentric naturalists (see Macnaghten and Urry, 1998, p. 45). Environmental activists have succeeded in popularising

nature throughout the world, different communities politicising different issues reflecting their unique natural and social environments.

The shift from specialist to generalist knowledge in Australia began in the early 1970s when, after failing to prevent the damming of Lake Pedder in Tasmania using traditional covert lobbying tactics, activists began targeting the general public in order to overtly influence political decision makers. Early urban attention was generated in 1971 through the high profile ‘Green Bans’ the Builders Labourers Federation placed upon controversial proposals that risked social or natural heritage values (see Roddewig, 1978; Anderson and Jacobs, 1999). Through public-oriented campaigning interest burgeoned in subsequent years culminating in massive street protests in both Sydney and Melbourne in 1977 opposing the Ranger uranium mine in Kakadu National Park and most famously in the successful national campaign that ‘saved’ Tasmania’s Franklin River in 1983. Since then there have been innumerable campaigns that have mobilised public attention and placed

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popular pressure on environmental decision-makers (for a history of the environmental movement in Australia see Hutton and Connors, 1999).

The push to make nature ‘public’ has clearly been successful. Millions of consumers throughout Australia adopt ‘environmentally friendly’ behaviours whilst the Australian Green Party as well as environmental NGOs enjoy popular support. Nature has arrived within, and continues to inhabit, the Australian consciousness. What is less clear is the effect this popularisation of nature is having upon nature’s construction. Social constructionists and philosophers have shown that we can never truly ‘know’ nature, as our understandings of nature are shaped by the social and cultural lenses through which we see the world. This is not to argue that ‘there is no real nature out there’, but instead that our knowledge of nature will always be, at least partly, social (see Cronon, 1996a, p. 25; Escobar, 1996, p. 46). In opening nature to public attention specialists have relinquished their authority over the constitution and meanings of nature and allowed nature to be contested by a much wider variety of stakeholders.

In recent years there has been much work focusing upon this politicisation of nature, researchers variously exploring the tactics of pro-development industries (e.g. Beder, 1997; Rowell, 1996; Stauber and Rampton, 1995; Hager and Burton, 1999), the structural limitations of environmental reporting in the mass media (e.g. Anderson, 1997; Hansen, 1993), and the portrayal of nature within particular campaigns or storylines (e.g. Lee, 2002; Eden, 2002; Wondrak, 2002). Less work, however, has concentrated upon a key target of environmental politics, that being Public imaginations are Beder (1997), Rowell (1996), Anderson (1997) and others have shown that immense resources are invested in influencing how publics imagine or construct nature. Public imaginations are inherently political; if environmental stakeholders can naturalise their preferred narratives, languages and constructions of nature amongst the community, public and political support for their approaches is likely to be forthcoming.

The task of this paper is to approach this under-researched area by exploring how environmentally concerned Australians have negotiated local environmental contests and come to construct and give meaning to nature. Rather than adopt the quantitative psychological approaches that dominate public opinion research (e.g. Dunlap et al., 2001) I adopt a more discursive approach theoretically informed by Peet and Watts’ (1996) concept of an ‘environmental imaginary’. In doing so a novel approach to discussions groups as a methodology for analysing discourse is presented. The aim is to show the extent to which different environmental discourses have become entrenched within Australian environmental communities and draw conclusions about the influence of these discursive

frameworks upon the future directions of the movement.

2. Environmental imaginaries

In *Liberation Ecologies* Peet and Watts (1996) introduce the concept of an ‘environmental imaginary’ in their attempt to incorporate a more post-structural focus into the expanding literature of political ecology. Environmental imaginaries are introduced as the ways in which a society commonly imagines nature, or how the raw material of existence is transformed, interpreted and conceptualised within the collective (un)consciousness of society. Environmental imaginaries are likened to ‘regional discursive formations’ which Duncan has described as a “range of competing discourses constituted by a set of narratives, concepts, and ideologies relevant to a particular realm of social practice” (1990, p. 16). These formations result in “certain modes of thought, logics, themes, styles of expression and typical metaphors” becoming naturalised which go on to govern what and how events and issues are interpreted and communicated (Peet and Watts, 1996, p. 16). Imaginaries are place-specific being constructed from both natural, nature provides the “sources of thinking, reasoning and imagining”, and social, being “prime sites of contestations between normative visions”, sources (Watts and Peet, 1996, p. 263–268). Environmental imaginaries are highly contested and can be thought of as the ways in which a society collectively constructs, interprets and communicates nature.

The environmental imaginary is a useful concept for critical studies into the reception of environmental meanings. It shifts attention away from the traditional foci of individual values, attitudes and knowledges, towards the *social acceptability* and social influence of different environmental discourses. Values and attitudes research can be thought of as focusing upon a particular aspect or outcome of the greater regional discursive formation, the impact of the discourses upon an individual, rather than studying the dynamic properties of discourses within specific sites of discursive performance. Exploring the environmental imaginary redirects research towards the underlying discursive norms that govern communication in *social* situations. Attention turns to the “forms of social and individual practices which are [socially considered] ethically and morally right in regard to nature” (ibid, p. 263). Interviews focus not on the personal values and attitudes that are assumed to pre-exist responses, but on the social norms and conventions that constrain and enable what can be acceptably said. Just as the mass media is recognised as a site of discursive performance and is shown to have constraints that favour certain knowledges over others, so too does the realm of ordinary

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