

# Environmental economic geography: A sympathetic critique

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## Abstract

In this article I examine the objectives and substantive claims of a body of work that has come to be known as ‘environmental economic geography’ (EEG). I characterize this loose grouping of research activities as a topical contrivance: often what unites EEG researchers is simply a desire to apply the theories and methods of economic geography to environmental issues. The article explores an alternative rationale for doing EEG: the development of a distinctive intellectual project out of the encounter between economic geography and environment. Such a project extends beyond an assessment of the environmental impacts of economic activity, to examine the ways in which many ‘economic’ processes are environmentally constituted.

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## 1. Introduction

‘Environmental economic geography’ describes a loose grouping of grounded research activities that address the reciprocal relationships between economic organisation and environmental outcomes. It is a topical contrivance: coherence among individual pieces of research derives primarily from a broad orientation among a group of economic geographers towards a common object of study. The question I wish to raise in this short commentary is whether environmental economic geography (EEG) should aspire to be more than a topical categorization: is there, in effect, an ‘epistemic project’ within this emergent body of work?<sup>1</sup> I conclude that there is indeed a distinctive intellectual project at the heart of EEG, but that in contemporary research it often lies latent – a road not taken. Accordingly I suggest there are two research agendas at work within EEG: one is the default agenda of current practice, the other a promising opportunity with knowledge-transform-

ing potential. The road not taken leads to an engagement with the environment that challenges and re-works some of the core concepts of economic geography. To pursue this argument further, I have structured the commentary around four observations: (i) the somewhat contradictory nature of a call to incorporate environment (back) into economic geography; (ii) the different means by which economic geography can engage environment; (iii) the originality of EEG as an integrative agenda; and (iv) the need to specify more closely what ‘environment’ means within EEG research.

## 2. Environment: the constitutive ‘extra-economic’

EEG is a call for collective action to resolve an apparent paradox. The neo-Marxian turn in economic geography in the late 1970s produced a highly innovative sub-discipline with a broad palate of theoretical frameworks at its disposal. Yet, for much of the subsequent period, the core of the sub-discipline has remained largely detached from questions of environmental change, resource degradation, and the rise of environmental politics – phenomena which popular accounts of the late twentieth century tend to regard as among the most pressing policy and intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of an ‘epistemic project’ for EEG was raised by David Angel at the International Conference on Environmental Economic Geography in Cologne (2004).

challenges of the age. Until comparatively recently, for example, key texts in economic geography overlooked environmental issues or ghettoized them to the penultimate chapter (a narrative location that might charitably be read as recognition of the environment's incipience). While this has changed in the last few years (see, for example, Coe et al., 2007) the basic pattern is one in which environment has lain outside, or at best has been peripheral to, economic geography's field of vision.

To call for an 'environmental economic geography', then, is to appeal for a sustained examination by economic geography of a welter of contemporary environmental phenomena (some of which are outlined below). Thus a certain missionary-like momentum – absolving economic geography of a sin of omission – has attended recent initiatives around which EEG has begun to take shape. These include a highly stimulating conference at the University of Cologne in 2004 (from which the papers in this issue originate), planning for a follow-up conference in 2007 at the University of Connecticut (Hanink et al., 2006), and a set of paper and panel sessions at the 2007 Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco (Affolderbach et al., 2007).

Admitting environment into the core of economic geography is, however, always going to be a paradoxical project (cf. Braun, 2006). It was the *marginalization* of nature that largely defined the realm of possibility for post-war economic geography. In an institutional sense, economic geography – as a recognizable sub-discipline of Anglo-American geography – rests on the active exclusion of environment and the prioritization of space, understood as a human construct (Hanson, 1999; Gibbs and Healey, 1997). Thus EEGs co-opting of a set of concerns once firmly planted in the external realm of the 'extra-economic' explicitly seeks a return of the repressed. And like the return of all repressed things, admitting environment into economic geography has the potential to destabilize the object whose development its exclusion first enabled. Smuggled inside the expanding adjectival embrace of EEG, then, is a provocative question: to what extent does the incorporation of the environment challenge the core concepts of economic geography? Lying hidden at the heart of much recent work, the transformative potential of this question is often left untapped. A key issue, I maintain, is how EEG might detonate this question and capture its possibilities for re-thinking our understanding of 'economic' processes. This brings me to my second observation.

### 3. Application or innovation

"Fragmentation abounds" within EEG, as Dietrich Soyez and Christian Schulz observe in their editorial introduction to this theme issue. In its units of analysis, objects of interest, methodologies, and theoretical genealogies, EEG is nothing if not heterodox. Papers and poster presentations at the Cologne conference (which can be credited with launching the term 'environmental economic geogra-

phy') drew on a wide range of mid-level analytical frameworks, including regulation theory, theories of governmentality, ecological modernization, transaction cost analysis, and institutional economics. In this regard, EEG reflects the famously 'polyvocal' character of contemporary economic geography. And it shares with economic geography the same liberating sense of possibility – and limited efforts at systematic development – associated with the absence of a canon.

Against this background of diverse topics and approaches it is possible to distinguish two different rationales for contemporary work around EEG. The first is a largely empirical project to understand significant changes in what can be called the 'reproduction patterns' of late capitalism (Beckenbach, 1989). A broad array of empirical phenomena suggest something potentially significant is afoot in the organization of economic activity with respect to the environment: a proliferation of new 'environmental economies' (carbon finance, climate futures, and wetland banking); the importance in some industrial sectors of environmental performance as a driver of innovation; the normalization – in relatively affluent economies in the global North – of the 'environmental consumer,' and a mainstreaming of the environmental conditions of manufacture, transport and/or disposal as a means of product differentiation and market segmentation; and the consolidation of 'environmental peril' as a staple storyline in the mass media (cf. Hajer, 1995). Often cited as evidence for the 'greening' of corporate, collective and personal economies, such empirical phenomena call for the attention of an economic geography making even modest claims towards social relevance. One *modus operandi* for EEG is to apply to contemporary 'green' phenomena the conceptual tools and methodological techniques developed in other areas of economic geography: in effect, to extend economic geography's franchise by rolling out a well-honed set of tools.

An alternative working practice for EEG, however, would be to use the encounter between economic geography and nature to question – and potentially to transform – some of the concepts which comprise economic geography. By being alive to the ways in which thinking about environment may unsettle contemporary conceptualizations and reveal their inadequacies, EEG could challenge some of the assumptions around which economic geography is convened. Framed this way, for example, EEG might lead to thinking about production not as value creation but as a process of materials transformation in which environmental change and the organization/disorganization of matter and energy are integral rather than incidental to economic activity (cf. Hudson, 2001); to conceptualizing North-South trade as an unequal ecological exchange, through which economically useful forms energy and materials become concentrated in the North (cf. Muradian and Martinez-Alier, 2001; Giljum and Eisenmenger, 2004); to understanding processes of investment/disinvestment as a fixing/loosing of particular ecological conditions; and to considering how a growing technical division of

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