

**Political ecology** is the study of the relationships between political, economic and social factors with environmental issues and changes. Political ecology differs from apolitical ecological studies by politicizing environmental issues and phenomena.

The academic discipline offers wide-ranging studies integrating ecological social sciences with political economy (Peet and Watts 1996, p. 6) in topics such as degradation and marginalization, environmental conflict, conservation and control, and environmental identities and social movements (Robbins, 2004, p. 14).

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### Origins

The term "political ecology" was first coined by Frank Thone in an article published in 1935 (Nature Rambling: We Fight for Grass, The Science Newsletter 27, 717, Jan. 5: 14). It has been widely used since then in the context of human geography and human ecology, but with no real systematic definition. Anthropologist Eric R. Wolf gave it a second life in 1972 in an article entitled "Ownership and Political Ecology," in which he discusses how local rules of ownership and inheritance "mediate between the pressures emanating from the larger society and the exigencies of the local ecosystem" (Wolf 1972, p. 202). Other origins include other early works of [Eric R. Wolf](#) as well as John W. Cole and Hans Magnus Enzensberger and others in the 1970s and 1980s.

The origins of the field in the 1970s and 1980s were a result of the development of radical development geography and cultural ecology (Bryant 1998, p. 80). Historically, political ecology has focused on phenomena in and affecting the developing world; since the field's inception, "research has sought primarily to understand the political dynamics surrounding material and discursive struggles over the environment in the third world" (Bryant 1998, p. 89).

Scholars in political ecology are drawn from a variety of academic disciplines, including geography, anthropology, development studies, political science, sociology, forestry, and environmental history. Some modern prominent scholars include:

- Anthony Bebbington
- Paul F. Robbins
- [Piers Blaikie](#)
- Harold Brookfield
- Dianne Rocheleau
- Richard Peet
- Nancy Lee Peluso
- Karl Zimmerer
- [Michael Watts](#)
- Nathan Sayre
- Jake Kosek
- [Arturo Escobar](#)
- Tom Bassett
- [Robyn Eckersley](#)

### Overview

Political ecology's broad scope and interdisciplinary nature lends itself to multiple definitions and understandings. However, common assumptions across the field give it relevance. Raymond L. Bryant and Sinéad Bailey have developed three fundamental assumptions in practicing political ecology:

- First, costs and benefits associated with environmental change are distributed unequally. Changes in the environment do not affect society in a homogenous way: political, social, and economic differences account for uneven distribution of costs and benefits.

- Second, this unequal distribution inevitably reinforces or reduces existing social and economic inequalities. In this assumption, political ecology runs into inherent political economies as "any change in environmental conditions must affect the political and economic status quo." (Bryant and Bailey 1997, p. 28).

- Third, the unequal distribution of costs and benefits and the reinforcing or reducing of pre-existing inequalities holds political implications in terms of the altered power relationships that now result.

In addition, political ecology attempts to provide critiques as well as alternatives in the interplay of the environment and political, economic and social factors. Robbins asserts that the discipline has a “normative understanding that there are very likely better, less coercive, less exploitative, and more sustainable ways of doing things” (2004, 12).

From these assumptions, political ecology can be used to:

- inform policymakers and organizations of the complexities surrounding environment and development, thereby contributing to better environmental governance.
- understand the decisions that communities make about the natural environment in the context of their political environment, economic pressure, and societal regulations
- look at how unequal relations in and among societies affect the natural environment, especially in context of government policy

### **Scope and Influences**

Political ecology's movement as a field since its inception in the 1970s has complicated its scope and goals. Through the discipline's history, certain influences have grown more and less influential in determining the focus of study. Peter Walker traces the importance of the ecological sciences in political ecology (Walker 2005, p. 74). He points to the transition, for many critics, from a 'structuralist' approach through the 1970s and 1980s, in which ecology maintains a key position in the discipline, to a 'poststructuralist' approach with an emphasis on the 'politics' in political ecology (Walker 2005, p. 74-75). This turn has raised questions as to the differentiation with environmental politics as well as the field's use of the term of 'ecology'.

The discipline has drawn much from cultural ecology, a form of analysis that showed how culture depends upon, and is influenced by, the material conditions of society (political ecology has largely eclipsed cultural ecology as a form of analysis according to Walker, 2005). As Walker states, “whereas cultural ecology and systems theory emphasize[s] adaptation and homeostasis, political ecology emphasize[s] the role of political economy as a force of maladaptation and instability” (2005, p. 74).

Political ecology will often utilize the framework of political economy to analyze environmental issues. An early and prominent example of this was *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* by [Piers Blaikie](#) in 1985, which traced land degradation in Africa to colonial policies of land appropriation, rather than over-exploitation by African farmers.

The movement of the field has changed, broadened and complicated its scope and goals.

### **Political Ecology in Anthropology**

Originating in the 18th century with philosophers such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Thomas Malthus, political economy attempted to explain the relationships between economic production and political processes (Ritzer 2008: 28; Perry 2003: 123). It tended toward overly structuralist explanations, focusing on the role individual economic relationships in the maintenance of social order (Wolf 1997: 7-9). Within anthropology, Eric Wolf pushed political economy towards a neo-Marxist framework which began addressing the role of local cultures as a part of the world capitalist system as opposed to earlier political economists and anthropologists who viewed those cultures as “primitive isolates” (Wolf 1997: 13). This approach to ethnography, however, still lacked an attention to environmental effects on political and economic processes and is still sometimes criticized for looking to structural explanations for cultural phenomena (Perry 2003: 123).

Conversely, Julian Steward and Roy Rappaport's theories of cultural ecology are sometimes credited with shifting the functionalist-oriented anthropology of the 1950s and 1960s toward a more scientific anthropology, incorporating ecology and environment into ethnographic study (Perry 2003: 154-157). Yet, these theories were later found to be lacking by many anthropologists as they were criticized for “separat[ing] economic from other aspects of life, even in the process of showing the ways in which they interact with one another” (Perry 2003: 157). In other words, cultural ecology was good at exploring function in the nature-culture dichotomy, but the conclusions drawn from that theoretical position tended to ignore the impact of environment on political and economic factors.

Recognizing these flaws in political economy and cultural ecology, anthropologists (Wolf 1972; Blaikie 1985, Greenberg & Park 1994; Hershkovitz 1993) worked with the strengths of both to form the basis of political ecology in anthropology. This approach focuses on issues of power, recognizing the importance of explaining environmental impacts on cultural processes without

separating out political and economic contexts. These approaches tended to emphasize local, minority, and indigenous knowledge (Ervin 130) while moving away from privileging a Western nature-culture dichotomy.

The application of political ecology in the work of anthropologists differs depending on what the anthropologist is seeking to emphasize. While any approach will take both the political/economic and the ecological into account, some approaches will place more emphasis on the political while others will place more emphasis on the ecological. Some anthropologists, such as Michael Watts, focus on political impacts on access to environmental resources. This approach tends to see environmental harm as both a cause and an effect of “social marginalization” (Paulson 2003: 205).

Other anthropologists, such as Andrew Vayda and Bradley Walters (1999), criticize political ecologists for pre-supposing “the importance...of certain kinds of political factors in the explanation of environmental changes” (167). Vayda's response to overly political approaches in political ecology is to encourage what he calls an “event ecology” (Vayda & Walters 1999: 169), focusing on human responses to environmental events with an eye on political reactions to the events instead of presupposing the impact of political processes on environmental events.

As with any theoretical approach in the social sciences, political ecology has its strengths and weaknesses. At its core, political ecology makes great strides in attempting to contextualize political and ecological explanations of human behavior. But as Walker (2006) points out, it has failed to offer “compelling counter-narratives” to “widely influential and popular yet deeply flawed and unapologetic neo-Malthusian rants such as Robert Kaplan's (1994) 'The coming anarchy' and Jared Diamond's (2005) Collapse” (385). Another problem is the neo-Marxist nature of political economy in a world where policy decisions are dominated by a global capitalist system (Walker 2006: 388-389). Ultimately, applying political ecology to policy decisions – especially in the US and Western Europe – will remain problematic as long as there is a resistance to Marxist and neo-Marxist theory.

## Political Ecology and Conservation

When speaking of political ecology and [conservation](#), one ultimately finds that there is a divergence of ideas, issues, and troubles, especially when looking at conservation through [biodiversity](#) and the creation of conservation units. Sutton (2004) defines political ecology as “the study of the day-to-day conflicts, alliances, and negotiations that ultimately result in some sort of

definitive behavior; how politics affects or structures resource use” (311). It is a matter of who is involved and what they eventually want the outcome to be, such as the views from NGOs or those of the local people and the government of the occupied land. They must all consider their involvement in this matter. Are the actions local people contributing an asset to the area or are they in effect causing more harm than good? Are the NGOs helping the situation and for whose benefit? What is the government’s role in this; where do they stand?

[Biodiversity](#) , meaning biological diversity, can be briefly defined as “the number and dominance of species present in an ecosystem” (Sutton 2004: 308). Many, however, feel that in cases where the local indigenous people are using [slash and burn](#) are, in effect, harming the area or in other cases where [logging](#) is being done. In some cases, biosphere reserves have been created. Hanna et al. states:

Biosphere reserves can be platforms for building place specific, mutually reinforcing policies and practices that facilitates conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, economic growth and other needs and aspirations of local communities and the emergence of knowledge based governance and management arrangements at local, provincial and national levels. (2008: 21)

These reserves are made in places such as conservation units like protected areas. It is important to not forget about the people who are also affected by the creation of these units.

With the creation of these conservation units, “political ecologists have devoted some energy to the study of protected areas, which is unsurprising given political ecology’s overall interest in forms of access to, and control over resources” (Hanna, et al. 2004: 203). The local people must in some cases show that they are as important as the area which they occupy, despite the thought that those who [slash and burn](#) are seen as doing harm. Most people have occupied the same areas for many generations and, because of their practices, can also be seen as an important aspect of the area. Just as, Dove and Carpenter state, “indigenous people have important environmental knowledge which could contribute to conservation” (2008: 4). However, some people are removed from the land. In any case, others who get involved such as NGOs and the government then make decisions about who can access the land and how it can be used, putting regulations on the local people. Sutton explains this as:

In a few cases, perhaps especially tragic local groups have been displaced to create national parks and reserves to 'conserve' the forest. Fortunately, most conservation bodies are now aware that, if a group has been using and managing a forest for several thousand years, throwing it off the land is more apt to destroy the forest ecosystem than to preserve it. (2004: 302)

But population increases by these people can also be seen as a problem for these areas due to over-usage and lack of [sustainability](#) .

### See also

- [Cultural ecology](#)
- [Development geography](#)
- [Ecological crisis](#)
- [Eco-socialism](#)
- [Ecogovernmentality](#)
- [Environmental sociology](#)
- [Green state](#)
- [Human behavioral ecology](#)
- List of ecology topics
- Political economy
- [Social ecology](#)

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### External links

- [Journal of Political Ecology: Case Studies in History and Society](#) (free online).
- [Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers](#) . Archive of newsletters, officers, award and honor recipients, as well as other resources associated with this community of scholars.