

**A PLACE FOR NATURE: UNDERSTANDING ORGANISATION-
NATURE RELATIONSHIPS
THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIES**

Sara Walton
Department of Management
University of Otago
PO Box 56
DUNEDIN
NEW ZEALAND
Ph +64 3 479 5108
Fax +64 3 479 8173
swalton@business.otago.ac.nz

*KEY WORDS: ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY, ORGANISATIONS AND THE NATURAL
ENVIRONMENT, NATURE, SOCIO-NATURAL RELATIONSHIPS*

**SUBMISSION TO
CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES 4: CAMBRIDGE 2005
STREAM: MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL HISTORY**

There is now considerable literature arguing for a place in organisation studies for the natural environment (for example some of the well known include Shrivastava, 1994 & 1995; Hart, 1997; Egri & Pinfield, 1996; Purser, Park & Montuori, 1995; Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause, 1995). The majority of the calling for such a place involves an examination of the present and the future of our discipline in relation to impending and current resource scarcities. Much of the organisation and natural environment literature appears to embrace the natural environment with normative, instrumental and/or descriptive overtones. Seldom does any of the literature involve a historical stance on the position of the natural environment other than to say organisation theorists and practitioners have largely ignored it. In conjunction with this, it is also argued that organisation studies literature in general has largely tended to lack historical engagement (Rowlinson & Carter, 2002; Kieser, 1994; Zald, 1993; Jacques, 1996). The purpose of this paper is to include, the normally excluded natural environment, in both analyses and histories of management. This inclusion will add to the literatures on organisational history and organisations and the natural environment by arguing for the relevance of environmental histories as an approach to studying organisations.

Environmental histories explore “transformations of nature in human histories” (Pawson & Brooking, 2002: 344). The aim of an environmental history is purported to “understand how and why the environment of a particular place or region came to be what it is today...study changes in human activity and nature’s economy, not in isolation, but in terms of their interactions” (O’Connor, 1998: 25). As Stroud (2003) comments, they are about relationships between the social and natural worlds which she states ‘illuminates’ not only the social but the interrelated notions of cultural, political and economic history. In Stroud’s article on the role of dead people in environmental history she creates some useful questions which capture environmental histories in general –

“How is this project an environmental history? What is the role of nature in my story? In what ways am I concerned with changing ideas about nature? About material changes in nature? About political and social implications of the interactions between these changes?”

(Stroud, 2003: 626-7)

While one key reason of an environmental history is to recognise the interconnectedness of humans systems and natural systems, another is as Cronon (1995) indicates in his work, to emphasize that nature does not sit outside of a cultural context and to historicize that context in order to examine how we operate today.

Due to the prevalence of organisational activities in social, cultural and economic histories this paper will argue that there are a number of reasons why environmental histories have a place in organisation studies, and in particular critical management studies. Firstly, as Perrow (1997) points out organisations are “intensive and effective environmental destroyers” and while he argues for his project of considering that organisations are largely responsible for cultural, social and political directions in history, I believe that he has omitted an important aspect. I believe that they are also responsible for directions in environmental history as well. The rationalization and increasing commodification of nature can be attributed to organisational sense-making of the natural environment. Indeed, it seems that the appropriation and exploitation of nature and the negative externalities produced through the consumption machinery have resulted in a depiction of nature dominated by materialities. Such a depiction begs for closer historical examination in order to understand the way that nature is appropriated and conceptualised historically by organisations to achieve their own needs.

Part of gaining this understanding involves paying attention to the construction of socio-natural relationships. This recognizes that nature is not inevitable but rather a socially constructed phenomenon (Banerjee, 2003; Eder, 1996; Haraway, 1991; Chaloupka & Cawley, 1993; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998). Organisation studies has a role to play in understanding the socio-natural relationship because as Harvey suggests a key point of this understanding is “the

labour process as the active point at which we as a species appropriate the grand other of the natural world” (Harvey, 1998: 9). This is because the role of transformative activity, i.e. human labour, is considered fundamental to our species (Harvey, 1998). There is increasing questioning of the current socio-natural relationship. For example Hajer and Fischer in the introduction to their edited collection (1999: 20) suggest, “we need to rethink the way in which socio-natural relationships are conceptualized”, in particular, they argue, if we are to develop sustainably. Another significant questioning of socio-natural relationships comes from theorists such as Donna Haraway (1991) who suggests that who constructs nature matters. As such, a key question according to Castree and Braun is, “who constructs what kinds of nature(s) to what ends and with what social and ecological effects” (2001: xi). Hence, if the labour process is central to our appropriating of the natural world then it makes sense that this process is also vindicated in constructing the kinds of natures we come to know.

This paper will argue for the understanding of historical contexts to analyse relationships between nature and organisational activities. It will speak to and add to those management scholars calling for historical analyses and to those scholars calling for a greater understanding of organisation and nature relationships. As such the contribution will not only show the importance of historical knowledge in making sense of current practices but also use history as part of developing a method for understanding social contexts and in particular socio-natural relationships.

References

- Banerjee, S. B. (2003). Who sustains whose development? Sustainable development and the reinvention of nature. *Organization Studies*, 24(1), 143-180.
- Castree, N., & Braun, B. (2001). Preface. In N. Castree & B. Braun (Eds.), *Social nature. Theory, practice, and politics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Chaloupka, W., & Cawley, R. M. (1993). The great wild hope: nature, environmentalism, and the open secret. In J. Bennett & W. Chaloupka (Eds.), *In the nature of things* (pp. 3-23). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cronon, W. (1995). Introduction: In search of nature. In W. Cronon (Ed.), *Uncommon Ground. Rethinking the human place in nature*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Eder, K. (1996). *The social construction of nature*. London: Sage.

Egri, C. P., & Pinfield, L. T. (1996). Organizations and the biosphere: Ecologies and environments. In S. R. Clegg & C. Hardy & W. Nord (Eds.), *Managing organizations. Current issues*. London: Sage.

Fischer, F., & Hajer, M. (Eds.). (1999). Introduction – Beyond global discourse: the rediscovery of culture in environmental politics. In *Living with nature. Environmental politics as cultural discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gladwin, T. N., James J. Kennelly and Tara-Shelomith Krause. (1995). Shifting paradigms for sustainable development: implications for management theory and research. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4), 874(834).

Haraway, D. J. (1991). *The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

Hart, S. (1997). Beyond Greening: Strategies for a Sustainable World. *Harvard Business Review*, 75(1), 67-76.

Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Jacques, R. (1996). *Manufacturing the employee*. London: Sage.

Kieser, A. (1994). Why organization theory needs historical analyses - And how this should be performed. *Organization Science*, 5(4), 608-631.

Macnaughton, P., & Urry, J. (1998). *Contested Natures*. London: Sage.
O'Connor, J. (1998). *Natural causes. Essays in ecological Marxism*. New York: Guilford Press.

Pawson, E., & Brooking, T. (2002). Backcover. In E. Pawson & T. Brooking (Eds.), *Environmental histories of New Zealand*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Perrow, C. (1997). Organizing for environmental destruction. *Organization & Environment*, 10(1), 66-72.

Purser, R., Park, C., & Montuori, A. (1995). Limits to anthropocentrism: Toward an ecocentric organizational paradigm. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4), 1053-1089.

Rowlinson, M., & Carter, C. (2002). Foucault and history in organization studies. *Organization*, 9(4), 527-548.

Shrivastava, P. (1994). CASTRATED environment: GREENING organization studies. *Organization Studies*, 15(5), 705-726.

Shrivastava, P. (1995). The role of corporations in achieving ecological sustainability. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4), 936(925).

Stroud, E. (2003). Reflections from six feet under the field: dead bodies in the classroom. *Environmental History*, 8(4), 618-627.

Zald, M.N. (1993) Organization studies as a scientific and humanistic enterprise: Towards a reconceptualization of the foundations of the field', *Organization Science* 4(4), 513-28.