

# Preface

I make a basic assumption at the outset that anyone picking up this book has an interest in knowing something about the environment, sociology or both. For those interested in the environment, the book will cover some key environmental issues and problems, but will also show them how sociologists think about and carry out research in this area. I will try to convince them that understanding, explaining and solving environmental problems will require sociological knowledge. For those already interested in sociology, the book will try to convince them that they should take environmental issues and problems seriously and that sociologists should be prepared to make the effort to understand evidence from the natural sciences if they are to make their necessary contribution. Of course, should anyone already be interested in both the environment and sociology, they will need no convincing of any of this, but should still find the presentation of material and specific examples helpful.

The book has been written with two specific audiences in mind, namely the (possibly mythical) 'intelligent layperson' and the (hopefully real) new undergraduate student. Some of the former may even metamorphose into the latter before, after or possibly during the reading of this book, though this is by no means necessary. Still, self-evidently the book is sociological and contains some of the staple concerns of the discipline. Most of the time, the sociological content, and particularly the theory, is embedded within the discussions of evidence or delivered with a fairly light touch. In this way the sociological contribution builds gradually and is not separated out from the evidence. My hope therefore is that it will be possible for people with no, a little, or some knowledge of sociology to get something useful from the book. New students of sociology, politics, international relations, geography and environmental science should be able to read it without feeling too overwhelmed by social theory, a fair bit of which I readily admit is unnecessarily verbose.

What led to a textbook of this kind was my gradual realization that despite the existence of many introductions to 'environmental sociology' and the 'sociology of the environment', all of them have been written for the higher levels of undergraduate or postgraduate study. That means anyone approaching sociology to find out what it might be able to add to their existing knowledge of the environment and environmental issues would probably not find the existing literature that

useful, simply because it is written at too high a level and makes the assumption of prior sociological knowledge. This book does not make that assumption. To a lesser extent, teaching my own Environment and Society course has also convinced me that a more basic introduction might even provide a service to higher-level students of sociology. This is because, apart from some brief material on risk, environmental politics and the general rubbishing of all things biological or natural, there really isn't much 'environment' in sociology degree schemes. Even though higher-level environmental sociology students may get along perfectly well with the sociology, their previous lack of acquaintance with environmental issues may have left a gap in knowledge which this book should help to fill. Such a lack of acquaintance does not entirely explain a former student who tried to convince us that genetically modified crops might be part of an extra-terrestrial alien conspiracy to wipe out the human species, but it probably didn't help.

None of this means that the book is undemanding or easy. The issues it deals with require a genuine interest and desire to understand wide-ranging environmental debates, which cross the science of global warming, the history of environmental movements and the long-term development of human societies. But I suggest that this is an entirely worthwhile and rewarding challenge. As many other sociologists have found, trying to make sense of environmental issues and problems takes us all into distinctly 'alien' territory. As an undergraduate sociology student seeking out information for my dissertation on the society-environment relationship, I was often found wandering and browsing in parts of the library previously considered no-go areas: general biology, physics, geography (human and physical), economics, history, history of science, anthropology and even theology and religious studies. This was absolutely necessary because the library's own categorizing of 'environment' books was determined by existing disciplinary divisions. In reality, the knowledge and information these books contained not only often failed to match the category, but were also of interest in themselves to a sociological project covering environmental issues. In fact, all of the above library sections have things to offer those who are fascinated by nature, environment and society. I strongly recommend my own research strategy – 'wandering' and 'browsing' as a way of seeking out implausible connections across disciplines, sadly an under-used research method in the age of qualitative software packages and electronic databases.

Two more important things to note. First, the text uses examples and illustrative materials, drawing on my own 'local' knowledge of the British situation and research literature. That means there will be many British examples throughout the text. However, I have drawn on the wider literature whenever possible and particularly when doing so makes for a stronger argument or makes a point especially well. Hence, environmental issues in post-communist Eastern Europe have a place, as do those in India, China, North America, Africa and many more. One

pleasing and very satisfying aspect of environmental studies is the recognition that there is no point in restricting the focus to one country or region. The entire natural and human worlds are part of our subject matter and we just have to pursue issues wherever they may take us, both geographically and intellectually. Fascinating stuff! But also, necessarily demanding.

Secondly, the book does not provide another review of sociological ideas on environmental issues, at least not in the conventional way. That is because I have tried to keep the referencing of authors and their work to a minimum so as to distil their key contributions into a coherent and readable whole. One benefit of this method is that it allows the text to concentrate on illustrating theories and arguments with illustrative examples and evidence without the need to fill the book with streams of names and dates. There is nothing wrong with the latter, of course: adopting academic conventions is an essential part of what we do. But not at this level. The focus is also on presenting clear expositions of some central ideas and debates rather than engaging in an extended critique of the field. After all, that is what all of those higher-level introductory books aim to achieve. This book is therefore intended to serve as an entry point into sociological approaches to the environment which will guide readers towards the wider literature should they choose to take matters further. The Bibliography should help with this, and key readings can be found at the ends of chapters. I have also provided a glossary of keywords for practical assistance and keywords are identified **thus** on first use within each chapter. Of course, readers may not find the answers they are seeking here, but the book will hopefully give them a better idea of where to look.

## Structure of the Book

As a whole, the book adopts a long-term perspective which sets current environmental issues into a wider social and historical context. The text also covers as much of the field of society–environment relations as would reasonably fit an entry-level text, though others will no doubt find that some things have been omitted or not covered in enough detail. The separate chapters are parts of what is really a closely intertwined whole, and at times the relatively discrete parts may raise issues which are not adequately dealt with until a later chapter. This is unavoidable, though I have tried to flag upcoming matters whenever possible and readers are advised to hold onto all their unanswered queries until they are discussed more fully in the relevant chapter. For those with an interest in structure, the book is roughly and invisibly divided into three sections, dealing with the socio-historical and cultural, the economic and political, followed by two chapters which work towards a higher level synthesis of all of these at an increasingly global level. To explore this a little further, the chapter breakdown is as follows.

Chapters 1–3 look at ways in which people gain knowledge about the natural environment. Much knowledge can be gained about the environment from academic books, television documentaries, fiction, film and from personal experience. Quite often, some of this knowledge is contested and we have to reach our own conclusions about it. Is the planet really steadily warming or not, for instance? These chapters raise some significant questions about the way that ideas about nature have changed over time. What is ‘nature’ and how might it be studied? Evidently, scientific knowledge has a privileged place amongst the possible knowledge sources, but even though science has displaced and marginalized many other types of knowledge, it has not entirely eliminated them. One issue that continues to trouble modern societies is the question of where human beings fit into the natural environment. Are they part of nature or do they stand outside? The book brings a typically sociological approach to this question, in that sociology sees human beings as naturally evolved and, at the same time, socially developed. The implications of this view are pursued throughout. Finally, sociological methods of gaining knowledge of environmental issues are introduced. These are presented in a polarized form simply because that is the way they have developed chronologically. However, it should be borne in mind that ways around these disagreements are emerging and some of these are included here. Ways of knowing the environment remain a crucially important matter because we act on the basis of what we know about the environment. If global warming really is happening but we are convinced that it is not, then the consequences could hardly be more serious. However, should we be convinced that global warming is real when it is not, then we may spend enormous amounts of the world’s time, effort and money on trying to prevent it at the expense of other genuinely serious problems.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the transformation of the natural environment by human activities. Again, a long-term view is adopted because we need to have in mind a ‘history of the present’, as it were, if we are to avoid misunderstandings. A brief review of human social development is included before the focus falls on industrialization, urban development and capitalistic production and consumption patterns. The combination of these is shown to have had revolutionary consequences for both human life and the natural environment on which they depend. The incalculable consequences of these transformations are then explored alongside current debates on risk and risk-awareness. Over recent years, people do seem to have become more aware of the risks of living in the modern world. These are not all to do with the environment of course, though many of the more serious and hard-to-tackle hazards have been defined in environmental terms. For example, one central environmental issue is industrial pollution and its effects on the health of human beings and the environment. This section outlines some important questions and introduces some of the ways in which pollution levels might be reduced.

Chapters 6 and 7 take stock of environmental politics, looking at the development of conservation and environmental groups, Green political parties, environmental ideologies and the greening of party political systems. Environmental politics is part of a much wider environmental movement that can be studied alongside other social movements such as feminism, disabled people's movements, peace and anti-nuclear movements and so on. Sociologists have to take social movements seriously because they have been and still are the source of new ideas, activities and values in societies. It is hard to imagine that 'the environment' would be quite such a widely recognized political issue without the relentless campaigning of environmental organizations such as Greenpeace or the commitment of environmental activists and supporters. Nevertheless, it is the case that more than this is required to bring the state of the natural environment into people's conscious awareness. Wider social and economic changes can affect and shape attitudes and beliefs in ways that are more or less conducive to environmentalist arguments and protests, so we have to be sensitive to this. If we are not, then we could run away with the (false) idea that the activities of a few people can change societies at any time of their own choosing. They cannot. Karl Marx once told us that of course 'people make history', people bring about revolutions or prevent them. But they do not do this under conditions they have freely chosen. They are simply born into a particular moment in the stream of historical development. For environmentalists, it took over a century for their ideas to gain widespread currency and be taken seriously.

Chapters 8 and 9 then tackle the thorny issue of how to align economic development with environmental protection through the concept of sustainable development; the global aspects of environmental issues complete the book. The dominant framework of sustainable development is discussed, and some examples of this show why it has become so central to international environmentalism. A notable feature of sustainable development is the way that it has tried to connect environmental problems with social justice and poverty in the developing countries. Although separate matters on the face of it, sustainable development advocates believe that unless global social justice issues are tackled, there is no hope for a sustainable future. This argument is outlined and debated. Global warming is also introduced here as a global environmental issue *par excellence*, and a survey of the science and social debate on the issue attempts to assess its potential significance for the future. Chapter 9 also introduces some constructive solutions to global problems under the name of 'ecological modernization'.

By the end of the book my hope is that readers will understand better some of the distinctively sociological approaches to environmental issues and appreciate why these have to be part of all attempts to grasp and tackle the environmental problems of the future. More than this

however, I hope that those who came along with an interest in the environment go away with an emerging sociological imagination, and those whose sociological interest brought them here leave with a clearer sense of the vital significance of environmental issues for the future of the discipline.