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# What is Environmental Consciousness? A Thematic Cluster

by Sophia Perdikaris



## *About the Author*

*Dr. Perdikaris is an environmental archaeologist with a specialty in animal bones from archaeological sites. She is interested in people–environment interactions through time and the response of both to big climatic events. Her research focus is on exploring how heritage work can inform sustainability questions for the future applying a transdisciplinary approach through a combination of natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the arts in a collaborative research perspective that connects scientists, local communities, and youth and can maximize our understanding and response. Dr. Perdikaris is a Charles A. Happold Professor of Anthropology and Director of the School of Global Integrative Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

# What is Environmental Consciousness?

## A Thematic Cluster

*Sophia Perdikaris*

For its second issue *Ecocene* welcomed cross-disciplinary contributions on what it means to be environmentally conscious in the world today, what it might have meant in diverse social-environmental pasts, or indeed what it may mean in our shared futures. The ambition of the cluster has been to engage with some key reassessments of the ways in which ecologies, identities, communities, temporalities, heritage, spatiality, risks, or agencies have been rethought in recent years, or in new waves of research, scholarship, theory, and criticism in the present era of global environmental change. The ideas for this cluster, as indeed most of the contributions published in this issue, derive from presentations and discussions originally framed for the “Rethinking Environmental Consciousness” symposium organized by the Nordic Network for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies at Mid Sweden University some time back.<sup>1</sup> Contributions were welcomed within subthemes focused on the Anthropocene, Material Ecocriticism/s, and Transnational Environmental Consciousness.

The seven articles in this cluster explore various notions and relations of self, culture, identity, art, and belonging with nature. Perhaps more than ever our awareness of the environment is in a state of flux. Though it has still not seen canonical acceptance within the formal international bodies of geological sciences to which the idea was introduced two decades ago,<sup>2</sup> the fairly recently formulated concept of the Anthropocene not only signals a paradigmatic shift in humanity’s position *vis-à-vis* its environment, but also in its way of thinking about this position. Recent emergence of critical perspectives such as the new materialisms, of which material ecocriticism has become an important strain, has already had substantial impacts on the ways in which relationships between people and environments are conceived. At the same time, the transnational modulation of the exchange of environmental thoughts and ideas has rarely been greater, suggesting that

we are in a period of particular intensity, in which environmental consciousness is changing in ever more complex ways; thus, it seems especially pertinent and promising to reflect on some renewed theorizations of what it means to be environmentally conscious in the world today, as well as in our shared pasts and common futures.

The resulting special cluster includes contributions from scholars and educators working in and across fields in the environmental humanities and social sciences such as environmental art and education, archaeology, ecocriticism, medieval studies, Scandinavian studies, and comparative literature.

The first article, “There is a Great Joy that Comes from the Wild Creatures: Greening Happiness across Cultures and Disciplines” by **Peter Mortensen**, reflects on how the relationship between human happiness and the natural environment has become the object of considerable research, debate and contention. Mortensen addresses how concepts with distinct cultural and disciplinary origins (e.g. E. O. Wilson’s concept of biophilia and the Bhutanese concept of Gross National Happiness) have influenced shifts in contemporary thinking about happiness in a more ecocentered direction. He also discusses a “eudaimonic” (happiness-oriented) reading of the French writer Jean Giono’s novel *Joy of Man’s Desiring* (1935), which contests the dominant happiness ideologies of the twentieth century but resonates strongly with still-emerging twenty-first-century paradigms of understanding. Highlighting the multidisciplinary and transnational nature of the new green discourse on happiness, the article sets out to exemplify how literary and cultural studies may contribute to this project. Focusing on happiness, the author suggests, provides an alternative and potentially productive way to engage with questions of environmental crisis and human-natural relationships more generally.

In “The Dark Pastoral: Material Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene,” ecocritical scholar and theorist **Heather Sullivan** proposes the concept of “dark pastoral” as an alternative ecocritical trope adapted to the “new nature” of climate change, the troublingly catastrophe-centered scenarios so popular in the fossil-fueled era of the Anthropocene, and the ongoing centrality of reverently pastoral impulses in environmentalism. Sullivan’s article explores power and agency in relation to material nature-culture, juxtaposing localized biophilic representations with a more abstract, large-scale attention to the ecological challenges of global climate change, pollution, the plight of refugees, and mass species extinctions.

With its approach to poetry as an embodied practice and its definition of community as place-based, transnationally situated, and shaped by multi-species experience, **Nuno Marques’s** article, “A New Song for Ourselves—Contributions of Gary Snyder’s Poetics of Place to Current Ecopoetics,” reevaluates Gary Snyder’s bioregional project. Exploring

in part bioregionalism's contributions to ecocriticism, the article examines the poetics of Snyder's work, arguing for the key role of poetry as an embodied practice that not only investigates place but plays a potentially crucial role in place creation. Marques's discussion connects recent theorizations and enactments of ecopoetics as both a critical and poetic practice, which can be extended to ecologically oriented forms of community action and activism.

In her article, "Dominion and Stewardship: Unpacking Environmental Consciousness in Some Old English Saints' Lives," medieval scholar **Margaret Tedford** addresses the concept of environmental consciousness in two Old English prose versions of *The Life of St Cuthbert*, alongside an Old English poem *Guthlac A*, and a Latin version of *The Life of St Guthlac*. As evident in these hagiographic works, the article challenges assumptions concerning monolithic beliefs regarding humanity and nature in the early medieval period, situating Tedford's own ecocritical analysis within the context of contemporary Anthropocene discourse and its key focuses. The article argues for a complexity of beliefs regarding man and nature in the period, characterized by a theology both of dominion and of stewardship (implying the duty of care) that plays out both in cosmic (spiritual) ways and in locally situated (physical) ways vis-à-vis environments and social-ecological communities. "Through study of these texts in their own context and on their own terms," the author suggests, "we are able to achieve a more nuanced view of the history of environmental thought and further understand the longevity of some of the ethical questions surrounding environmental approaches today."

In his article, "'A Better-Informed Citizen of North America': Environmental Memory and Frames of Justice in William T. Vollman's Transnational Metafiction," **Parker Krieg** examines works by contemporary U.S. author William Vollmann. Krieg's article focuses on how Vollmann's metafictional narratives effectively dramatize the uses, limits, and possibilities of environmental memory, transnationally reframing narratives of environmental justice in the process. Two novels, *The Ice-Shirt* (1990) and *Imperial* (2009), are discussed for their constructions of environmental memory as challenges to traditional territorializations of the nation-state in an era of uneven anthropogenic change.

Working at the intersection of Scandinavian studies and environmental humanities (while also building on ethics and ecophilosophy as applied to the area of development studies), scholar **Dominic Hinde** approaches the Anthropocene concept as a reflexively constructed articulation of modernity in his article "Narrative Ethics, Media and the Morality of the Ecological Modern: The Case of Sweden." Discussing how environmental knowledge is instrumentalized in self-consciously modern contexts, and drawing on examples from twentieth-century Sweden, as well as their connection with different eco-

modernities, Hinde’s article argues that many of the necessary components for the greening of contemporary society are already in place but are underutilized by environmentalists. Among other thought-provoking questions, the article considers whether a sustainable anthropomodernity can be achieved that comes to terms with the complexity of contemporary global society.

Finally, in “The Sea Will Rise, Barbuda Will Survive: Environment and Time Consciousness,” Sophia Perdikaris and Katie Rose Hejtmanek explore concepts of climate change from a local and a global perspective, as explored through the use of art as a medium. Barbudan perspectives on and responses to climate change can be seen to contrast directly with the vast majority of climate change science and even best-selling narratives. The article attempts to unpack how these distinct perspectives could be so different—one of a “point of no return” and another of “small things [that] will allow us to survive.” Perdikaris and Hejtmanek argue that environmental consciousness inevitably involves a fundamental relationship to time and that time consciousness profoundly affects environmental consciousness.

By revisiting the notion of environmental consciousness in a time of accelerated social-ecological change and vulnerability, this rather diverse cluster of contributions in the second issue of *Ecocene*, it is hoped, may serve to open up some fruitful lines of inquiry and dialogue worth addressing in subsequent clusters and independent contributions to the journal. Interdisciplinary engagement in environmental humanities, arts, and social sciences disciplines, traversing cognate and complementary fields of study, is a key plank in the journal’s mission to address many of the most pressing challenges of the new age stretching out before us.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For their efforts organizing the symposium and their original framing of the theme (in ways that may even leave residual traces in these introductory comments), grateful acknowledgment is here given to Steven Hartman, Christian Hummelsund Voie, Anders Olsson, Mae Kilker, Reinhard Hennig, Michaela Castellano, and Nuno Marques.

<sup>2</sup> Such as the International Union of Geological Sciences or International Commission on Stratigraphy.