
**Special Issue Introduction: Ecocosmologies and 'Western'
Epistemologies: Contestation, Conflict, and Collaboration**

This special issue of the *JSRNC* revisits some related themes that have been explored previously (for instance in issues 2.1, 2.3, 6.4, 7.2, and 10.2), but from a somewhat different angle. The theme, 'eco-cosmology', refers to what the theorist Daniel Dubuisson (2002) referred to as 'cosmographic formations', relating large-scale visions of the cosmos and humans' place within it to ecological systems.

As readers of this journal know well, there is a significant and growing literature either blaming religious ideation for environmental degradation or extolling its environmentally salutary promise. Recent literature reviews that have appeared here in the *JSRNC* (Taylor 2016; Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016) and elsewhere (Johnston and Taylor 2016; Taylor and Johnston 2016) concluded that, on balance, the most important and positive trends related to religiously motivated environmental care are occurring not within the mainstreams of the so-called world religions, but rather on their margins or among the world's remaining traditional or indigenous cultures and their practices. This special issue explores some of these instances in which traditional or indigenous cultural movements are effecting positive change, in most cases by either contesting or complicating resource management regimes grounded in 'Western' epistemologies. Of course, the claim that there are 'Western' epistemologies, on the one hand, and traditional or indigenous ones on the other, and that they are somehow qualitatively different, implies a sort of essentialism that is ultimately problematic if not demonstrably false. Furthermore, not all 'ecocosmologies' perceive ecological systems as beneficent or positive. Robin Wright (2014, 2015), for instance, has noted that for the jaguar shamans of the Northwest Amazon and the communities in which they dwell, 'nature' is powerful and terrifying, not a safe space for enjoyable interactions with the other-than-human world. Here, however, acknowledging those complexities, the contributors to this special issue point toward ways in which such non-mainstream epistemologies are contributing to environmental protection

and helping to forge new alliances between conservationists and other impacted communities.

In the first article, C. Anne Claus explores the 'social lives' of Okinawan corals as commodities that simultaneously promote conservation and also democratize scientific understandings. The destruction of reef structures southwest of Japan has become an ecological problem. Recently, however, amateur ecologists have turned this environmental issue into an incentive for restoring corals to the area. 'Consumers' of these commodities purchase small pieces of coral as a way to memorialize loved ones, special life events, or to facilitate communication with supernatural agents. The corals are then affixed to denuded reefs by amateur ecologists. Those who purchase the corals connect them in complex ways to existing religious ideation and practice. In addition, the amateur ecologists who sell these commodities indicate that their reasons for doing so are not purely scientific, but have deeper, culturally specific spiritual meaning. This opening article, then, explores the intersections between traditional religious practices, the commodification of conservation, and the challenges these connections pose to traditional sources of authority (whether religious or scientific).

Second, Kyle Boggs examines as a case study the construction of a large ski resort in the San Francisco Peaks on land that is sacred to at least thirteen tribal groups who maintain residence in the area. For Boggs, spaces of outdoor recreation and the rhetorical contestations that are implicated in their construction privilege those who already enjoy social access and power, thus perpetuating the inequities characteristic of settler colonialism. While the tribal groups couch protestations to the resort primarily in terms of their traditional spiritual practice and history, pro-development groups assure the public that their interest is in equal rights for all peoples, not sites where the few can enjoy such amenities to the exclusion of others. Setting up the conversation in this way, and holding values related to recreation and inclusion to be sacrosanct over traditional ones, is itself an exercise in rhetorical exclusion that blunts the legal tools of tribes whose defense of these spaces depends on making the case that their traditional spiritual values should override the scientific case that no significant environmental damage will result from construction.

Elizabeth Allison's case study of the nation of Bhutan likewise investigates divergences between traditional spiritual practices and commitments and scientific environmental management regimes. Allison notes that although they arise from different 'ontologies', in this case traditional religious practices that typically combine animism, Bön, and Vajrayana Buddhist perceptions and practices, these management

regimes reinforce and provide justification for governmental documents and policies. For Allison, as indicated by Bhutan's retention of significant forest cover, this interconnection between religious practices and official government policies has yielded effective conservation results in the relatively insular mountain nation.

Pablo Dominguez offers an ethnography of the intersection of traditional land management practices of the Berber Mesioia tribe of the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains and the large scale socio-political forces that seek to erode them. Specifically, Dominguez focuses on the *agdals*, a system of agro-sylvo-pastoral management that has been strongly impacted by globalization, emergent state structures, tourism, and mass media, as well as Islamic influences. As these forces chip away at local religious practices and commitments, they also compromise the traditional *agdal* system and local biodiversity.

Finally, Asebe Regassa Debelo offers an ethnographic examination of the competing epistemologies in the Nech Sar National Park in southern Ethiopia between government discourses and local cosmologies. Debelo notes that, through time, the agro-pastoral Guji Oromo people have both rejected and learned how to appropriate pragmatically the conservationist discourses put forth by government authorities in order to counteract official discourses of parks vs. people that initially led to the eviction of local communities from the Park. Local Guji contested resettlement programs, arguing that traditional herding did not in fact impact park wildlife negatively, as had been argued by some government programs that favored the eviction of local groups from the Park as late as 2004. For Debelo, sacred ecologies and conservationist discourses, such as those examined in this case study, are not isolated knowledge systems but rather influence one another. As shown here, contestation and conflict can make way to collaboration and conservation.

The special issue concludes with a number of book reviews exploring a variety of themes of interest to our readers. As a whole, the issue does not provide easy, simplistic understandings of the relationships between religious practices, natural systems, and globalizing economic and political factors. Rather, in different ways, the articles complicate these relationships. In some cases, economic incentives can promote conservation, while in other contexts the impingement of globalizing economic forces contributes to the erosion of ecological resilience. Sometimes local religious values rely on respectful relationships between humans and the other-than-human creatures with whom they co-exist, and in others global religions can work against protection. Scientific epistemologies may conflict with religiously grounded understandings, or may work in concert with them.

Our task, as scholars who investigate the nexus of such issues, is to highlight such ambivalences, not to offer sanguine celebrations of religions as tools for conservation. This special issue makes a contribution to this difficult work. Indeed, herein there are trends that should be cause for concern as well as developments that should be encouraged.

Importantly, the editors are grateful for your continued support of our mission and of the high quality of research that we are able to provide, now in our eleventh year of production. As always, we invite you to lend your own voice to this ongoing and valuable work.

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