

## WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENT?

### A Report of a Seminar Undertaken as part of ESRC Social Science Week under the auspices of the ESRC New Opportunities Programme Environment and Human Behaviour

By Paul Ekins  
Programme Academic Co-ordinator

---

Note: The Seminar took place on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, at the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), London. The Seminar consisted of seven presentations from projects in the programme addressing the question in the Seminar title, *What is the Environment?*, from the perspective of the project. The Seminar Programme is attached as Annex 1.

#### 1. Introduction

It seems very likely that the way people behave towards the environment will be very much influenced by *what* they perceive it to be. For example, do they perceive themselves to be part of the environment or separate from it? Is the environment fragile or robust? Is it benign (perhaps a source of sustenance to be nurtured) or threatening (a potentially hostile force to be mastered)? Does the word conjure up global or local images?

These perceptions are bound to have an important influence, not just on how people behave towards the environment when not thinking explicitly about it, but also on how they understand and interpret scientific views and descriptions of the environment. Such understanding and interpretation is clearly important when science is suggesting that environmental conservation may be important for human welfare. In what terms should science seek to couch such suggestions? Are there other words, images or discourses, apart from invoking 'the environment', which may be more effective?

These were the kinds to questions that the workshop was convened to discuss, not just from the different perspectives of the projects, but as perceptions from different communities, from different contexts and from different applications.

#### 2. Perceptions from Different Communities

##### *The Indian Middle Classes*

The Indian middle classes range from 50-300 million people, depending on definitions. Their impact on India's (and indeed the global) environment is important and potentially increasingly so, both because of their relatively high consumption levels in relation to their own society, and because of their influence in the professions, in policy making circles, and on the way India develops generally.

The environmental attitudes of the Indian middle classes have been widely criticised (e.g. Varma: materialistic, swept into global consumption, Bollywood films; Gadgil &

Guha: externalise environmental costs onto the poor, unconcerned by environmental degradation). While there may be some justification in these criticisms, it also needs to be recognised that the Indian middle classes are among the most diverse and polymorphous in the world, with highly globalised networks. This may intensify their consumption orientation, but there are also significant differences, and some are also aware of and sensitive counter-currents against it.

The dynamism of the Indian middle classes means that there is both a diversity, and hybridity, in their conceptions of such words as 'nature' and 'environment', and in their discourses on the relation between these concepts and other social elements. Environmental beliefs and values are also in a state of flux. Recognisable elements in this flux are:

- A sense of people 'barricading' themselves against objectively worsening environmental conditions (for example, air quality, through filtered air conditioners and cars; or water shortages, through personal tube wells)
- A growth of information sources about environmental conditions (for example, Earth Matters!, eco-clubs), although much of the material about the environment is published in English, with little in Hindi or other languages.
- Enormous growth of travel and tourism, with its associated experiences and images of Indian and foreign environments
- An Indian environmental movement that interacts closely with elements of the middle class, with issues and concerns including the impacts on the poor of middle class environmental responses, the perceived greening of the Hindu Right ('saffron seeping into green'), a keen ethnographic interest and broad scope of theorising.

In this context such radical middle class activists as Arundhati Roy and Medha Patkar are sometimes perceived as 'class traitors', but there is also a keen sense of the Western hypocrisy implicit in some of the foreign support they receive for their campaigns (i.e. people who lead environmentally destructive, high-consumption lifestyles themselves trying to prevent others from doing the same).

In efforts to research this area two main approaches could be identified: large-scale surveys of environmental attitudes in general (such as that undertaken by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) or more in depth studies of different issues, such as the education system, national parks or the interface between religious and scientific ideas (for example, Hindu and Western medical concepts of the body). There were also interesting parallels to be drawn between Indian society and other countries, which contests the optimistic notion of environmental exploitation and heavy pollution being a natural part of the 'stages of development'. For example, one explanation of the difference in the response of 21<sup>st</sup> century Mumbai to public health issues, compared to 19<sup>th</sup> century Manchester, is the availability of anti-biotics, giving the middle-classes the ability to treat infectious diseases rather than tackling them at source. A comparison is useful, mainly to demonstrate why Mumbai will not simply follow Manchester's pattern of urban development (including, in this context, environmental and public health legislation).

*The Environment and Saharan Peoples*

There have been great changes over the last 30-40 years in the perceptions of 'the environment' by the Tuareg people of the Sahara. A continuing concern to secure their terrain, in terms of pasture and water, has recently been added a new imperative: the conservation of their cultural heritage.

For the Tuareg the features of the landscape reflect the social order (for example, there are male and female mountains). In fact, 'the environment' is perceived to be a map of the social order on which generations of Tuareg people have left their mark. Their territory is probably the greatest of museum of rock art in the world.

It consequently has huge potential for mass tourism, which started in the 1960s, built up to the 1980s and began to cause enormous damage to cultural sites, damage which the Tuareg people regarded as potential environmental catastrophe. One response was their organisation locally of 'alternative tourism'. The troubles in Algeria in the 1990s effectively shut down the Sahara, but it began to reopen in 1999 and many of the same problems began to recur, often through irresponsible charter expeditions of 'independent travellers'. The Tuareg have mobilised in response, partly politically, exerting pressure on the Algerian, and partly through direct action that has included the kidnapping of tourists perceived to be behaving irresponsibly. The current situation is very fluid and potentially dangerous.

Research in this area from the Tuareg's point of view needs to generate insights about the very immediate practical issue of what tourism is compatible with the Tuareg's conception of the 'environment' and how can such tourism be organised and other forms of tourism prevented. No doubt others will argue for an approach to tourism that takes Tuareg sensitivities less into account but which is, perhaps, more profitable, at least in the short term. How perceptions of 'the environment' evolve, both among the Tuareg in the wider society of which they are a part (only about 10% of those living in Tuareg territory are actually Tuaregs, the other 90% are incomers, often refugees from the troubles in the North) will to a large extent determine the whole future of Tuareg culture.

### *The Environment and Low-Income Communities*

There is, of course, a difference between 'global' and 'local' environmental issues. In low-income communities (LICs) previous research has suggested that more attention is paid to local issues. This is hardly surprising as there is also evidence to show that the state of the environment is worse in LICs than elsewhere, and they contain fewer environmentally relevant assets (e.g. they suffer disproportionately from poorly insulated housing, which exacerbates fuel poverty).

Although this project has found concern about global environmental issues in LICs, the ability of people living there to respond is constrained by poverty (e.g. high price of organic food) and infrastructure (e.g. inadequate public transport may encourage car use). Yet it is clear that environmental neglect breeds further neglect and further degeneration in a community. In fact, the project is finding that people in LICs are active on local environmental issues (e.g. through such initiatives as the Shell Better Britain Campaign), and perceive themselves as 'fighting back' against environmental neglect. The project is exploring further the possible inconsistency of this finding with evidence that environmental activism tends to be concentrated in higher social groups.

The project is also investigating the possibility that environmental activism, and the environmental improvement that it can bring, can affect human behaviour in the improved areas and act as a stimulus for further regeneration. If degraded environments engender a vicious circle that results in more degradation, the reverse might also be true: that environmental improvements engender a virtuous circle of further improvement. It is at least possible that environmental improvement at the local level could be a key driver in moves towards a more sustainable future.

### **3. Perceptions from Different Contexts**

#### *The Environment and Small Businesses*

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) comprise a significant portion of the economy, and are responsible for their share of depletion and pollution. The rhetoric of 'ecological modernisation' (EM) suggests that there can be significant market benefits for firms, which are environmentally proactive, reducing their resource use and their waste costs, and improving their customer appeal. At the limit environmental protection is sometimes presented as a precondition for firms' further economic advance.

Initial results from this project are suggesting that the EM discourse is neither recognised by nor having an impact on SMEs. Few believe that environmental initiatives will save money or generate other economic benefits, but few also feel under pressure from the market to deliver these benefits. Where government policy on the environment is noticed, it is perceived as having an emphasis on voluntarism (which competitive pressures render unrealistic), as oriented towards larger companies, and as formulated without reference to or consultation with smaller businesses.

In fact, environmental policy was generally perceived as ineffectual and at best irrelevant to, and at worst a constraint on, SME business practice. This raises the possibility that it would be more effective to acknowledge that the internalisation of environmental costs would inevitably cause some economic pain (very different from the EM emphasis on win-win outcomes) but that the benefits deriving from environmental protection could be worth the cost for society as a whole.

#### *The Environment and the Home*

There is a growing global convergence around the idea that indoor thermal comfort is a fixed condition. In both homes and offices this means providing and maintaining a year-round constant temperature of about 21°C. The attempted delivery of these standard indoor temperatures is increasing the environmental impacts associated with energy use.

A number of policy approaches have been suggested in response, including seeking to influence or change the behaviour of individuals, trying to understand human behaviour and adaptation in its social context, and, more radically, acknowledging the extent to which the concept of thermal comfort is a cultural and historical construct.

The ‘comfort makers’ who either tacitly accept or promote the idea of thermal comfort as a fixed state of affairs include architects, appliance manufacturers, utilities, policy makers and consumers. Yet other ways of defining and achieving comfort, relying on a diversity of responses and practices (including traditional forms of construction and such institutions as the siesta), have a long history, even though in many places they are now in decline.

The project is encouraging debate about the meaning and future of comfort, and is exploring the possibility of constructing less resource intensive strategies including the maintenance of cultural diversity, as opposed to standardised provision. In particular, the project focuses on the issue of how to counter the growth of unsustainable expectations or patterns of consumption, especially in the context of global climate change.

#### **4. Perceptions from Different Applications**

##### *What is Environmental Appraisal Appraising?*

There has been considerable development in recent years in the field of environmental appraisal. Project-level Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is being applied to an ever wider range of situations, while the focus of attention has been extended with the increasing use of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal. The trend is towards systems of appraisal in which consideration of environmental effects is combined with coverage of other ‘capitals’, or pillars of sustainability, namely the social and economic. An important area of interest for this project on Appraisal, Institutional Learning and Sustainability is the implications that these developments have for levels of environmental protection.

Whilst it is possible to regard sustainability appraisal as a means to highlight synergies between environmental, social and economic goals, and focus the minds of policy-makers on the achievement of important objectives through ‘win-win’ solutions, a concern has been expressed that re-defining appraisal in this way risks compromising environmental protection in the face of competing priorities.

In the presentation, this dilemma was explored through a case study of the application of the government’s New Approach to Appraisal in transport planning. Under this approach, appraisal is carried out over a wide range of criteria, including environmental impacts of different kinds, safety, economy, accessibility, integration with other policy goals, and distributional effects. For certain kinds of environmental impact, appraisal incorporates an interesting mix of community perception and professional judgement. There is then the crucial issue of how to combine assessment of economic, social and environmental issues. The danger that judgements concerning environmental impact can be diluted by the presence of more favourable assessments of economic and social impact was illustrated by highlighting the ambiguities present in official guidance documents. However, drawing from the case of the *Access to Hastings* multi-modal transport study (and from the discussant’s experience of sustainability appraisal of Fijian tourism development) the advantage of sustainability appraisal, that it enables taken-for-granted assumptions about economic benefits to be seriously scrutinised through ‘objectives-led’ analysis, was emphasised. It was agreed that there is a good case for further empirical research exploring the degree to which

sustainability appraisal leads to the compromise or promotion of environmental objectives.

### *The Environment and Learning*

Three types of learning about (and thereby changing behaviour relating to) the environment have been put forward. The first seeks to disseminate scientific understanding about environmental issues, on the basis of which rational and welfare-increasing actions can be carried. The second is similarly rooted in understanding, but with more of a recognition of the social processes through which such understanding is generated and the response actions are deliberated and decided on. The third type is different in that it relates to situations characterised by radical uncertainty that is not amenable to resolution through scientific learning. In this case learning consists of finding ways to cope with uncertainty and be prepared for surprises.

Formulating responses to environmental problems faces a range of obstacles: there are strong incentives that militate against changing current norms, habits, modes of operation and patterns of behaviour and there is significant uncertainty about the environmental implications of not changing such characteristics of daily life. The issue is not one of how to engender commitment to a particular social outcome, but rather how to handle a permanent transition to an uncertain future, and how to configure that transition so that the future turns out to be manageable.

The project is exploring how the metaphor of 'natural capital' might be relevant to learning in relation to the environment. One possibility, in relation to the third type of learning above, is that it can encourage people to think about the options which such capital makes available (whether or not they are considered valuable now), which may be useful in terms of enhancing the range of possible responses to environmental surprises. Such thought may help to consider possible futures in more defined terms, and to appreciate the relative values of different combinations of options. In the process, of course, the value ascribed to different options may change.

The conceptualisation of natural capital as a generator of options for the future, in an uncertain and potentially threatening world, is different to focusing on it as a generator of goods and services predominantly in the present. But it is a conceptualisation that is clearly related to the idea of sustainability and may provide a different way of learning, and, in due course, being educated about the environment.

## **5. Summary and Conclusions**

The perceptions of the environment explored at this workshop were almost exclusively anthropocentric. The environment produces benefits for people. Where these benefits are obvious, the environment is perceived as valuable. However, it is valued for different things by different people. And where either its benefits are not obvious, or it seems that they are less than the benefits that may be derived from environmental destruction (or where the benefits accrue to relatively powerful people while the costs fall on the less powerful), then the environment may be sacrificed for those other benefits.

The workshop explored perceptions of the environment and environmental policy from the many viewpoints of individuals, for example as members of social classes, business communities or consumers. But actions that influence and respond to the environment can also be undertaken by organisations. In this way the capacity for organisations 'perceive' the environment also becomes critical. Organisational perception is constrained by management structure and institutional rules and culture. When dealing with multi-scalar and cross-sectoral development concerns, like those associated with environmental change, the way in which information is identified, sorted and prioritised inside organisations and the scope for organisational learning, innovation and adaptation will be as likely to influence environmental sustainability as it does administrative efficiency or economic development.

Some fundamentally different views of the environment-economy relation emerged in the workshop:

- For much of the Indian middle classes, the environment is perceived as either irrelevant to, or in conflict with, their desire for economic development. Natural resources are to be used to support industrialisation, and the relatively affluent can insulate themselves against any negative environmental impacts, which this may bring about.
- For the Tuareg in Africa, the environment, conceived as their cultural heritage, is their principal asset for the future. It is therefore to be safeguarded and those who degrade or seek to remove aspects of it are to be resisted.
- For UK low-income communities, the environment can be a gateway to and driver for wider regeneration. Through the motivating effects of positive environmental action, and the better image of localities, which this action creates, environment can serve as a key factor of local improvement.
- For Fiji, the environment is a source of value through tourism, but different kinds of tourism generate different kinds of benefits to different sectors of society on different timescales – and with different effects on the environment.
- For SMEs the environment is largely perceived as a nuisance, an extra and unwelcome consideration and potential source of costs. Ecological modernisation may be a convenient rhetorical device through which to project the integration of economic and environmental issues, but it has no purchase at the level of the individual basis and certainly does not have the resonance, or provide the incentives, to bring about voluntary environmental improvements.
- A very strong perception of the home is as the place to be comfortable. The environmental impacts associated with generating this comfort are either not obvious or are relatively easily ignored. It is clearly important to understand how standards and norms of comfort are derived and adopted.

'The environment', then, has multiple meanings arising from very different situations and perceptions. Common to all of them, however, is that the environment can be a locus of conflict concerning which decisions (not necessarily explicitly about the environment) give rise to winners and losers and raise issues of fairness/unfairness and justice/injustice. Environmental appraisal is a placing of placing information of

various kinds in a framework so that judgements about the various issues can be made.

That is not to say that the win-win outcomes emphasised by ecological modernisation discourse, and by some other approaches to sustainable development, can never arise. They can, and do, but perhaps as often through changes in values as through increasing efficiency. Where such changes increase the values associated with the environment, then cost-benefit judgements (explicit or implicit) can be radically revised. Such changes are only likely to come about through learning. In fact the whole development of environmental concern, at an individual and social level, is the result of learning. An important purpose of this learning is to motivate and enable people and societies to retain the options that will be needed to respond the inevitable environmental surprises that lie ahead.

PAUL EKINS  
Programme Academic Co-ordinator