

The theoretical and  
conceptual readings  
explain political  
ecology, the tensions  
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Political Ecology POLITICAL ECOLOGY The term political ecology came about in the 1970s in an attempt to conceptualize relationships between ecology and the political economy, especially in light of the expanding environmental movement. Political ecology attempts to link physical and social sciences in order to address environmental problems, conflicts, and changes by applying issues of resource control and access and social relations of production to appreciate environmental degradation and development, while also developing environmentally sustainable alternatives and developing environmental conservation and rehabilitation models (Paulson et al, 2005). Specifically, political ecology refers to the social power relations and the functioning and formation of landscapes and ecologies. More generally, political ecology may also refer to the exploration of manifold biological and historical articulations, as well as how these articulations are established through cultural mediation. Political ecology practice and theory are also led and shaped by social justice issues and concerns about marginal social groups, which has been the result of intersecting efforts in academia to identify links between the environment and culture (Paulson et al, 2005). Theoretical developments in political ecology since its emergence in the 70s have changed with evolutionary biology being increasingly applied, while Marxist concepts have also influenced its current nature.

Significant tensions have arisen between conservation efforts and sustainability, particularly where the needs of local communities are concerned. Smith and Wishnie (2000) note that there has been a move towards the perspective that small-scale community are creators and conservers of biodiversity.

However, there is also another argument that human communities always tend to modify their environment in order to achieve short-term gains, while compromising biodiversity conservation and environmental stability. Indeed, one of the greatest causes of tension is that the conservation concept is controversial. As a result, conservation and sustainability have been at cross-purposes where the conservation practice or action, while mitigating or preventing environmental damage and resource overharvesting, is not designed for this purpose. Voluntary conservation has been evidenced to be rare because conditions under which it occurs adaptively are stringent with the presence of collective action, information feedback, economic demand, and temporal discounting. Moreover, Kosek (2006) notes that this tension arises when man treats nature as a dense terrain of political struggle where histories, meanings, and differences are made and reproduced, rather than treating the environment as environmentally inert objects over which human struggle takes place.

Pena (1998), in discussing the importance of place and space to New Mexicans, notes that sacred places for New Mexicans in the cultural-ecological renewal struggle should be viewed from perspective of broader political-economic and historical context. The sense of place, also called the spirit of place, for New Mexicans significant as it emerges from the understanding of the local culture about the eco-systemic conditions. These sacred places are important for ritual healing and ceremonies, rites of passage, contemplation, and as a cornerstone for cultural renewal.

Attachment to place is also important for New Mexicans, where Rodriguez (2007) states that attachment to hydrological and geographical territory

occupied by the New Mexican community is enacted or expressed via religious procession. Indeed, one generation for New Mexicans is instructed by preceding generations about their identity and the manner in which they should comport themselves in their place. The importance of place making for New Mexicans is seen in its ability to make history, construction of social traditions, and the construction of social, personal, and process identities (Rodriguez, 2007).

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