



Environmental Justice CSU Justice Roundtable Series

EJCSU Roundtable Brief #7

“Just Biodiversity: Who will speak for the environment?”

Event Date: 5/4/2016

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This brief is based on the Environmental Justice Roundtable Series hosted by the Environmental Justice Working Group (formerly EJCSU), which is supported by CSU’s School of Global Environmental Sustainability’s (SoGES) as one of its Global Challenges Research Teams (GCRT). The series began on February 12, 2015. For more information about EJCSU, please visit their website at: (<http://environmentaljustice.colostate.edu/>)

This document is part of a series of roundtable briefs highlighting how environmental justice is conceptualized, discussed, researched, and put into practice locally, regionally, and globally. The purpose of these briefs is to highlight the variety of contexts within which environmental equity and justice (EEJ) frameworks are imperative. In particular, the goal is to emphasize the transdisciplinary nature of EEJ, highlighting common themes and differences of interpretation and application that emerge in the EJ community at Colorado State University and among additional colleagues in our network. This particular roundtable brief is focused on issues of EEJ in biodiversity research and policy.

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JUST BIODIVERSITY

Who will speak for the environment?

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



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This Biodiversity Justice Roundtable is hosted by Environmental Justice CSU. Future roundtables will explore equity and justice across a range of issue areas including the climate, energy, and biodiversity and ecosystems. These informal roundtables are intended to facilitate the formation of transdisciplinary teams that can produce innovative research and teaching on environmental equity and justice. Refreshments served.

Wednesday
MAY 4

3-5pm Join EJCSU in an end-of-year celebration following this event at Avogadro's Number, 605 S. Mason St.

CSU Library Event Hall

sustainability.colostate.edu/events/biodiversity-justice

Hosted by Environmental Justice CSU,
a School of Global Environmental Sustainability
Global Challenges Research Team



SCHOOL OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY
Colorado State University

Executive Summary

“Just Biodiversity: Who will speak for the environment?” was the final roundtable discussion in the series hosted by Environmental Justice CSU. The roundtable featured 3 panelists, including: Dr. Melinda Laituri (Ecosystem Science and Sustainability, CSU and director of the CSU Geospatial Center), Dr. Julia Klein (Ecosystem Science and Sustainability, CSU and lead PI for the Mountain Sentinels Collaborative Network), and Dr. Robin Reid (Ecosystem Science and Sustainability CSU and Director of the Center for Collaborative Conservation).

Melinda laid the foundation of the roundtable discussion by addressing important questions about environmental and ecological justice, defining biodiversity, and discussing the relationship between the concepts. She asserted we must more critically reevaluate the way we frame discussions of biodiversity, in which the importance of place and nuances that form society-nature relations are assessed. A common theme across the panelists’ work was understanding and incorporating traditional ecological knowledge, as all panelists work with different indigenous and pastoral communities around the world.

The conversation then turned to environmental justice and biodiversity by focusing on the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. Robin and several attendees identified issues with the dominant approach to biodiversity, which often treats humans and nature as separate. This approach values nature by its ability to provide services to humans. Robin asserted that instead of viewing humans and nature as separate, we need to focus on the ways the two are connected and mutually dependent. This way of thinking is more inherent in indigenous and pastoral approaches. However, a participant pointed out that it is important that we do not over romanticize this approach. The group also discussed the influential role that economics can play in decision-making and how that can create tensions in environmental and ecological justice issues.

Throughout the open discussion, questions were raised about the connections between academics and the public, and how to create lasting change. Tara Shelley asks *“How do we empower our young people? How do we empower our local communities to do more? To listen? The environment doesn't always need someone to speak for it because it's already telling us it's in distress we're just not listening.”*

Final topics addressed in the roundtable event included the extent to which basic needs can influence: (1) an individual’s ability to voice environmental justice (EJ) concerns and (2) the type of concerns that are voiced. Participants drew on examples of water contamination in Flint, Michigan, water access and water quality issues on the U.S.-Mexico border, and the agricultural industry where undocumented immigrants serve as laborers with little recourse for justice issues in the context of their work.

Event and Panelist Introduction

The roundtable event took place on May 4, 2016, in the Morgan Library Event Hall. Program Coordinator, Stacia Ryder introduced EJCSU, emphasizing that the work done by EJCSU aligns with the mission of SoGES. EJCSU holds that the path towards environmental sustainability includes environmental justice and equity concerns in the six areas focal areas of SoGES. These focal areas include climate change and energy, food security, environmental institutions and governance,

sustainable communities, land and water resources and biodiversity conservation and management. Stacia emphasized that EJCSU is concerned with teaching, research, and outreach strategies related to health and labor, and the political economy. Prior to beginning the roundtable Stacia introduced the principal investigators of EJCSU to the group, including: Stephanie Malin, Dimitris Stevis, Melinda Laituri and Tara Shelley. After the introductions, the roundtable panelists spoke about issues of just biodiversity in the context of their work. The panelists included Drs. Robin Reid (Ecosystem Science and Sustainability CSU and Director of the Center for Collaborative Conservation), Julia Klein (Ecosystem Science and Sustainability, CSU and lead PI for the Mountain Sentinels Collaborative Network) and Melinda Laituri (Ecosystem Science and Sustainability, CSU and director of the CSU Geospatial Center). Each participant helped led the roundtable through discussions on the relationship between environmental justice and biodiversity.

Melinda Laituri—Ecosystem Science and Sustainability

Melinda, a professor in Ecosystem Science and Sustainability and director of the CSU Geospatial Centroid, began the roundtable discussion by asking questions related to how we define environmental justice and ecological justice. In doing so, Melinda illustrated to the audience that there are different types of justice and the way we define and talk about justice will shape other considerations. She contended that with numerous ways to think about EJ, some important characteristics should be considered:

“There are some characteristics about EJ that we should consider just from the get go as sort of a basis and we can argue about those if you want. I think the first one is that the earth is sacred. It's that we consider the earth as an organism going back to principles of Gaia and thinking about that we actually create rights for different types of entities. We had to fight for rights for minorities, we had to fight for rights for women, for children, for animals, and should we set a context to fight for legitimizing the rights for the environment, for the ecology. Maybe we've done this a little bit with respect to some of the laws we've passed, such as the Clean Water Act, and others... international agreements that are in place, but I just want us to think about that.

So first, that the earth is sacred, the second is that the earth is complex. It's fragile. It's a finite system. And that humans are a part of this system. That they're a part of it, not separate and distinct; they are a part. And if we think about looking at this through a historical lens, we can see how the outcomes of the 20th century and looking at the beginnings of the 21st century have largely favored the peoples of the global North and most of the damage has been felt by the people in the global South. That's a huge generalization I recognize there are different pockets in the north and south with respects to this, but a generalization anyways. So, what is biodiversity and what are the relations of biodiversity to EJ? I would consider couching our discussion within the context of ways of knowing whose environment or ecology are we talking about? Biodiversity, I think, claims a scientific bird's eye view, but biodiversity is a cultural

construct. I think that biodiversity must be addressed within the cultural context and examined within the larger politics of sustainability. So if biodiversity, if we agree biodiversity is a product of cultural landscapes, then we can see that are these reified environments that are products of the people who have lived on them. Indigenous cultures who throughout time have molded places and become a part of them, and conservation management has only recently reintroduced people back into the landscapes from which they were removed.”

Using her research with indigenous cultures as an example, Melinda explained how indigenous cultures can play a role in resource management and that they should have a voice in global discussions about biodiversity and environmental justice. Melinda continued:

“So the question is, what do people and environments need? Possibly a rights-based approach to biodiversity and other environmental parameters. We have a long history of providing rights to inanimate objects, the church, the state, corporations, municipalities, so again why not the environment? Why not the ecology? And so we might consider justice as recognition, maybe it’s biocultural diversity we should be talking about. Cultural and biological diversity as mutually supportive within a socioecological justice framework.”

Melinda concluded by explaining how global policies have situated discussions of biodiversity within the context of conservation, economic growth, and social justice – and highlighting how these discussions are not critical of the neoliberal economic framework that underlies them. Melinda asserted that there needs to be a critical reevaluation of the way we frame discussions of biodiversity, where the importance of place and the various nuances that form society-nature relations are assessed. More specifically, a reevaluation where *“we examine ecological contributions to society that are inherent and not externalities, consider the role of the indigenous people, and really think about what we mean by cultural biodiversity, justice that can be reconciled with environmental sustainability.”*

To see more about Melinda’s work visit her webpage [here](#).

Julia Klein—Ecosystem Science and Sustainability

Julia is a Professor in the Department of Ecosystem Science and Sustainability at Colorado State University and a lead Principal Investigator for the SENTINALS collaborative network. Julia’s work focuses on ecosystem science and sustainability on the Tibetan plateau. Julia explained that Tibetan plateau ecological research and concerns with ecological justice are influenced by the fact that basic human rights need to be recognized in many contexts, including cultural occupation or oppression. It is difficult to discuss environmental justice and ecological justice within a context where basic human rights are not protected. She illustrated this by discussing the difficulties of communicating her science with community members and the need for secrecy.

Julia highlighted how her work and environmental justice can also be viewed through a political ecology lens. She discussed the dynamics of decision making power on the Tibetan plateau and the distribution of benefits from those decisions. She explained:

“So one thing we are looking at in Tibet was how people respond to disasters, in this case these big snow storm events. And seeing how sort of the policies that were being implemented there were really not allowing local people to respond to snow storms as they had in the past.”

Julia also works with a transdisciplinary global network of 56 sites around the world where stakeholders and scientists come together to address sustainability in mountain regions. She explained that while people in these areas are removed from centers of decision-making, they can still provide important services and resources to various groups across the world. Because of this, Julia and her colleagues promote transdisciplinary approaches to the study of EJ as a way to bring local people and their expertise into the discussion and facilitate partnerships. Julia presented this as a way to address issues of power and justice within EJ.

Finally, Julie discussed the various ways that biodiversity and ecological sciences are framed and understood within her field of study. She explained that the notion of intrinsic value in biodiversity has been replaced by the concept of “ecosystem services”. The ecosystem service approach assesses ecosystems and biodiversity by the services it provides to humans. She argued that this approach is main stream and anthropocentric, and that it has shifted our understanding of biodiversity away from one where there is intrinsic value in conservation and towards conservation based on human benefits. While this trend has been seen in ecosystem science, Julia noted that there have been efforts to connect sustainability science and ecological justice, such as incorporating local knowledge into traditional or western science. Referencing Melinda’s comments, Julia noted that:

“And these ideas that you mentioned, that earth is sacred, a lot of traditional cultures really do have more values that are in line with that ecological justice, in the sense that non-sentient beings are also highly valuable.”

Julia concluded her presentation by discussing the link between human and ecological justice that can change the dialogue. Using climate change as an example, Julia explained:

“So we talk about the unequal distribution of harm, or vulnerability to climate change. So people who are impacted by climate change aren’t the ones who are causing it, and its sort of in a similar vein that plants and animals are experiencing climate change, a really large disturbance, they also didn’t cause...There might be some interesting links between human social justice and ecological justice due to the nature of some of these global changes.”

To see more about Julia’s work visit her webpage [here](#).

Robin Reid—Ecosystem Science and Sustainability

Robin is a Professor in the Department of Ecosystem Science and Sustainability at CSU and Director of the Center for Collaborative Conservation. Her research focuses on conservation and development around the world. Robin began by discussing her positionality and philosophy and that for her, justice means fighting on behalf of “the underdog.” The underdog can include people who do not have access to resources or rights for objects such as rocks, trees, and animals who may not have a voice to stand up and fight for themselves. Robin’s work fighting for those who are underrepresented has allowed disempowered groups to have a stronger voice. For example, Robin shared her experience living in Kenya, where she found that people who live in less “developed” areas with fewer resources had learned how to live in difficult climates. These populations, she explained, have expertise that should be shared. *“Let’s empower the people who actually get the picture... and then also empower the voices of folks that are considered primitive to our society, that I learned are not at all.”*

Robin discussed the idea of a middle ground between environmental justice (which focuses on people, what they have access to and their rights) and ecological justice (which is concerned with the rights of species and other objects in the environment). She explained that while the field of ecology has attempted to reconcile differences and competing priorities between environmental and ecological justice, there continues to be tensions and challenges in creating a dialogue where ecological and environmental justice are discussed simultaneously.

Robin described how some of these issues relate to her work in cases where she studies both the lives of pastoralists and the landscapes in which they live. Working with pastoral communities in Africa and Mongolia, Robin has found that a communal land management approaches can successfully exist, which are very different from the private property approach used in western societies. These communal approaches are threatened by cultures that favor development and ownership of land:

“Almost all of the people that live in common property landscapes... where people don’t have definitive pieces of land that they own because their life depends on being able to move where it rains or where there’s a river...in those environments, they are extremely susceptible to people who have either money or power. In other words, in this political ecology, they’re very susceptible to more settled people coming and either not allowing them to have rights in the nation to have a say over their places and have guaranteed access to things they need... so what gets imposed is not only a taking away of things and a lack of access, but also a philosophy and a development paradigm that is unsuitable for these people.”

Robin explained how her research with pastoral communities aims to provide information on a different way of life and land management practices. Her goal is to build capacity and help leaders in these communities gain the confidence needed to explain the value in their culture. Robin concluded by asking questions about what can be considered an injustice in the context of the food chain, extinction, and river diversion.

To see more about Robin's work visit her webpage [here](#).

Open Discussion

In the open discussion, both the panelists and participants grappled with environmental justice and biodiversity, focusing on the interconnectedness between humans and the environment and the dichotomous way they're traditionally presented.

Participant and anthropologist Dr. Kate Browne made the point that human-environment interactions can have unintended consequences and can be detrimental for both nature and society. To illustrate this, she discussed how the loss of wetlands from oil and gas development was one reason why the effects of Hurricane Katrina were so catastrophic in Louisiana. She observed:

"It's like this is been our dominant paradigm for such a long time in the West, we conquered nature, we can control nature, we can make nature work for us. And I think that that shows up in all kinds of ways like disasters, which is what I study. For example, in Louisiana with Katrina you saw this very thing play out in terms of the way the oil and gas pipelines which were at a huge proportion of the cost of the loss of wetlands. So the loss of wetlands has been something like 2,000 square miles in the last 70 years, I mean that's almost unfathomable. A lot of scientists say that's the fastest coastal land loss in the world, and it's unthinkable. But because there's this perception that we have to keep the economy alive, we have to have a way, you know there's this certain cost. Yeah, we might lose some wetlands but look at all the jobs we're providing. So there's this premise that there is this trade off, that it's worth what it costs. And I think that speaks to the fact that we don't have a sense of the absolute inseparability of nature and culture or you know us and the environment that we're part of, because we allowed the costs to be externalized too much. And they're externalized because again that philosophical posture or world view that allows us to separate these things. And to think of them as discrete it's like, you know as an anthropologists thinking of things even like the economy is somehow discrete from who we are is just crazy."

Robin added to this point by challenging the way we talk about the economy and the need to keep it alive, as if it is a living thing, while we ignore legitimately living things that are often damaged by this attempt.

Another participant presented questions on the ecosystem services approach and our current understanding of environmental values in economic terms. Julia Klein responded to these questions by explaining that our approach to the environment should be expanded beyond the economic bottom line, in order to understand intrinsic value. However, Julia also discussed benefits to the ecosystem service approach in that, in certain cases, it can be an effective way to convince groups of people of the value in biodiversity and nature. Melinda commented that an economic perspective can often

homogenize understandings of nature around the world and can make it difficult to maintain diversity in discussions and understandings of culture and the environment.

The same participant asked Melinda to expand upon her discussion of biodiversity as a cultural construct. Melinda explained that the term biodiversity comes from scientific literature that was predominantly Euro-American and is influenced by social and cultural understandings of the best way to approach science. She suggested that we have to think about ecosystem rights both in terms of services and in terms of the rights of the entity to be a part of the globe. That is, thinking about the Earth as an organism, and asking what rights organisms have.

Several speakers asked questions and discussed how people and nature can come together, covering issues across multiple scales, from the Colorado Community Rights Network actively advocating for community rights to global efforts such as the UN's approach to maritime law and the current state of ocean protections and contemporary ocean threats like climate change, acidification, and overfishing. Melinda suggested a spatial and scalar approach may be applicable for understanding issues with ocean health.

A participant raised questions about how we can shift people away from something that is inherently destructive but is nonetheless a traditional way of life in certain places and suggested that romanticizing non-western culture can also be problematic. Julia responded by saying that one way to make progress may be to highlight *“more win-win situations where it's not environment or livelihood”* stating that there are *“definitely examples where they can actually be very synergistic, and I think getting those out in front of people and communicate it in a way that people are receptive to them.”*

In terms of addressing complexity, Robin discussed various organizations and groups, such as the Center for Collaborative Conservation, attempting to bring people and nature together to improve our understanding of human-nature interactions. This can produce more holistic understandings. She discussed how community-driven conservation efforts can be translated to larger scale efforts and that there is a need for both. Melinda added to this, explaining that through networking and making connections it is possible to learn lessons from the local level that can apply to other communities and other levels. Robin discussed how people should be empowered to act and ways to do this would be to highlight good examples of change and bring various groups of people together to discuss environmental issues. She presented the Colorado Conservation Exchange as an example of this. Julia highlighted a key principle for EJ, which is the recognition of multiple stakeholders who should have a voice and participate in various discussions. Melinda also pointed out the extent to which multi-scalar efforts can have influence:

“It's an opportunity for networking so we want to make sure that lessons learned in one locality can be shared with lessons learned in other localities and so we create another mechanism whereby we not only have these global treaties that are important and these local initiatives but then these connections that are being made between important movers and shakers. And it does come down a lot to individuals, to people with a vision, to people with a passion who are able to somehow transmit their ideas to other people.”

A final part of open discussion centered on how to get more people involved to create lasting change. Tara Shelley asked *“How do we empower our young people? How do we empower our local communities to do more? To listen? The environment doesn't always need someone to speak for it because it's already telling us it's in distress. We're just not listening.”* One speaker suggested that when individuals have direct experience with nature, they are able to appreciate its intrinsic value. Kate talked about how to make research and knowledge gained from research accessible to the public at large. Kate pointed that developing ways to share this information could be a positive step to get more people involved. Stacia talked about connecting her students to city processes, organizations, and research. She noted the importance of centering these projects on the *“inseparability of human and environment.”* Melinda discussed connecting current students with former students who work with organizations promoting ecological and environmental justice. She believes that gaining real-world perspectives can interest students and show them the real-world effects of various work. She also commented on the importance of the humanities, and touched on the way in which our job in the academy *“is to teach students now how to navigate that vast landscape... to be able to find multiple voices and multiple perspective,”* to sift through them to learn and make informed decisions. The conversation evolved then to exploring the extent to which we can better engage in public scholarship, despite the way in which EJ might have a connotation that is negative to some scientists. Julia pointed out this is especially critical when organizations reach out to us. Melinda noted that we often only write for each other, and this is problematic, when we could be co-developing solutions with citizens that actually increase quality of life in communities.

A final important topic discussed is the extent to which basic needs can influence: (1) the ability to participate in voicing EJ concerns and (2) the type of concerns that are voiced. Participants drew on examples of Flint, Michigan, water issues on the U.S.-Mexico border (where accessing water was more important than the quality of water accessed), and the agricultural industry, where undocumented immigrants serve as laborers with little recourse for justice issues in the context of their work.