Environment, Technology, and Society

Newsletter of the Section on Environment and Technology of the American Sociological Association

The Undertheorization of Technology In Environmental Sociology

Stephen R. Couch, The Pennsylvania State University

I would like to add yet another voice concerning whether or not to drop "technology" from our section's name. I am in favor of retaining it; doing so underlines the importance that technology should have in the work we do.

In the last issue of *ETS*, Gene Rosa (2002:3) wrote: "I cannot imagine making progress toward our foundational quest – to understand the interpenetration of human and ecological systems – without serious consideration of technology's transformative role." I could not agree more. Technology necessarily mediates between human systems and ecological systems; theorizing and studying technology's "transformative role" must be central to understanding the nature of the dialectical interaction between humans and the physical environment.

While emphasizing technology's importance to an audience of environmental sociologists may seem so commonsensical as to be banal, I would suggest that in fact, a surprising amount of our work takes place without seeing technology as an important and necessary part of our conceptual apparatus. I recently read the interesting text on *Sociological Theory and the Environment* edited by four of our esteemed colleagues (Dunlap et. al, 2002). The book contains some excellent essays on theorizing the relationships between human and environmental systems. However, the treatment afforded "technology" was quite spotty.

Of the fourteen articles following the book's introduction, only those by Murphy (2002: 73-89) and Benton (2002: 252-273) incorporate an analysis of technology as a central part of their article. Murphy does this by correcting Weber, who wrote that a machine is "mind objectified;" Murphy (2002:80) writes, "Machines are more accurately portrayed as 'nature manipulated'...." He goes on to explore several interesting implications of this alteration. For his part, Benton offers an extended critique of Giddens's and Beck's treatment of technological risks (2002:257-270). Except for these two authors, theorizing technology receives short shrift.

To be fair, technology is mentioned in various other places throughout the volume. Dickens (2002: 59) deals in passing with machinery and its role in the labor process, according to Marx. But his main concern is with the social division of labor. This is also the case in the article by Roberts and Grimes (2002:167-194) which examines the relationship between world systems theory and the environment; much can be inferred about the role of technology, but little is written. Shove and Ward (2002: 238) briefly consider the role of "sociotechnical systems" that help shape consumption patterns, pointing out in fact that "...although these technological systems structure patterns of daily life and related consumption practices, ...sociologists of consumption have

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Notes from the Editor on the Spring 2003 issue...

April showers have become May showers in recent years--just a seasonal shift or global climate change? Either way, the Spring shower season has, more often than not, become the flash flood season here. With the increase in impervious surfaces in our communities, stormwater run-off has reached a near-crisis stage.

Having recently completed Phase II Stormwater planning, our County now faces the greater challenge of implementing the requirements. In a recent chat with Metropolitan Sewer District representatives, we learned that there is no provision for crediting the new "best practices" for stormwater run-off reduction, mainly because the District staff is too busy to figure out how to quantify the reductions made by these alternatives. Just thinking about using planting areas and pervious pavement materials in parking lots in lieu of the old fashioned detention basin sends many code officials into a cold sweat. Such is life on the front lines. Again, I remind you that your help and support of your local planning agencies could make a real difference!

Your submissions for the newsletter are also welcomed at any time--brief reports on recent research; reviews of books, articles, or videos; opinion pieces; point--counter-point debates; member news items; department and program spotlights; calls for papers; etc. Remember, without YOUR submissions, it's a blank sheet of paper--send your piece today!

Award Committees, 2002-2003

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Tom Beamish and Harry Potter

Distinguished Contribution Award:
Ken Gould and Section Council

Boguslaw Award:
Allan Schnaiberg, Chair
Bob Brulle and Stan Black

Outstanding Publication Award:
(to be awarded in 2004)
Tom Rudel, Chair

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The Environment and Technology Section on the Internet:

Listserv: *Envtecsoc*
To subscribe, send an email to:
listserv@csf.colorado.edu with the message text:
sub envtecsoc youremailaddress

Resources: The listserv archives and additional resources for environmental sociologists:
http://csf.colorado.edu/envtecsoc

Section Websites:

www.lbs.msu.edu/ets/ets.html

www.asanet.org/Sections/environ.htm

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Please note that you must be a member of the ASA in order to join a Section. Contact the American Sociological Association, Membership Services, at 1307 New York Ave., NW, Suite 700 Washington, DC 20005

The Undertheorization of Technology, continued from page 1

paid them relatively little attention." Reflecting the content of the articles, the book's introduction does not accord technology a particularly high standing, although "the role of technology in social and environmental change" is included in a list of six "empirical issues of interest" that provide continuity and to which the new theoretical directions represented in this book are seen to contribute (Buttel et al:28).

So, far from being integrated into theoretical considerations of human system/ecosystem relations, it seems to me that technology is undertheorized by environmental sociologists, especially those of us in the United States. Indeed, geographers such as David Harvey, and historians like William Cronon, do a better job analyzing technology than many environmental sociologists. It is ironic that during the 1990s, a time when theorists the likes of Giddens and Beck were mainstreaming analyses of technological risks, environmental sociologists, perhaps bogged down in objectivist and subjectivist musings, appeared to become less interested in issues involving technology. However, because we have not lived up to our promises of integrating technology into our analyses is no reason to give up the fight. For me, it is all the more reason to renew a focus on this important concept, which must be better understood if environmental sociologists are to achieve the goal of understanding the relationships between physical environments and social relations. I think that dropping technology from our section's name would be a step in the wrong direction.

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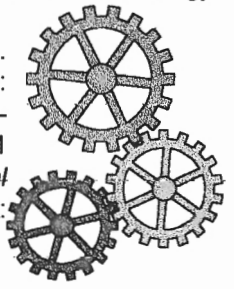
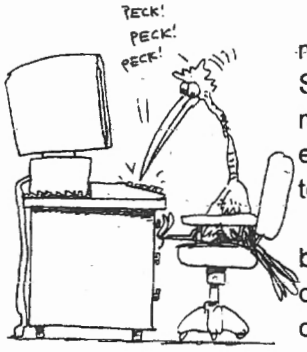


ET&S Seeks a New Editor

Nearly eight years ago I took over as editor of *Environment, Technology, and Society*. Building on the work on past editors such as Riley Dunlap and my immediate predecesor Chris Cluett, I have tried to maintain the fine reputation of the Environment & Technology Section newsletter. Using the submissions and column ideas of E&T members, I hope that I have accomplished this.



Working on the newsletter has been a great experience. I took over when I was finishing up my Ph.D., and the editorship gave me an opportunity to become actively involved with the E&T Section and to get to know many of the members. Participation in the annual E&T Council meeting has helped me understand the workings of ASA and the Section. Thanks especially to email, I've had the chance to work with many terrific people from all over the world in putting together the quarterly newsletter.

I suppose I shouldn't pretend that the process is all sunshine and roses. Sometimes it can be a bit tedious, chasing down stories for *ET&S*--everyone is busy and I'm making one more demand. Deadlines are fairly soft, however. Developing the layout can be fun and sometimes challenging when there is a lot of material to try to make fit. But that's a *Continued on page 7*

Conference Announcement: Monitoring the Environment: Scales, Methods, and Systems in Historical Perspective

Hagley Museum and Library

July 17 - 18, 2003

Sponsored by the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT) and the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) The notion of environmental sustainability suggests, among other things, that a society has the capacity to monitor that which it desires to sustain. But who decides what measures of environmental quality should be sustained and how they should be monitored? And who determines what standards should be maintained and which human actions and practices should be regulated to manage those standards? After a society places closure on such questions and constructs a system of monitoring and regulation that is accepted as legitimate, the issues involved often come to be seen as purely technical. This conference will explore ways in which past decisions about monitoring the environment have unfolded, with an aim toward identifying themes and issues that historians and others might fruitfully explore.

For more information, contact Hugh Gorman at 906.487.2116 (hsgorman@mtu.edu)

or Erik Conway at 757.864-6525 (E.M.Conway@larc.nasa.gov).

Sponsors

Society for the History of Technology (SHOT) An interdisciplinary organization, SHOT is concerned not only with the history of technological devices and processes, but also with the relations of technology to science, politics, social change, the arts and humanities, and economics. For more information, visit http://shot.press.jhu.edu/

American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) The American Society for Environmental History seeks understanding of the human experience of the environment from the perspectives of history, liberal arts, and sciences. The Society encourages crossdisciplinary dialogue on every aspect of the present and past relationship of humankind to the natural world. For more information, visit http://www.aseh.net

The Hagley Museum and Library. The Hagley Museum and Library is located in Wilmington, Delaware on the site of the first DuPont powder works. It is home to a research library known for collections that document the history of American business and technology and their impact on society. Visit http://www.hagley.lib.de.us/

Member News

Gene Rosa, Washington State, gave the keynote address at the dedication of the Jeanne X. Kasperson Research Library at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts on April 24, 2003.

David A. Sonnenfeld, Washington State University, has been appointed to the International Advisory Board of the Environmental Research Network Asia (ERNAsia), an independent institution aiming to bring together scholars and professionals from various parts of the world who share a common interest in environmental issues in the Asian region.

J. Steven Picou (University of South Alabama) presented the keynote address for the Earth Charter Summit entitled, "The Earth Charter and the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill: Corporate Response to Eco-Social Degradation," University of Wisconsin (Oshkosh), September 28, 2002.

Dr. Picou also gave the keynote address for the Alaska People's Forum entitled, "Sociology of Disaster Recovery: Natural, Technological and Terrorist Events," Anchorage, Alaska, March 7-8, 2003.

Cindy Caron (Cornell University) has received a Research and Writing Grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Program on Global Security and Sustainability. She will return to Sri Lanka in June for eight months of fieldwork.

David A. Sonnenfeld has been granted tenure and promoted to Associate Professor, Deptartment of Community and Rural Sociology, Washington State University.

THE ECOLOGICAL COSTS OF MILITARIZATION

Kenneth A. Gould

Militarization is the single most ecologically destructive human endeavor. Funding the military-industrial complex requires enormous levels of surplus economic production for diversion to destructive ends. Roughly 50¢ on every tax dollar since the 1940s has been dedicated to military expenditures, effectively halving funding for education, health care, poverty alleviation and environmental. To fund militarization, the labor product of workers is expropriated for negative redistribution to transnational corporations (TNCs), lining the pockets of defense contractors.

Defense corporations influence elected officials through campaign donations, who in turn take money from taxpayers and give it to those corporations who can then fund additional elected official influence. After leaving office, the elected officials take lobbying positions for those corporations in support of further military expenditures. This is what President Eisenhower called the "military-industrial complex" in his prescient farewell warning to the American people. The military redistribution of wealth from workers to elites requires increased levels of worker production to sustain families, artificially increasing levels of ecological withdrawals and additions per capita. Wages stagnate so that the only hope for larger net incomes is tax relief. Tax relief (rarely aimed at working people) leads to reduction of public services, but not reductions in military spending. As a result, militariza- tion becomes a larger share of the total that government does.

Military production is largely exempt from environmental protection legislation in the name of national security. That exemption has made military production facilities the most ecologically devastated locations on Earth. Military production also requires extraction and production of the most hazardous materials, generating the most pernicious threats to human health and the environment. The "marquis" weapons systems are of course weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. has been the world's leading producer of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, the same weapons we are told present the greatest threat to humanity and global security. These weapons represent a primary thrust of the U.S. technological trajectory. While they are marketed to civilian populations as environmental, medical, and economic benefits in the form of civilian nuclear power, gene therapy, and food production enhancing pesticides, their origins in military research and application are telling. From an ecological and human health standpoint, these are the highest risk technologies currently in widespread application. Covering the Earth in chemical biocides, genetically modified organisms, and strontium 90 are the combined results of the military and corporate application of these high-risk technologies, and it is a mistake to view the corporate and military applications as separable. The contaminants resulting from the production of weapons of mass destruction are some of the most persistent pollutants. The areas surrounding weapons factories including Hanford, WA, Savannah River, GA, Oak Ridge, TN, and Rocky Flats, CO are technically uninhabitable despite the continuing human presence in these ecological sacrifice zones.

One reason why military production and deployment zones have been allowed to become enormous environmental and public health disasters is the secrecy with which such operations are conducted. Again in the name of national security, civilian workers and their families have been systematically denied access to information that would permit them to make informed decisions as to what level of health risk they are willing to accept. Community Right to Know laws have been non-existent, weakly enforced or simply denied to protect military secrets. The results have been a series of nightmares where communities discover that they have been systematically exposed to the most pernicious carcinogens and mutagens across generations. From Fernald, OH to Oak Ridge, TN, the military has knowingly devastated the health of civilians while giving repeated assurances that no significant health risks exist. The post-9/11 state decision to further reduce civilian access to information about military technology and public health risks has made it far less possible for people to act to protect their families, thus decreasing their security.

Storage and deployment of military products disperses these threats throughout the U.S. and the world. The transportation of weapons, and weapons of mass destruction in particular, present even more dispersed dangers to civilian populations and local ecosystems, as places with no military production, testing or deployment facilities are put at risk with even less civilian awareness. That lack of awareness of transportation risks is made even more problematic by the post-9/11 decisions to reduce civilian access to information.

Weapons get field tested from Vieques, PR to Fort Drum, NY, producing water contamination, land contamination and resultant health problems. Leaking weapons of mass destruction, like nerve gas shells stored in populated areas such as Berea, KY threaten to annihilate communities at a moment's notice. Unexploded nerve gas shells litter the islands of Panama, currently under development for ecotourism. And the testing of weapons systems is not limited to designated *Continued on page 6*

bombing ranges and military bases. Unknowing domestic and foreign civilian populations have historically been used by the military to test the health effects and dispersement patterns of weapons of mass destruction, with devastating long-term health consequences.

In a best-case scenario, all of this ecological destruction is for naught. The weapons produced go unused presenting enormous, and thus far insolvable, long-term disposal problems, and all of that labor productivity and capital is simply discarded. Efforts to safely store or dispose of weapons of mass destruction from nuclear warhead cores to nerve gas shells have universally failed. In-situ vitrification in Oak Ridge, nerve gas incineration on Johnson atoll, and other such disposal schemes have generated new ecological risks.

In a worst case scenario, military production is actually utilized to destroy other environments, labor, and capital, resulting in the worst forms of ecological and social disorganization. A combination of agent-orange defoliant and napalm incendiary was used to eliminate much of the rainforest of Vietnam, after initial use in Guatemala. The remaining ecosystems of most of Europe were finally lost to WWI and WWII. The endangered snow leopard was indigenous to the mountains and caves of Afghanistan.

It is worth noting that two of the leading causes of refugee status, now at epidemic proportions globally, are war and environmental degradation. The mass movement of refugees generates tensions that can lead to even more violent conflict.

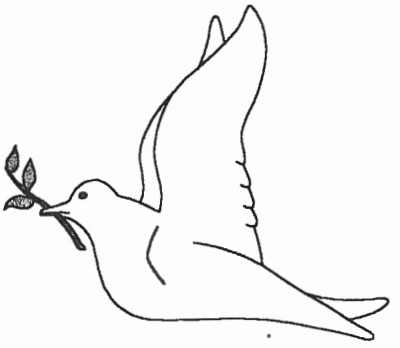
The battlefield environment also becomes an ecological hot zone for G.I.s and those who may reinhabit it. Agent Orange produced devastating multigenerational health problems for U.S. troops and their families, not to mention the Vietnamese peasantry that has been farming in contaminated soils for 40 years. The Gulf War produced Gulf War Syndrome, likely the result of exposure to some combination of U.S. and Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or efforts to defend against them. And the military enthusiasm for covering the Earth in depleted uranium shells has unknown long-term implication for human health and the environment. Later post-war efforts to remediate the environment, both natural and built, require further ecological withdrawals and additions.

Thus militarization destroys ecosystems numerous times and at numerous levels including extraction, production, distribution, testing, transportation, disposal, implementation, and reconstruction. Militarization remains the only form of human production the aim of which is to destroy environments and more socially and ecologically benign forms of production. It is therefore the most socially and ecologically regressive human enterprise, and one to which the U.S. State has been deeply committed for more than half a century.

Militarization is necessary to protect Americans' ecologically destructive way of life and the economic interests of TNCs. The primary use of U.S. military production has been to secure access to natural resources and markets for U.S. based TNCs. That is, military production is essential to keep unsustainable levels of domestic production and consumption going, and to maintain outlets for unsustainable surplus production. The U.S. economy is completely dependent on ecological imperialism for its survival. Oil is only the highest profile example of America's dependence on expropriating the natural resources of other nations. Occasionally, other nations seek to use their natural resources to support their own populations, demand a higher price for external access to their resources, or simply refuse to make their resources available to support U.S.-based transnational corporations. The threat of America's military limits the occurrence of such instances. In cases where the threat is insufficient, military force is needed to overthrow uncooperative governments and replace them with those that will prioritize America's needs over those of their domestic populations. Similarly, where other nations seek to reduce access to domestic markets for American goods, coercive force may be necessary.

Perhaps the only social and ecological benefit of the transition from colonialism to corporate dominated globalization is that economic coercion has largely replaced military coercion in the process of expropriating resources and securing markets. Nevertheless, the threat of military action if economic coercion fails remains quite tangible and quite necessary.

As resource scarcity increases globally, incidents of violent conflict over vital and strategic resources are likely to increase. Oil wars are already quite common. Water wars are certainly in our near future. As economic growth continues, resource-scarcity related violence will generate increased state and corporate demand for further militarization to take or defend resource access. Increased militarization will deepen scarcity, resulting in a cycle of escalating violence and ecological decay.



Twenty-Five Years after Love Canal:
The Environmental Health and Environmental Justice Movements
Special Session at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting
San Francisco, August 14-17, 2004

We are very pleased that the ASA organizing committee for the 2004 annual meeting has approved a Thematic Session to be sponsored by the Environment and Technology Section. Organized by. Robert Brulle, with a committee including David Pellow and Phil Brown, the topic of the session is "Twenty-Five Years after Love Canal: The Environmental Health and Environmental Justice Movements."

This thematic session is designed to explore and explicate the meeting theme of Public Sociologies. As envisioned by the incoming ASA President, Michael Burawoy, sociology at its best functions as a mirror and conscience of society by defining, promoting, and informing public debates about the issues of the day. Public sociologies transcend the academy and engage wider audiences in these discussions. Thus the aim of the ASA 2004 meeting is to encourage and provide examples of public sociologies.

This special session will focus on the growth and development of the Environmental Health movement and Environmental Justice movement in the United States. The movements took on a national focus over 25 years ago with the citizen's struggles over the toxic waste dump at Love Canal New York, and shortly after with protests at a toxic dump site in Warren County, North Carolina. This session brings together major actors in these movements. They will reflect on how our nation has handled hazardous waste since then, how this gave birth to the environmental justice movement, and the future prospects for the realization of environmental justice. These environmental health and justice movements are among the most extensive and developed social movements in the United States.

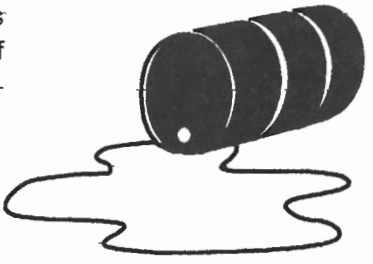
This special session featured three renowned speakers:

Lois Gibbs, Executive Director, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. Lois Gibbs is the internationally known activist who led the Love Canal struggle beginning in 1978. She catapulted toxic waste issues to the forefront of American politics, and follows in the steps of Rachel Carson as a catalyst for the spread of the modern environmental movement.

Robert Bullard, Professor of Sociology, Clark Atlanta University. Activist and sociologist Robert Bullard is one of the leading scholars on the environmental justice movement. Since his 1990 book, Dumping in Dixie, he has written and edited numerous other books, and has been a major voice for environmental justice in academics, activism, and in pressing the federal government to do more in this area.

Ted Smith, Executive Director, Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition. Ted Smith is the articulate leader of one of the country's most innovative and successful environmental justice organizations. Working with labor, community, civil rights, and environmental groups, as well as with government health offices, he has f been a major leader in environmental justice organizing over the past 20 years.

There will be a few brief discussant remarks by Phil Brown, Professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies, Brown University, who is currently the chair-elect of the Environment and Technology Section.



ET&S Seeks a New Editor, *continued from page 3*

happy challenge. My eight-year tenure should say something--the position is listed by ASA as a three-year term!

After eight years, I feel it is time to give someone else a chance to put together *Environment, Technology, and Society*. Many times, I've tried to involve others in the production process, but with the vagaries of technology, this tends to be a one-person activity. If the printers don't match, one person still ends up finalizing the layout. It isn't difficult, it just means spending a bit of time--I work fairly steadily on it for a couple of days each issue. A number of people together at the same institution might be able to more easily share the layout work.

I hope I've been able to pique someone's interest in taking over the editorship of *ET&S*. While the position involves some work, it provides tremendous opportunities for supporting and advancing the field of environmental sociology as well as for personal networking. Anyone who is interested may contact me at roschke@one.net, (513) 458-4515 (office), or (513) 731-9120 (home) to talk more about what is involved in the position.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place - a Metaphor for Our Times?

A comment on the resignation of EPA Chief Administrator Christie Todd Whitman by Jan Buhrmann

It may be that the recent resignation of EPA Chief Administrator Christie Todd Whitman reflects the current dynamic within the U.S. – the dynamic of knowing 'onsome level' what we need to do as individuals and as a people, yet not having the personal or collective will to do it.

Not having in-depth knowledge about Christie Whitman's personal views on the environment, it might be more useful to take a 'larger-picture' view of things. Specifically, it's important to consider the fundamental tension that has to exist between an Administration that places a premium on resource extraction, consumption, and exploitation (generally highly polluting activities) and an agency whose central mission is to regulate, minimize, and mitigate environmental contamination. It's likely that regardless of her personal views on environmental protection, Governor Whitman felt somewhat 'between a rock and hard place' in trying to simultaneously forward the goals of the EPA *and* abide by the policies of the current Administration.

Similar to the tension that Christie Whitman no doubt has felt during her tenure as EPA Administrator, it's likely that many in the country at this time sense a need to 'take action' and move forward in a better direction, but feel limited by the conflicting social values of 'protecting our way of life,' and not allowing ourselves to fall victim to media hype or fear-induced acceptance of the status quo. I recently attended a presentation by Noam Chomsky when he was in the Denver area. One of the key challenges he left the audience with was the importance of taking action about what we feel is right (in this case, politically), as opposed to limiting our 'activities' to passive observation and coffeehouse conversations. His view is that unhindered by the limitations that many around the world are experiencing at this point in time (such as the basic necessities of clean water and adequate food supplies, in addition to the freedoms of speech and thought) we in the U.S. are in a unique position to take advantage of our individual and collective ability to effect positive change – even if it challenges some of the current 'popular' norms and values.

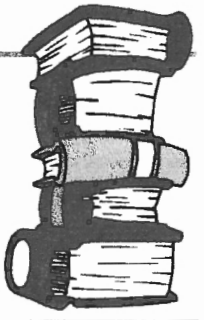
As environmental sociologists, we are in a unique position to pose questions and seek out solutions – both in our teaching and our research – that examine the basic (individual and collective) social values that have manifested in the environmental problems we now face. As the EPA as an agency struggles within the current political climate to enforce and uphold environmental regulations geared toward ensuring long-term environmental quality, we can seize the opportunity to facilitate thought-provoking discussions in our classrooms, tackle critical and ground-breaking questions in our research, and work actively toward more progressive policies and strategies in applied settings.

I feel strongly that environmental sociology has an increasingly important role to play in helping to 'dislodge' the country's current feeling of being 'between a rock and a hard place.' As a values-based discipline, an important component of our work is to help facilitate an understanding of the very real connection between what we value as individuals and as a society, and the health and well being of our natural environment. Wemight begin 'taking action' by considering words of Chief Oren Lyons:

> *Our leaders were instructed to be (people) of vision and to make every decision on behalf of the seventh generation to come; to have compassion and love for those generations yet unborn.*

Moving individually and collectively in this direction might be the most significant and far-reaching action we can take...

Member Publications



Picou, J. Steven and Brent K. Marshall. 2002. "Contemporary Concepts of Environmental Risk: Implications for Resource Management and Policy." Sociological Practice: A Journal of Clinical and Applied Sociology. Vol. 4, No. 4:293-313.

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