

## Society : Cultural Ecological Perspective

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Cultural ecology studies the relationship between a given society and its natural environment as well as the life-forms and ecosystems that support its lifeways[citation needed]. This may be carried out diachronically (examining entities that existed in different epochs), or synchronically (examining a present system and its components). The central argument is that the natural environment, in small scale or subsistence societies dependent in part upon it - is a major contributor to social organization and other human institutions.

In the academic realm, when combined with study of political economy, the study of economies as polities, it becomes political ecology, another academic subfield. It also helps interrogate historical events like the Easter Island Syndrome.

### Coining the term

Anthropologist **Julian Steward** (1973) is associated with the term. In his *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution* (1955), cultural ecology represents the "ways in which culture change is induced by adaptation to the environment."

It is this assertion - that the physical and biological environment affects culture - that had proved controversial, because it implies an element of environmental determinism over human actions, which some social scientists find problematic, particularly those writing from a Marxist perspective. Cultural ecology recognizes that ecological locale plays a significant role in shaping the cultures of a region.. Steward's method was to:

document the technologies & methods used to exploit the environment - to get a living from it.

look at patterns of human behavior/culture associated with using the environment.  
assess how much these patterns of behavior influenced other aspects of culture (e.g., how, in a drought-prone region, great concern over rainfall patterns meant this became central to everyday life, and led to the development of a religious belief system in which rainfall and water figured very strongly. This belief system may not appear in a society where good rainfall for crops can be taken for granted, or where irrigation was practiced).

Steward's ideas of cultural ecology became widespread among anthropologists and archaeologists of the mid-20th century, though they would later be critiqued for their environmental determinism. Cultural ecology was one of the central tenets and driving factors in the development of processual archaeology in the 1960s, as archaeologists understood cultural change through the framework of environmental adaptation.

## **Conceptual views of culture and ecology**

### **The Human Species**

Books about culture and ecology began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s. One of the first to be published in the United Kingdom was *The Human Species* by a zoologist, Anthony Barnett. It came out in 1950-subtitled *The biology of man* but was about a much narrower subset of topics. It dealt with the cultural bearing of some outstanding areas of environmental knowledge about health and disease, food, the sizes and quality of human populations, and the diversity of human types and their abilities. Barnett's view was that his selected areas of information "...are all topics on which knowledge is not only desirable, but for a twentieth-century adult, necessary". He went on to point out some of the concepts underpinning human ecology towards the social problems facing his readers in the 1950s as well as the assertion that human nature cannot change, what this statement could mean, and whether it is true. The third chapter deals in more detail with some aspects of human genetics.

Then come five chapters on the evolution of man, and the differences between groups of men (or races) and between individual men and women today in relation to population growth (the topic of 'human diversity'). Finally, there is a series of chapters on various aspects of human populations (the topic of "life and death"). Like other animals man must, in order to survive, overcome the dangers of starvation and infection; at the same time he must be fertile. Four chapters therefore deal with food, disease and the growth and decline of human populations.

Barnett anticipated that his personal scheme might be criticised on the grounds that it omits an account of those human characteristics, which distinguish humankind most clearly, and sharply from other animals. That is to say, the point might be expressed by saying that human behaviour is ignored; or some might say that human psychology is left out, or that no account is taken of the human mind. He justified his limited view, not because little importance was attached to what was left out, but because the omitted topics were so important that each needed a book of similar size even for a summary account. In other words, the author was embedded in a world of academic specialists and therefore somewhat worried about taking a partial conceptual, and idiosyncratic view of the zoology of *Homo sapiens*.

### **The Ecology of Man**

Moves to produce prescriptions for adjusting human culture to ecological realities were also afoot in North America. Paul Sears, in his 1957 Condon Lecture at the University of Oregon, titled "The Ecology of Man," he mandated "serious attention to the ecology of man" and demanded "its skillful application to human affairs." Sears was one of the few prominent ecologists to successfully write for popular audiences.

Sears documents the mistakes American farmers made in creating conditions that led to the disastrous Dust Bowl. This book gave momentum to the soil conservation movement in the United States.

### **Man's Impact on Nature**

During this same time was J.A. Lauwery's *Man's Impact on Nature*, which was part of a series on 'Interdependence in Nature' published in 1969. Both Russel's and Lauwery's books were about cultural ecology, although not titled as such. People still had difficulty in escaping from their labels. Even *Beginnings and Blunders*, produced in 1970 by the polymath zoologist Lancelot Hogben, with the subtitle *Before Science Began*, clung to anthropology as a traditional reference point. However, its slant makes it clear that 'cultural ecology' would be a more apt title to cover his wide-ranging description of how early societies adapted to environment with tools, technologies and social groupings. In 1973 the physicist Jacob Brownowski produced *The Ascent of Man*, which summarised a magnificent thirteen part BBC television series about all the ways in which humans have moulded the Earth and its future.

### **Changing the Face of the Earth**

By the 1980s the human ecological-functional view had prevailed. It had become a conventional way to present scientific concepts in the ecological perspective of human animals dominating an overpopulated world, with the practical aim of producing a greener culture. This is exemplified by I. G. Simmons book *Changing the Face of the Earth*, with its telling subtitle "Culture, Environment History" which was published in 1989. Simmons was a geographer, and his book was a tribute to the influence of W.L Thomas' edited collection, *Man's role in 'Changing the Face of the Earth* that came out in 1956.

Simmons' book was one of many interdisciplinary culture/environment publications of the 1970s and 1980s, which triggered a crisis in geography with regards its subject matter, academic sub-divisions, and boundaries. This was resolved by officially adopting conceptual frameworks as an approach to facilitate the organisation of research and teaching that cuts cross old subject divisions. Cultural ecology is in fact a conceptual arena that has, over the past six decades allowed sociologists, physicists, zoologists and geographers to enter common intellectual ground from the sidelines of their specialist subjects.

### **Relationship in the 21st Century**

In the first decade of the 21st century, there are publications dealing with the ways in which humans can develop a more acceptable cultural relationship with the environment. An example is *sacred ecology*, a sub-topic of cultural ecology, produced by Fikret Berkes in 1999. It seeks lessons from traditional ways of life in Northern

Canada to shape a new environmental perception for urban dwellers. This particular conceptualisation of people and environment comes from various cultural levels of local knowledge about species and place, resource management systems using local experience, social institutions with their rules and codes of behaviour, and a world view through religion, ethics and broadly defined belief systems.

Despite the differences in information concepts, all of the publications carry the message that culture is a balancing act between the mindset devoted to the exploitation of natural resources and that, which conserves them. Perhaps the best model of cultural ecology in this context is, paradoxically, the mismatch of culture and ecology that have occurred when Europeans suppressed the age-old native methods of land use and have tried to settle European farming cultures on soils manifestly incapable of supporting them. There is a sacred ecology associated with environmental awareness, and the task of cultural ecology is to inspire urban dwellers to develop a more acceptable sustainable cultural relationship with the environment that supports them.

