

# Realistic Environmentalism

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## Introduction

*A personal episode*

*Before I wrote my first term paper I had learned to avoid words such as "should", "must" or "have to". I had learned that the researcher should avoid normative language and stay "neutral". Today we know that an author's background inevitably enters the writing process, if not in language then in content, and that sometimes it is more sensible for us reflect on our values and maybe even "disclose" them to our reader. I have come to realize that the abovementioned rule of thumb still holds true in one sense though: it is not that we have to keep our value or norms or opinions out of our research because our research needs to be "objective". Rather, the hard truth is that if you tell "the world" in your paper what to do, the world probably will not listen to you. "The world" probably will not care—beyond your readers.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, it is more sensible for us to lay out the facts and let the audience arrive at the conclusion herself or himself.*

*See also Boisot and McKelvey (2010); Gouldner (1962); Jones and Bartunek (2019); Zbaracki, Watkiss, McAlpine, and Barg (2021).*

In terms of citations and cultural impact, the last 30 years have been incredibly successful for sustainability research. Yet, the community is less than satisfied with the outcomes (e.g., Ergene, Banerjee, & Hoffman, 2020). This article takes a look at the original motivation of the research and how that motivation has influenced the research that happens under its umbrella (Latour, 1987). That insight on the motivation and the research process allows us to problematize missed opportunities (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Toward this goal we carry out a discourse analysis.

At the heart of sustainability research, there are a number of debates that signify distinct epistemic communities, each forming around a disparate larger consensus (Knorr Cetina, 1999). First, there is a rift between ecocentrism and the environmental management paradigm (Purser, Park, & Montuori, 1995). Second, there is a divide between research focusing on solutions, and research

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<sup>1</sup>And in some cases even those will not care.

describing problems. And finally, there is a disagreement on strategies. Some papers suggest small, gradual changes, while other papers argue that only sweeping changes are suitable for addressing problems such as an accelerated global climate change.

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