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Cultural Narratives in Environmental Activism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of cultural narratives in shaping environmental activism and influencing ecological policy. It examines how communities construct, resist, and reshape dominant environmental discourses through storytelling, historical reinterpretation, media representation, and protest. Drawing on case studies, historical trajectories, and diverse global perspectives, the research highlights how narratives rooted in local identity, spirituality, dispossession, and collective memory offer compelling alternatives to the master narrative of environmental decline. These cultural framings drive grassroots mobilization, challenge technocratic approaches, and center environmental justice for marginalized populations. By tracing the evolution of environmental storytelling from early preservationist discourse to digital-era climate justice campaigns, the paper underscores how narrative agency becomes a strategic and affective tool in the struggle for ecological sustainability, territorial sovereignty, and policy change. The findings call for a critical reassessment of the cultural foundations of environmental politics and a recognition of the power of narrative pluralism in fostering inclusive, impactful, and resilient environmental movements.

Keywords: Cultural narratives, Environmental activism, Environmental justice, Storytelling and protest, Climate change discourse, Indigenous ecological knowledge, Media representation.

INTRODUCTION

Culturally situated narratives about the earth, nature, and the environment help shape human relationships with the non-human world. Some narratives fit comfortably within the master (or dominant) narrative of environmental discourse, while others lead individuals or communities to action that challenges the key assumptions of the master narrative. These contradictions illustrate the partial successes of the master narrative of the "endangered environment". The communities highlighted here have adopted "endangered environment" narratives, but their actions suggest caution in ascribing too much power to this narrative. Other contributions to the symposium illustrate the use of environmental narratives in one community and the negotiation of disparate narratives across communities. Alongside these contributions, these narratives challenge the notion of the master narrative as a pre-existing text available to be adopted, utilized, or resisted. In each case, the adoption or rejection of a particular narrative is an ongoing interactive struggle, influenced by existing social hierarchies and the negotiation of power relationships across communities. Whereas the first set of cases suggests that collective action is often a product of widespread mastery of a common understanding, these narratives of a rapidly evolving human-nature relationship and the socio-political context in which they occurred intriguingly underscore the tensions and contradictions that accompany movement-building. This symposium contributes to the ongoing debate about the politics of space by examining the ways in which territoriality intersects with narratives of identity, nation, race, and environment. Recent and ongoing struggles for the redress of environmental injustice highlight the deep embeddedness of place in both individual and collective identities. Alongside deeply influential historical narratives about the inhabiting of environments to naturalize political and territorial claims, new narratives of environmental protest, rooted in local

experiences of toxic waste and resource extraction, have emerged. However, while challenging dominant practices of territorialization, these narratives have become embedded within broader culturally- and nationally situated territorial projects [1, 2].

The Role of Storytelling in Environmental Movements

Storytelling and moral framing have been and will continue to be an important, but often overlooked, part of many environmental groups' strategies, especially those groups often depicted as "radical." This activism bears many similarities to other movements around the world: the development and communication of both elite and folk understandings of environmental problems, building moral imperatives (both intrinsic and extrinsic) to act in ways consistent with the movement's understanding, and then urging action (often in public ways). Efforts to reframe, oxygenate, or politicize how local forests, water, and land are understood, valued, and treated are as common as reports of arrests, in many communities around the country (and the world). Most rhetorical analysis of environmental discourse focuses on mainstream or "scientific" narratives and how these fail to effectively reframe environmental discussions and motivate action. The failure of elite environmental narratives (understood broadly) to effectively engage more than a small percentage of the population has become increasingly clear. Environmental Frames and Counter Frames focuses instead on rhetoric, argumentation, and moral framing used within PNW communities by environmental groups in opposition to logging road building and burnout logging. Environmental storytelling strategies often center on the same basic structure as any effective story: a character who possesses a motivation (or desire) for a change, who faces an obstacle preventing that change, and who takes action against that obstacle, ultimately culminating in some resolution. The environmental character frequently revolves around local watersheds or forest, motivated by a need to protect them from logging, obstruction planned by small working communities with adjacent forests facing great market pressure for timber harvest, faced with the disinterest of federal forest management agencies comfortable with the timber-based lifeways of the small towns, and taking actions that call public attention to the area's beauty and ecological value, often sacrificing their freedom [3, 4].

Historical Context of Environmental Activism

Environmentalism, as the term is commonly used today, can be understood best within the context of the environmental movements beginning in the nineteenth century that led to the establishment of successfully defended enclaves of "nature." Environmentalism is the recently evolved tradition of human relationships to nature that sees whole biotic communities, ecosystems, and the planet itself assigned value independent of their market usefulness. To a greater or lesser extent, environmental movements seek limits to human interference with the nonhuman world on behalf of interests that are believed to be served by more-than-human wholes. A diverse and sometimes contradictory set of beliefs contributes to these general understandings. Despite the considerable attention paid to environmental movements since the 1960s, the tradition within which they work and which provides them both their strengths and their vulnerabilities is poorly understood by many who live in contemporary industrial societies. Twelve types of environmentalism are presented, distinguished by the human-nature relationships promoted and the interests asserted. Each type attempts to find a place for humanity within a planetary community. For five of the types, "environment" has topological meaning: environmentalism seeks limits to the precedence of human purposes at increasing distances from humanity's corporeal presence. In more linear or juxtaposed fashion, these five topological environmentalisms seek protection for 1) scapegoat places on which projected troubles are blamed; 2) human places that are valued not for voluptuousness or wildness but for health and productivity according to human designs; 3) semiwild places that can serve "buffer" or "filter" functions for healthier human prospects; 4) wild places, iconic for their difference from humanity and exotic for their magnificence; 5) places beyond the planet itself. For seven types of environmentalism, "environment" has ecological meaning: humankind is understood as one biotic band in a gaudy and tangled web of life. Two specifically anthropocentric types of ecological environmentalism assert new social norms allowing more-than-human others' inclusion in consideration of the other's interests. Five more biocentric environmentalism types claim subordination of human purposes to the interests asserted by nonhuman others. These distinctions have implications for understanding environmental movements and the prospects for continuing collaboration [5, 6].

Early Environmental Movements

The period from the 1960s to the 1990s is seen as the first wave of modern environmentalism. Fueled by ecology's growth, a new understanding of nature's harmony emerged, leading to a call for action against environmental decline. This narrative intertwined with civil rights and antiwar movements, merging diverse ideas: Aldo Leopold's land ethic with John Muir's preservationism, Thoreau's critique of civilization with Marshall McLuhan's assessment of the electronic age, and W.E.B. Dubois's fight against racism with Rachel Carson's stance on pesticide use. Despite the compelling narrative of saving the

environment, there was notable exclusion of marginalized groups, blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and working-class whites, in cultural and political discussions. Early ecologists were surprised by this absence, as prominent environmentalists often mirrored the privileged demographics depicted in Landseer's artwork. Around a decade later, dissatisfaction sparked an alternative environmental narrative. New figures articulated a provocative environmentalism, with radical ideas arising from the counterculture of the 1960s. American countercultural environmentalism showcased four primary narratives: anti-civilization environmentalism, eco-feminism, social ecology, and bioregionalism, all critiquing the mainstream narrative and offering visions of sustainable societies. Although these variations manifested in politics and actions, their distinctiveness stemmed more from the narratives they created than from their actual programs. The writings of key figures in deep ecology, eco-feminism, and social ecology significantly shaped the anti-civilization narratives, underscoring their importance within the wider context of environmentalism's countermaster narratives [7, 8].

The Rise of Modern Environmentalism

Grassroots activism in the U.S. from 1900 to 2000 aimed at addressing environmental issues, particularly those affecting disadvantaged communities, often fueled by notable incidents of disparity due to environmental risks faced by non-dominant groups. These events prompted local organizations to form alliances and frame responses to environmental justice, garnering attention from government and corporate entities. However, local activism was challenged by dominant institutions, notably large media outlets, which influenced public discourse. The political and epistemic barriers included an institutionalized focus on economic growth and a scientific viewpoint that treated nature as an object of control, coupled with claims of neutrality from those holding power over resources. Environmentalism in the U.S. was not new, with earlier conservation efforts acknowledging nature's intrinsic value, but these reflected the industrial revolution's anthropocentric views. This "Romantic Environmentalism" persisted into the 1950s, yet preservation and conservation methods are still prevalent today. The 1960s marked an "environmental revolution" where ecological disasters raised public awareness, alongside significant post-WWII growth leading to environmental decline. Health concerns linked to environmental issues prompted a rise in public mobilization, particularly among affluent individuals embracing post-materialist values aligned with social change movements. Consequently, a new environmentalism emerged, sharing themes with contemporary social movements, focusing on autonomy and collective identity, giving rise to "green politics" in Europe and institutional environmental protections in the U.S., such as the Environmental Protection Agency. A radical shift was represented by Deep Ecology, advocating for the equality of all life forms and moving beyond anthropocentrism [9, 10].

Key Cultural Narratives in Environmentalism

Narratives are essential for linking environmental and social issues across time and space. However, academic discussions often focus on scientific claims, neglecting cultural storytelling forms. This research interprets environmental narratives predominantly from elite North American and European institutions as master and counter-narratives, highlighting pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change versus social concerns for people. By analyzing materials such as non-fiction books, experimental music, dance, blogs, and self-funded films, the researcher explores how cultural narratives reconcile social and environmental issues, reshaping societal beliefs through multimodal expressions. Narratives can exclude potential future paths and lead social change downward; prioritizing socio-economic issues can diminish environmental pollution concerns, while emphasizing climate change does not resolve divisions among groups. Moreover, shortcomings in addressing political presentism and revenge remain in critiques of local environmental struggles. Miscommunication of ideological positions can create more harm than ideologies themselves. Actions often stem from affective justifications, leading to misjudged intentions and marginalization of agency. Thus, broader frames of attention demand sustained efforts to redefine legitimacy, focusing on analogies, genres, styles, and cognitive mapping, while identifying common ground beyond conventional representations of heroes or villains [11, 12].

Case Studies of Cultural Narratives

This section presents three case studies on climate change activism using social media for awareness. It highlights cultural narratives, the organization's social media strategy, and key individuals. Alongside video content reviews, statistics on content volume, view counts, and social media engagement are provided where possible. The specific discourse culture within activist communities is revealed through these consistent case studies, allowing for comparison among them. Organized by the dimension of cultural narratives most significant in each case, each study emphasizes a different aspect of activism performance. The first case focuses on narrative focus, detailing anti-sand mining activism that promotes collective political agency in response to threats. The second emphasizes agency-targeted narratives, spotlighting youth climate activists demanding action post-extreme flooding in their homeland. The third

case showcases narrative identity through youth activism, highlighting cultural identity's vulnerability in the climate crisis. These cases present varied activist narratives that can resonate broadly with popular discourse on climate issues, each shedding light on a distinct narrative dimension while sharing common elements. Collectively, they aim to inspire diverse audience responses based on identity, motivation, engagement, or action. Popular narratives often blend these dimensions for greater impact, yet analyzing them in isolation is still beneficial. Broadening the types of narratives and communities studied will enhance understanding of cultural narratives in environmental activism [13, 14].

Media Representation of Environmental Issues

Environmental issues have been addressed in different newspapers around the world. Several sources, including academic journals, have looked at the media representation of the environment in general. In South Africa, very little literature has been produced on how the media represents those issues. There is a wealth of literature out there, analysing the new South Africa's transition to democracy regarding socio-political issues of grave importance such as land, housing, education, and employment. However, very little has been said about the country-specific environmental issues. The only comprehensive work is done by the International Environmental Law Research Centre. The Centre has looked at how South African newspapers reported on the public perception of the Goodman Maize contamination and the Vaal River pollution as a result of the mining sector. This failure is also reflected in works by various thinkers who argue that the media has failed to include environmental issues as part of the broad socio-political discourse. However, new feasible angles for the analysis of a broader range of environmental issues in South Africa have been opened. Water is increasingly becoming a scarce resource, with the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria currently trading water with each other. As political battles rage and are played out in the media over public resources such as water, health care, spectrum, and land, so an older and more unconventional resource, the environment, is coming up for grabs. South Africa's very break apart the environmental issue is becoming politicized and more visible. Even relatively mundane issues such as Cape Town's overgrown parks have turned into the topic of a bitter political fight, with scandals and allegations of corruption showcased by front-page stories, show reviews and investigative programmes, on a par with political discourse about the arms deal or the wasteful expenditures of the parliamentarians concealed by a cloak of diplomatic immunity. While this analysis could be broadened, it focuses on the two national newspapers, the Herald and The Weekend Post, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), public radio, and television [15, 16].

The Impact of Cultural Narratives on Policy Making

In a world dominated by visible narratives, maps of sacred ecology and indigenous fight for the earth are examples of powerful cultural stories that motivate political activism for environmental policy change. Their success at catalyzing political mobilization begs investigation into what makes a narrative culture compelling, thereby directing agency at overthrowing current individuals or institutions in favor of more just worlds. The case of New York City's 2019 climate mobilization call for "The People's" climate referendum inspires an analysis of how the lack of powerful cultural stories focused on dispossession and accountability restricted political action for climate policy change. In elucidating a cultural story that demands accountability from the perpetrators of climate change, it is revealed that narrative structures matter: elevation of people is more compelling than simple victimization in limiting the interpretation of counter-narratives, and indigeneity story structure limits the reach of armchair activists. Some narratives can prime cognitive patterns and evolutionary trends, thus enhancing logical plausibility. However, this increased proximity can be concomitant with inevitable complications that increase the difficulty of executing a counter-narrative. To change the story of climate policy, the social movement amplification process must be redirected towards culturally resonant storytelling of accountability in climate politics. Audience trust must be evoked as the supporters of the Accountability Campaign Foundation need allies in top NYC institutions, wiser gatekeepers that can vouch for the truth of the climate accountability narrative and the irrelevancy and ineffectiveness of business-as-usual, negative narratives. Collaborative storytelling of accountability and sophistication of folly narratives can ensure that these cultural narratives will continue to reach high societal positions in the digital literate society's global media landscape [17, 18].

Challenges in Communicating Environmental Narratives

Cultural narratives and metaphors are key constructs for communication in environmental activism. However, the political implications and consequences of storytelling and their use of metaphors are often overlooked in the environmental literature. Scholars and activists alike often praise narratives as tools for reaching out and engaging wider, more diverse audiences. Narratives and metaphors are celebrated for their ability to personify environmental issues, evoke an emotional response, and illustrate complex connections through relatable analogies. The logics of how these narratives function, and the often-fragile

alliances that can be formed through their deployment, are much less well established. The unprecedented crisis of global climate change is likely to heighten calls for positive, personal, and often hopeful narratives. As more climate description enters the media, there is a real risk that people will tune out narratives and forms of description that they find too terrifying or alien. It is important to strike a balance between appealing across barriers of class, culture, and ideology without compromising scientific sobriety and giving in to doomism. Narratives, and the metaphors that often characterize them, allow complex and dynamic changes in social systems to be understood (equally important can be the tropes, scripts, or even motifs). Natural events, such as storms, droughts, or floods, are often thought of as metaphors for how societies may change. Conversely, narratives can be deployed politically and steadfastly to support a nation's thoughts of itself. Furthermore, local cities and communities can provide compelling stories for advocacy. Domestic enemies can coalesce around figures inspired by existing metaphors, just as affinities and alliances can form around asteroids and Black Swans. Yet allegories and parables can also twist the perceptions of knowledge, and diminish the malignancy of agents. In advocacy, narratives can be delivered in various formats and models, each valuing different features of the communication setting, audience, topic domain, evidence, and urgencies in both relational and discursive respects [19, 20].

The Future of Environmental Narratives

If no attention or environmental action is taken, humanity will some day find itself driving a car off the road towards a crisis point of ecological devastation, and there will be through-the-roof rates of asthma attacks in Detroit about renting a car. This master narrative has run through several possible scenarios of how things might go wrong into what appear to be rebuttals, but their core assumptions remain intact and unexamined. In stories of the human-as-environment conflict type, what is at play are broad, macro-scale changes that are featured as threats to humans. This perspective and priority structure shifts the subject matter of environment from structural and collective entities and phenomena, deep and large. In contrast, nonhuman persons and bodies exhibit particular behaviors, often consisting of acts of omission that humans take no notice of or account for. Nonhuman persons are to be considered as well or instead of or even exclusively, institutional actors themselves as actors; as well as powers and authorities that produce discourses and frames, there is a need to look whether such changes have had any effect on the production of knowledge. Humans have been featured as disproportionately agentic in these stories. Humans, as superbly virtuosic and intricately determined beings, are standard in the grand narrative of Western modernity. Based on knowledge of their superlative capacity and of non-agential forces, species of humanity over millennia are cast as the trouble, as systems-of-systems, knots-in-knots, and numerous formal models and simulations are constructed to represent them, track them, or even correct their effects. It is necessary to consider their many roles in graphical and rhetorical representations in a treatment of narratives, in discourse theory. Instead of a metanarrative, it could even be said that, in the contemporary North American intellectual environment, the grand narratives of modernity and the shipwreck of modernity might today be the master narratives about narrative. Examples abound from biological scientists who have written about biodiversity as our priceless assets that must be protected, or narrative contracts by which the obese discuss their symptoms with representatives of a pharmaceutical company in search of treatment. From such examples, it is clear that narratives are about environmental problems. Even though the conflict-driven narrative has been useful to the growth of the environmental movement, it is proposed that it must be understood as a master narrative with two other sides, and that the side discussed here is a powerful rhetoric in itself because of its entrenched place in contemporary environmental discussions and documents. While recent efforts to transcend the conflict template have met with some successes, this must be regarded as a process and a task likely fraught with difficulties because of the durability of this narrative. To be detailed, Technological Fixes, the Limits-to-Growth style Precautionary Discourse, and the Mountain in a Bend narratives all maintain basic assumptions and structures of tale-telling that draw upon and reinforce the master narratives as modes of understanding [21, 22].

CONCLUSION

Cultural narratives are not mere accessories to environmental activism; they are its very foundation. Through storytelling, marginalized groups assert agency, reframe ecological crises, and challenge the dominant paradigms of human-nature relationships. The interplay between master and counter-narratives reveals the contested terrain of environmental meaning-making, where legitimacy, power, and place intersect. From early conservationist ideals to radical biocentric philosophies and contemporary social media-driven movements, environmental storytelling has evolved into a dynamic strategy for advocacy and resistance. Case studies demonstrate how local stories rooted in identity and injustice mobilize broader audiences and shape political agendas. Yet, these narratives must be continually negotiated within the constraints of institutional power and media framing. Ultimately, reimagining

environmental activism through the lens of cultural narratives offers a more inclusive and impactful path forward—one that honors plurality, centers justice, and reclaims the environment not as an abstract entity, but as a living space entangled with the histories, futures, and voices of those who inhabit it.

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