

# Environment and Culture: Developing Alternative Perspectives in Environmental Discourse

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## **Abstract**

*This paper suggests that many aspects of environmental discourse that have been assumed to be universal need to be challenged to further develop environmental ideologies in today's increasingly diverse social contexts. It argues that cultural myths and misunderstandings often obscure truth, distort reality, and lead to unnecessary conflicts and antagonism, which are also seen in environmental management issues. Referring to the cases of Japan's whaling, and the assumed lack of interest in environmental issues among Asian communities, the paper argues that incorporating social and cultural aspects specific to a local context is critical for effective environmental management and education as well as for further development of environmental ideologies. The paper also argues that sound cross-cultural understanding is an essential skill for all environmental educators and practitioners.*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article suggère que plusieurs des aspects du discours environnementaliste tenus jusqu'ici pour universels doivent être remis en cause afin de faire progresser les idéologies environnementalistes dans les contextes sociaux actuels, de plus en plus diversifiés. L'article soutient que les mythes et les malentendus culturels tamisent la vérité, déforment la réalité et mènent à des conflits et à des antagonismes inutiles, conséquence qu'il nous est également donné d'observer dans le domaine de la gestion de l'environnement. En rappelant les cas de la chasse à la baleine au Japon et du manque d'intérêt présumé des communautés asiatiques pour les questions environnementales, l'article affirme que la prise en compte des aspects sociaux et culturels d'un contexte local donné est essentielle à l'efficacité de la gestion de l'environnement et de l'éducation environnementale ainsi qu'au progrès des idéologies environnementalistes. Il ajoute que tous les éducateurs et autres travailleurs du domaine de l'environnement devraient posséder une bonne compréhension des cultures.*

This paper emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural awareness in environmental discourse that provides alternative perspectives to traditional mainstream viewpoints. It argues that, in current environmental discourse, many aspects of environmental ideologies are often assumed to be universal.

In today's increasingly diverse social contexts, however, such assumptions may need to be challenged. If we accept that environmental practices can be influenced by the underlying culture, the diversity of the ideologies behind them should also be acknowledged. Drawing on an "Asian perspective" as an example of an alternative to a "Western" one, this paper suggests that developing cross-cultural awareness or alternative perspectives is essential to achieving a true interdisciplinary understanding of sustainability that takes social and political contexts into consideration. Such understanding is relevant to all environmental practitioners in fields such as politics, policy-making, management, and education.

### Definition of Culture

As Yenchen (2000) suggests, environmental cognition involves belief systems and values, as well as knowledge, in which "culture" clearly plays an important role. Analyzing culture, as Hsiao et al. (1999) point out, reveals "how discourse and ritualisation impact the solidarity, identity and consciousness of movement participants" (p. 213) and helps us to understand why certain approaches to mobilizing the environmental movement can be more successful in some societies than in others.

The definition of "culture" employed here extends the traditional anthropological and sociological notion of "culture as behaviour and representation of meanings, values and ways of life" (eg., Erickson, 1997; Hatton, 1998) to embrace "a network of representations—texts, images, talk, codes of behaviour, and the narrative structures organising these—which shapes every aspect of social life" (Schech & Haggis, 2000, p. 26). This notion does not place "culture" in any particular discrete bounded entity such as ethnic identity or regional boundary. More importantly, this definition does not separate culture from the economic and political arenas, and is therefore relevant to the discussion of sustainability, as "a form of economy that does not undermine the capacity of the earth and all its component parts to provide both nurture and the basic resource needs for all living matter, including human beings" (Turner, in O'Riordan, 1991, p. 7). Acknowledging the economic and political dimensions of culture also implies "power" in "practices and processes intrinsic to all social relations and structure" (Schech & Haggis, 2000, p. 29), where shared meanings constructed through discourse are used to produce "contestation and resistance as much or more than social cohesion and unity" (p. 29).

### Cross-Cultural and Alternative Perspectives

The importance of promoting cultural understanding in environmental discourse can be illustrated through reference to two cases I have encountered.

One is the debate over Japanese whaling, a practice that has been severely criticized on ethical and moral grounds in Australia. In this debate, Japan is often depicted as an “ecologically ignorant villain” or a land of “backward-looking barbarians” (*The Australian*, 16 June, 2000; 19 June, 2000; 25 June, 2000), whilst anti-whaling nations (Australia in this case) are seen as “environmentally conscious.” Although this debate is political rather than ecological in nature, there are clearly differences in cultural values attached to the species. A similar argument is often put forward in debates over indigenous hunting, such as, of dugongs and sea turtles for Australian Aboriginals and fur seals for Canadian Inuit, versus protection of these species.

The second case relates to a comment made by a member of an environmental organization about the difficulty of mobilizing local “Asian” communities in environmental activities (political or non-political). As in the case of whaling, local Asian communities were labelled “ignorant” or “indifferent,” and there was an unspoken and negative assumption that “Asian people,” in general, are uninterested in environmental issues. In both cases, what was disturbing for me was not that communities I obviously belong to (Japanese and Asian) were being criticized, but the fact that the argument was based on a very simplistic “good and evil” scenario, which as Hsiao et al. (1999) point out, tends to frame much environmental discourse. In both cases, assumptions were also being made about the universality or “correctness” of dominant Western perspectives.

Just as there is great diversity in environmental problems, and needs, of different regions (Gupta & Asher, 1998), attitudes towards the environment itself can also be diverse, and it is important to acknowledge that alternative perspectives exist. An example of an “alternative” to a Western perspective is Hofstede’s “East-West” dichotomy contrasting “individualism” and “collectivism” (Hofstede, 1986). Although such a divide can be simplistic, it is nonetheless useful in considering how assumptions made from a dominant perspective may be irrelevant in other contexts.

### Culture: East and West

One of the most prominent features of Western<sup>1</sup> environmental discourse in contrast with non-Western contexts, in my view, is its focus on an individual rights-based approach. In non-Western contexts, collective values tend to be acknowledged more, and individualistic approaches may be described as incompatible or counter-productive. Although (in “English” language discourse), it is often acknowledged that traditional Asian attitudes are consonant with modern environmentalist thought (eg., Yenchen, 2000), there is also an assumption that non-individualistic approaches (eg., conforming, collectivist, group-oriented) are negative or hindrant. For example, Barrett and Therivel (1991) describe Japan’s academics as limited in independent thought

and inquiry, and bound by “a network of loyalties and obligations,” and as a consequence, they “remain conformist” and “controversial fields of research are frowned upon” (Barrett & Therivel, 1991). Schech and Haggis (2000) also point out that “Asians” tend to be criticized for their lack of individual initiative and willing subordination to authorities, which tend to be interpreted as “a lack of civil and political liberties” (p. 164). A negative tone is often evident even in writings by non-Western writers. For example, Hsiao et al. (2000) suggest that the somewhat tame nature of the Asian political climate is due to a “distaste for open criticism of authority, the fear of upsetting the unity of the community, and the knowledge that any violation of the community’s rules of propriety will lead to ostracism” (Hsiao et al., 1999, p. 210).

I support Schech and Haggis’s (2000) view that developmental discourse often fails to acknowledge that the concept of right is “based on cultural traditions and may vary from society to society . . . [and an individualistic approach] artificially separates individuals from their communities, and underplays the importance of duties and sacrifice for the greater good . . . and fails to recognise the common oppression which large groups of individuals experience in many societies” (p. 156). From this perspective, they argue, even the concept of “universal human rights” may not be universal in all societies. The pursuit of collective interests, which Schech and Haggis argue is more relevant to some minority groups, is equally important to many non-Western societies. I would also argue that in such societies emphasis on collective values over individual ones does not necessarily mean exploitation or denial of the individual, or a lack of liberty, as suggested earlier.

### Developing Alternative Perspectives

As seen above, different cultures express their values differently, and this applies equally to environmental values. For example, Pepper points out that “Japanese perceive nature and culture as mutually embedded, and their attitude lies outside of the Western Judeo-Christian model” (Pepper, cited in Barrett, Abe, Harako, & Ichikawa, 2000, p. 79). Kong et al. (2000) argue that in Asia “people may draw on a unity of underlying values which emphasise harmony with nature (including one another) and respect for environment” (p. 133). Hsiao et al. (1999) also point out that Taiwan’s success in raising people’s environmental concerns was due to its emphasis on a “collective action frame” (p. 213).

Opposition to the West expressed by Asian leaders such as Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed or Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (Schech & Haggis, 2000) is not only a protest against political interference but also against the imposition of Western values that are incompatible with local societies. The Asian Development Bank (1997) also considers

the inappropriate adoption of Western environmental management practices to be one of the main causes of environmental degradation in Asia. Deyo makes a similar point in noting that industrial peace in the newly industrialized Asian communities is generally attributed to the political culture, which stresses “cooperation, a preference for mediation over confrontation, industriousness, deference to elders and most important the subordination of individual to family, group and state” (Deyo, in Hsiao et al., 1999, p. 211).

Clearly, ways of expressing values and preferred courses of action vary across cultures, and in non-Western contexts, overt and individualistic actions are not often favoured (Kato, 2001a, 2001b). It may also be noted that although collective interests in non-Western societies are often seen as negative (eg., “self-sacrifice”), the value of a collective approach is clearly acknowledged in other contexts such as “community participation” in environmental practice. Moreover, although “Asian values, striving for excellence” as a group or nation (Kong et al., 2000) are often criticized as ruthless and aggressive developmental strategies that disregard environmental consequences, such self-excellence and self-discipline may be considered as an expression of individuality which does not necessarily deny collective interests. There are examples of effective community-based environmental management practice based on self-regulation such as the *toban* and *han* (roster and group) system in Japan through which a strong sense of individual responsibility for the community is expressed. Overt “individual” actions or claims for individual rights as defined by “Western” perspectives therefore do not necessarily indicate the level of environmental consciousness in non-Western contexts, and it is therefore presumptuous to conclude that Asian nations have a lower level of environmental consciousness (Skyles, Yenchen, Fien, & Choo, 2000). The differences are in their “preferred approach” and “selected action.” Alternative perspectives, therefore, help us to understand that in some societies, the environmental movement may be more effective if placed in the context of cooperation to improve the quality of life for the community and society as a whole rather than pressing for individual rights.

## Conclusion

As approaches to sustainability should be interdisciplinary, developing a sense of cross-cultural awareness that challenges undetected assumptions in ideologies and discourse is an essential task for all environmental practitioners in politics, policy-making, management, and education. A broader notion of “culture,” defined to include social and political dimensions, is relevant to the context of sustainability, and also to communication across academic disciplines (eg., science and humanities) and interest groups (eg., communities, academia, government). As Kalland and Persoon (1998) point out, diversity exists not only in “backgrounds, histories, ideologies and strategies but

often also in definitions of *a better environment*” (p. 34-35; my emphasis). This challenges our existing ideologies, practices, and discourse further, and poses questions such as to what extent the definition of “sustainability” may be regarded as universal. Given the increasingly diverse context of environmental discourse, it is now time, as Yenchen (2000) suggests, not only “to think globally, act locally” but also “to think locally,” to value the rich sources of traditional environmental knowledge and local understanding and experience in furthering environmental debates.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The literature referred to here is limited to that written in the English language.

## Notes on Contributor

**Kumi Kato** is a lecturer in the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies, the University of Queensland, Australia. Her current interests include “culture and environment,” particularly cross-cultural value conflicts in educational, developmental or management contexts and their application to professional development and educational programs.

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