

# Theoretical Aspects Responsible for Environmental Degradation in Environmental Sociology Approaches

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## **Abstract**

The environment encompasses everything that surrounds us, including both living and non-living elements. Non-living components consist of land, air, and water, while living components include microorganisms, plants, animals, and humans. Sociology, as the study of human social behavior and societal changes, approaches environmental issues through a sociological lens. This perspective involves examining the social dynamics that influence our relationship with the natural environment, whether it is identifying the underlying causes of environmental crises, addressing their consequences, or envisioning and implementing solutions. The article focuses on contemporary theoretical frameworks in environmental sociology, particularly the factors contributing to environmental degradation and its various components.

**Keywords:** Theoretical aspects, Environmental degradation, Environmental sociology, Society and Environment

## **1.1 Introduction:**

Environmental sociology has its roots in classical works that emphasized the relationship between humans and their physical surroundings. This section will shift our attention to contemporary research areas within environmental sociology, examining how recent studies have expanded and deepened the exploration of societal-environment interactions. According to Hannigan (2006), since its establishment as a distinct field in the 1970s, environmental sociology has evolved through two primary phases. The initial phase focused on identifying the key factors leading to environmental degradation, while the subsequent phase aimed to discover effective strategies to mitigate these issues, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between society and the environment. Danlup and Marshall (2006) add that, alongside Hannigan's theoretical frameworks, current research in environmental sociology also addresses the impacts of environmental challenges. This includes examining the social consequences of energy scarcity and other natural resource issues, particularly concerning equity. Environmental degradation remains a critical issue in the modern world. Challenges such as climate change, unsustainable consumption patterns, and the spread of toxic substances must be recognized not only as

scientific or individual issues but also as significant social problems. Sociology, as the study of human social phenomena and societal changes, provides a valuable perspective on environmental issues. Examining environmental issues through a sociological lens involves analyzing the social factors that influence our relationship with the environment. This includes identifying the underlying causes of environmental crises, addressing their consequences, and envisioning and implementing effective solutions. Climate change, for instance, stands out as a significant social justice issue today, particularly due to its unequal effects on impoverished populations worldwide. The sociological approach to environmental issues has gained attention only recently, as will be elaborated in the subsequent sections. While addressing these challenges necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration, there is an increasing acknowledgment of the critical contributions of social sciences, particularly sociology. This recognition arises from a growing understanding that environmental issues are, at their core, social issues. This assertion is increasingly valid today, as the origins, impacts, and potential solutions to environmental challenges are deeply intertwined with human social behavior. These problems are social in nature because they influence human communities, their causes are rooted in social interactions, and sustainable solutions demand collective societal action.

## 2.1 Objective:

To know an overview of the approaches to Environmental Sociology involves understanding the theories that explain the factors contributing to environmental degradation and its various components.

## 3.1 Approaches to Environmental Sociology

### 3.1.1 Theorizing Factors Responsible for Environmental Degradation or Destruction

The increasing prominence of environmental issues over the last decade can be attributed not only to heightened awareness among scientists, the media, and policymakers but also to notable changes in the nature of these challenges. Modern environmental issues are distinct from earlier concerns such as litter, habitat loss, and traditional air and water pollution in several significant ways:

- **Scale:** Localized issues now have regional and global repercussions, exemplified by urban air pollution and river contamination compared to broader phenomena like acid rain, global warming, and ozone layer depletion.
- **Pervasiveness/Frequency:** Contaminated water supplies and insufficient solid waste management are reported frequently enough in the media to be recognized as widespread problems.
- **Complexity and Risk:** The origins of these issues are often challenging to comprehend, their consequences are difficult to identify and predict, and they present greater risks than previous environmental challenges.
- **Seriousness:** The impacts of these problems have severe implications for human health and welfare, including future generations, as well as for other species, with some effects potentially being irreversible.

The contemporary attempts of theorizing the causes for environmental degradation will leave us with two theoretical approaches according to John Hannigan (2006). These include, the ecological explanation model of ‘competing environmental functions’ and political economy explanation as found in Alan Schnaiberg’s concepts of the ‘societal-environmental dialectic’ and the ‘treadmill of production’,

both of which view (According to Buttel, 1987 cited in Hannigan, 2006) the social structure and social change being reciprocally related to the physical environment.

### **3.1.1.1 Ecological Explanation**

#### **i. Human Ecology**

The ecological perspective on environmental degradation originates from the discipline of 'human ecology,' which was a prominent focus in urban sociology from the 1920s through the 1960s. As discussed in your Urban Sociology course, Robert Park from the University of Chicago developed this theory, gaining recognition during the 1920s and 1930s until it encountered criticism for its links to Social Darwinism. Park explored the concept of the "web of life," emphasizing the interdependence of various species within a shared environment. Central to this web is the principle of the 'struggle for existence,' where species adapt to find their 'niches' in both the physical environment and the division of labor among them. Park adapted principles from biological ecology to analyze human populations and communities. However, he cautioned that human ecology significantly differs from plant and animal ecology in several ways. Firstly, humans are less directly reliant on their physical surroundings, largely due to a global division of labor and exchange systems. Secondly, humans possess the ability to modify their environment and habitats through inventions and technology, rather than being strictly limited by them. Lastly, the organization of human communities is influenced by cultural factors, particularly an institutional framework shaped by customs and traditions, rather than being solely determined by biological factors. Thus, human society is structured on two distinct levels: the biotic and the cultural.

This depiction of the relationship between nature and society fundamentally challenges several principles of Catton and Dunlap's New Ecological Paradigm. It highlights the unique traits of humans, such as creativity and technological prowess, instead of focusing on their similarities with other species. Additionally, it prioritizes the role of social and cultural influences, including communication and labor division, over biophysical and environmental factors. Ultimately, it minimizes the limitations set by nature, instead celebrating humanity's ability to dominate it.

#### **ii. Cultural Ecology**

Cultural ecology, while not achieving dominance, compelled traditional human ecologists to consider social organizational and cultural factors more thoroughly. This influence is illustrated in O. D. Duncan's POET model (Population, Organization, Environment, and Technology), which presents an 'ecological complex' where: (1) each component is interconnected with the other three, and (2) a modification in one element can impact the others. Although the POET model was pioneering in shedding light on the intricate dynamics of ecological disruptions, it did not adequately address environmental limitations.

### **3.1.1.2 Competing Function of the Environment**

Catton and Dunlap have effectively articulated the ecological foundations of environmental degradation through their model of the "three competing functions of the environment." As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, their framework highlights three primary roles that the environment plays for humanity: as a supply depot, a living space, and a waste repository. In its role as a supply depot, the environment provides both renewable and non-renewable resources—such as air, water, forests, and fossil fuels—that are vital for survival. Excessive exploitation of these resources inevitably leads to shortages. The environment also functions as a habitat or living space for humans. In contemporary urban settings,

overutilization of this function can result in overcrowding, congestion, and the destruction of habitats for other species. Lastly, the waste repository function allows the environment to act as a "sink" for waste materials, including garbage, sewage, industrial pollutants, and other byproducts. When the capacity of ecosystems to manage waste is exceeded, it can lead to health issues stemming from toxic waste and significant disruptions to ecosystems.

### **3.1.1.3 Political Economy Explanation:**

The concepts of the 'societal–environmental dialectic' and the 'Treadmill of Production' are pivotal in environmental sociology. Alan Schnaiberg's seminal work, *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity* (1980), offers a profound analysis of the interplay between capitalism, the state, and environmental issues. By integrating elements of Marxist political economy and neo-Weberian sociology, Schnaiberg elucidates the inherent contradictions that arise from economic growth and environmental degradation. He critiques various theorists, notably biologists like Ehrlich and Commoner, to establish his arguments. Schnaiberg challenges Ehrlich's perspective by highlighting the significant disparities in environmental impact across affluent and impoverished nations, as well as within different socioeconomic groups in the same country. He argues that population growth is closely linked to poverty, which compels individuals in lower-income brackets to have more children for labor and security. Additionally, Schnaiberg takes issue with Commoner's view of technology as an independent force, asserting that technological advancements are largely influenced by political and economic motivations, particularly the pursuit of profit and capital accumulation.

### **3.1.1.4 Constructivism and Materialism**

One of the core ideas in environmental sociology is the notion that 'the environment' is a social construct (Hannigan 1995). This concept goes beyond the mere alteration of 'untouched' nature by humans into 'artificial' or 'constructed' spaces. Instead, it emphasizes how our perceptions of nature, the environment, and environmental issues are influenced by social processes related to knowledge creation and communication. It is essential to acknowledge that the language we use to describe our environments does not reflect universally valid objective characteristics but rather socially significant categories and interpretations that can vary across different contexts, times, and social groups. This can be further explored by posing some straightforward questions.

## **4.1 Conclusion:**

The three perspectives come together to create a model known as 'political economy.' This model indicates that economic growth driven by capitalism is a fundamental cause of environmental damage experienced across the globe. As nations pursue aggressive economic strategies, they often prioritize profit over ecological health. This focus on growth leads to practices that harm the environment, such as deforestation, pollution, and depletion of natural resources.

The global free-market economy plays a crucial role in this issue. It promotes competition and encourages consumption without adequately addressing environmental impacts. Companies aim to maximize profits, frequently at the expense of the environment. Regulations that could slow environmental harm are often overlooked or weakened in favor of short-term economic gains.

This model highlights a significant challenge: the global free-market economy acts as the main obstacle to reducing environmental harm and achieving sustainable ecological practices. Efforts to address



climate change and protect ecosystems are often hindered by the relentless push for economic expansion. Achieving a balanced approach that prioritizes both economic growth and environmental stewardship remains a key task for policymakers and society as a whole.

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