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## Editorial

## Environmental management as situated practice

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## ABSTRACT

We propose an analysis of environmental management (EM) as work and as practical activity. This approach enables empirical studies of the diverse ways in which professionals, scientists, NGO staffers, and activists achieve the partial manageability of specific “environments”. In this introduction, we sketch the debates in Human Geography, Management Studies, and Science and Technology Studies to which this special issue contributes. We identify the limits of understanding EM through the framework of ecological modernisation, and show how political ecology and work-place studies provide important departures towards a more critical approach. Developing these further, into a cosmopolitical direction, we propose studying EM as sets of socially and materially situated practices. This enables a shift away from established approaches which treat EM either as a toolbox whose efficiency has to be assessed, or as simply the implementation of dominant projects and the materialisation of hegemonic discourse. Such a shift renders EM as always messy practices of engagement, critique and improvisation. We conclude that studying the distributed and situated managing agencies, actors and their practices allows to imagine new forms of critical interventions.

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## 1. Introduction

Ecological crises are the effects of mis-management of human–nature relationships – this tenet is widely shared among influential actors in environmental policy. Such a framing implies that current human–nature relationships would become sustainable if only managed properly. Consequently, institutionalised *environmental management* emerges as the logical solution (e.g. EPA, 2007; UNEP, 2011; European Commission, 2015). At the same time, critics argue that environmental management provides governance for, and thus sustains, unsustainability rather than addressing the actual problems (Levy, 1997; Blühdorn, 2013).

This special issue addresses environmental management as situated practice: it examines the manifold socio-techno-natural relations through which ‘environmental management’ is constituted. In focus are those actors who conceptualise themselves as environmental managers or are framed by others as such. How do they manage? Our methodological–analytical trajectory is

committed to opening up how natures and material agencies are constituted or enrolled in the doing of management whilst furthering the conversation between environmental studies and post-constructivist social sciences (Bingham and Hinchliffe, 2008; Asdal and Marres, 2014).

The approach advocated here contrasts with dominant takes on environmental management which tend to reproduce the entrenched dichotomy in environmental thought of utilitarian logic (consider the discourse of ‘internalising externalities’) versus romantic imaginary (such as protecting species or wilderness). Sidestepping this dichotomy helps to shed shared assumptions: both sides of these dominant takes and analyses separate the world into humans and nature, transforming environments into resources and extending market logics to new domains (see Glacken, 1967; Costanza et al., 1997; Stern, 2007; UNEP, 2009). In these kinds of analysis, focus tends to be on the tools and outcomes of environmental management, while little attention is paid to the situated practices – that is to the practical, local, social and material contingencies – of using the tools and producing the effects. This special issue turns to and critically explores these understudied aspects, offering an analytics that – as we outline in this introduction – is highly generative for understanding and

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rethinking the set of practices, actors and instruments that come under the notion of ‘environmental management’.

As critical social science has observed for a long time, environmental management often enough systematically impacts marginalised communities and the very ecological features it was instituted to protect (Peluso, 1992; Scott, 1998). However, within the traditional analytical framework of environmental management, such effects cannot be adequately addressed (Bryant and Wilson, 1998); the systems of environmental management cannot detect their own failings (Power, 1996). From these critical contributions we derive an alternative tenet: the manageability of environments is inherently limited. That is to say, these limits are not only located in the deficiencies of management plans and prescriptions, but also in the particularities of specific ‘environments’ and in the peculiarity of environmental management work (see also Lippert, 2011).

Taking the results of such critical studies as a starting point, the approach of this special issue shifts the focus away from repeated contestation of environmental management’s claims to ‘success’ and potential. We suggest that the management of environments needs to be approached analytically not only as a set of tools and plans, but also as a job, a configuration of situated practices: managing environments may very much be about getting the job done, an end in itself or a process. By asking *how environmental managers manage to manage*, we conceptualise environmental management as politically charged *work practices* that need to be studied and theorised in their own right (see also Lippert, 2014).

We focus on people’s practices, grounded in the understanding that realities only come into existence as they are enacted (Bourdieu, 1990; Ingold and Palsson, 2013). Decisively, our perspective analyses not only the transformation of environmental objects but also their performative achievement (Mol, 2002). We approach the managing agencies, entities and their practices as configuring how and what environments are (Suchman, 2012). Management practices always fold in and impact on particular social and ecological relations and are therefore necessarily *situated* in concrete but changing relations (Haraway, 1988; Suchman, 2007). A central aspect of this is the practices’ *embeddedness* in existing arrangements which not only constitute the possibilities and limitations for action, but also configure the object of management. We approach environmental management practice, thus, as situated in particular material and semiotic relations – recognising, *inter alia*, the manager’s social, political and historical position, and how the manager relates to other actors, instruments and environmental entities. Management situations exist in time and they are located in space. Asking how environmental managers manage allows us to attend to the minute details that matter in terms of shaping management, the realities subject to management, and how management constitutes its objects.

One way to start reimagining environmental managers as *workers* in this way is to think of job descriptions in areas like nature park management or corporate environmental management. However, dominant approaches that attempt to reconcile capitalism with the environment tend to simply presume the environmental manager as a more or less successfully performing and implementing agent of the respective plan or prescription for rendering capitalism green (Lippert, 2010). At the same time the ‘manager’ becomes invisible: such approaches eclipse the agents, their practices and therewith the practicalities of management from view.

Much more visible in environmental management are so-called solutions. Discursively, solutions are significant: they promise ways out of environmental crises. The environmental governance discourse assumes *inter alia* institutions, incentives and sanctions as effective solutions to such crises (Adger et al., 2001; Jordan et al., 2003; Biermann and Pattberg, 2008). While the implementation of such solutions in particular cases is presented as a ‘challenge’,

implementation is also staged as inherently doable and merely requiring all of ‘us’ to collaborate to make this implementation a success. This discourse does not empower a multitude of humans as social and political actors but primarily casts ‘us’ as consumers, narrowly positioned as indicators of demand for environmental goods and services. One of the most significant policy discourses and academic schools of thought that attempts to theorise how capitalism is reconciled with the environment is ‘ecological modernisation’ (Hajer, 1995; Christoff, 1996). Ecological modernisation theory posits that more efficient resource use will solve the environmental crisis (Huber, 2008). It also posits that institutionalised modernisation of capitalism will foster the required efficiency. It then ‘finds’ proof for reduced environmental impact in macro-economic data of ‘ecologically modernised’ countries in the Global North and rapidly developing countries.<sup>1</sup> From that, it concludes that the institutions it has been advocating all along – such as corporate environmental management systems, environmental market solutions and the ‘green consumer’ – ‘work’ (Mol, 2010; York and Rosa, 2003).

The approach taken in this special issue, in contrast, attends to the actual workers charged with implementing the policy programmes of ecological modernisation and their practices. This allows for a very different way to evaluate the supposed materialisation of the desired effects of green governance ‘on the ground’. Analytically, we approach environmental management as partially professionalised practices in modern institutions and organisations, as work achieved by the managers. Our interest, in other words, turns to a large range of actors including, but not limited to, environmental governance advisors and consultants, corporate environmental managers, environmental scientists and practitioners of sustainability sciences, environmental NGO staff and activists. Along these lines, David Rojas (2016) addresses scientists working on climate and policy, Franz Krause (2016) hydropower engineers and Ingmar Lippert (2016) carbon accountants. Here, then, is a concern with what we might call ‘agents of ecological modernisation’ (Lippert, 2010) – agents for, in or against dominant political paradigms of the environment, agents whose practical work often enough risks sustaining ‘unsustainability’ (Blühdorn, 2013).

Some of the studies in this issue also use this understanding of environmental managers as a generative heuristic, rather than literally. So our discussions partially intersect with recent discussions in geography, philosophy and feminist theory on ‘cosmopolitics’ (Stengers, 2005b) in that they open up conversations about new forms of living together in more-than-human worlds. Uli Beisel (2016) analyses management (im)possibilities around mosquitos, Israel Rodríguez-Giralt (2016) addresses birds, and activists enrolling these animals, and Manuel Tironi and Ignacio Fariás’s (2016) consider human attempts to isolate themselves from tsunamis. This shows how it is fruitful to examine people’s work practices and their effects on environmental management even if no particular actor explicitly identifies as environmental manager. That is to say: as environmental management work produces relevant effects in the world, studying how these practices actually achieve their effects is insightful independently of whether any of the actors is explicitly designated in the field as an environmental manager.

## 2. On empirical studies of environmental management

To locate the space in which this special issue’s contributions are placed, we relate to two bodies of literature that engage with environmental management empirically.

<sup>1</sup> This optimist interpretation, of course, is problematised e.g. in engagements with the outsourcing of environmental costs (Ninan, 2011), rebound effects (Alcott, 2005; Jänicke, 2008) and discussions of boundary assumptions (Lohmann, 2009).

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