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Ecological Crises and Ecopolitics Research in Australia

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It is difficult to exaggerate the scale of contemporary ecological crises. These challenges, particularly climate change, necessitate new modes of politics and policy, even potentially new institutions, that seem anathema to the emphases of traditional accounts of environmental political science. In this paper, we explore contemporary ecopolitics research in Australia that is attempting to come to terms with the reality of ecological crises and the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. Showcasing a range of scholarship in this area, we argue that contemporary Australian ecopolitics research identifies and engages with a wide range of *sites* of politics and a significant number of (consequential) political *actors*. It recognises the need to engage directly with key institutions while also extending our gaze to the environment movement, community groups, financial institutions, local governments, and consumers. It acknowledges that sites of politics extend from the way ecological crises are framed in public debate to policy management, practices of private corporations and even to individual patterns of consumption. And it argues for an expansive conception of *ethics* beyond currently living human communities, a vision which arguably better meets the reality of ecological crises and the Anthropocene epoch.

Introduction

We face an unprecedented challenge: to address concurrent and interrelated ecological crises, most notably but not exclusively climate change. Clearly, and as Australian constituencies are acutely aware, politics plays a crucial role in any response. Elections can be won and lost on the promise of action on environmental issues; policy instruments from regulation to incentive systems have been central to debates about responding to ecological issues; and how ecological issues are framed and debated helps us make sense of whether they are viewed as urgent or secondary to other considerations by elites and the broader community.

But ecopolitics extends well beyond formal institutional and electoral politics in a national context, the traditional bread and butter of political science. In the case of climate change, the global scope of the challenge, and the localization of effects, means recognising the importance of political struggles and action from the global to the local level: from UN Conference of the Parties climate meetings to ecosystem(s) management. The contribution that individuals and communities can and do make to climate change and its solutions means understanding individual *and* collective behaviour. It also requires attention to the function of markets and corporations that encourage or discourage ecological stewardship or can cause direct harm on a significant scale.

An expansive and interconnected research agenda consistent with addressing this crisis potentially, however, pushes against the core concerns of political science and the

traditional boundaries of its scholarship. Certainly, this discipline gives us resources for grappling with the politics of contemporary ecological crises, not least in providing insights into how powerful institutions come to prioritise and pursue responses to each crisis. However, there is a tendency within traditional political science scholarship to focus on a limited number of (formal) sites of politics, a limited number of (formal) political actors and responses (defined in policy terms), with a circumscribed vision of ethical responsibility. In this regard, *environmental* politics risks appearing as “politics as usual” in the face of unprecedented and urgent crisis.

In response to this context, we explore contemporary ecopolitics research in Australia and its attempts to come to terms with the reality of ecological crises and the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. The paper recognises and builds on a rich tradition of ecopolitics in the Australian context, not least associated with the Ecopolitics Association of Australia from the 1980s, but which fell from prominence even as ecological crises compounded.¹ It also speaks to a broad tradition of reflection on key contours of environmental politics literature in Australia.² This article, a collaborative product of a research workshop on this theme, argues that ecopolitics research consistent with addressing the scale of intersecting ecological crises requires broad horizons. This entails examining the significant range of sites, means, agents, and beings of moral concern that do—and should—inform our scholarship.

We argue that Australian ecopolitics research is indeed pushing precisely in this direction, at least as evidenced by examples showcased here. Contemporary Australian ecopolitics research identifies and engages with a wide range of *sites* of politics and a significant number of (consequential) political *actors*. It recognises the need to engage directly with international environmental negotiations and national-level policy settings while also extending our gaze to the roles and actions of the environment movement, community groups, financial institutions, local governments, and consumers as potentially consequential agents in addressing ecological crises. It acknowledges that sites of politics extend from the way ecological crises are framed and presented in public debate to bureaucratic policy management, practices of private corporations and even to individual patterns of consumption. And it argues for an expansive conception of *ethics* beyond currently living human communities, a vision which arguably better meets the reality of ecological crises and the Anthropocene epoch.

The article proceeds in five parts. First, we outline what we mean by ecological crises, linking this to the arrival of the Anthropocene epoch. We then identify tendencies and inclinations within traditional political science that militate against the type of research required to understand and address contemporary and interrelated ecological crises. The following three sections showcase research informed by ecopolitics in the Australian context, which engages with politics beyond traditional sites, agents, and ethics of policy. The third and fourth sections drive home the need to extend our gaze beyond traditional sites and agents of politics, respectively, while the final section notes the importance—and challenge—of extending normative political theory and political philosophy beyond human collectives and human institutions. In the conclusion we cautiously reflect on the implications of this analysis for political science in Australia and even beyond. We suggest the need to continue to engage with traditional points of analysis within political science while not allowing contemporary

¹ See Timothy Doyle, Ken Dyer, and Pam Gunnell, *The Ecopolitics Conferences, 1986–1993* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, Occasional Paper 5, 1993).

² Aynsley Kellow, “Environmental Politics,” in *The Australian Study of Politics*, ed., R.A.W. Rhodes (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 347–55.

institutional arrangements to determine the limits of our conception of “politics,” and we point to the need to engage in innovative forms of theorising beyond traditional boundaries of political science into multidisciplinary spaces while retaining a sense of disciplinary identity.

The objective of this paper is not to provide an authoritative account of literature in the field of political science engaging with ecological crises, in Australia or beyond, nor is it to provide a definitive account of “ecopolitics.” Rather, we aim to examine the contours of contemporary ecopolitics research in Australia, illustrating that this scholarship is moving in a direction consistent with understanding and addressing contemporary ecological crises. In the process, we hope this paper encourages reflection about the state of the field, while encouraging discussion on where we are headed as a discipline of political science in addressing ecological crises in Australia.

The Anthropocene and Ecological Crises

It is genuinely difficult to overstate the scale of contemporary ecological crises, both in a global context and in Australia. One prominent attempt to characterise the multifaceted nature of environmental challenges at the global level is the idea of “planetary boundaries,” which proposes that there are nine ecological boundaries delimiting the “safe operating space” for humanity and the Earth system.³ These include climate change, ozone depletion, loss of biosphere integrity, chemical pollution, ocean acidification, freshwater consumption and the global hydrological cycle, land system change, nitrogen and phosphorous flows to the biosphere and oceans, and atmospheric aerosol loading.⁴

Of these “boundaries” or “challenges,” it is only the response to ozone depletion that could be said to be consistent with addressing the issue effectively, particularly through the 1987 Montreal Protocol.⁵ On other challenges, it is less that progress has been insufficient, and more that ecological harm is growing significantly—at times exponentially—in scope and severity. In some cases, ecological harm is nearing the irrevocable in the face of business-as-usual models of extraction, production, and economic exchange.

Humanity’s impact on the natural world is such that global “human-made mass now exceeds all living biomass.”⁶ The associated habitat loss for plants and animals—through land clearing for agriculture in particular—has driven massive biodiversity loss. A WWF report suggested that wildlife populations had declined by almost 70 per cent in the last 50 years,⁷ while current analysis suggests we are seeing a “sixth mass extinction event,” memorably characterised by Ceballos, Erlich, and Dirzo as “biological annihilation.”⁸ Australia, already having lost more mammal species than

³ See Johan Rockström, Johan et al., “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Nature*, Vol 461, 7263 (2009), pp. 472–5.

⁴ *Ibid.*; Johan Rockström et al., “Safe and Just Earth System Boundaries,” *Nature*, Vol 619 (2023), pp. 102–111.

⁵ Paul Barnes et al., “Ozone Depletion, Ultraviolet Radiation, Climate Change and Prospects for a Sustainable Future,” *Nature Sustainability*, Vol 2, 7 (2019), pp. 569–79.

⁶ Emily Elhachan et al., “Global Human-Made Mass Exceeds All Living Biomass,” *Nature*, 588 (2020), pp. 442–4.

⁷ WWF, *Living Planet Report 2022* (Gland: WWF, 2022).

⁸ Ceballos, Gerardo Ceballos, Paul Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo, “Biological Annihilation via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol 114, 30 (2017), pp. E6089–96.

any other continent in the industrial era, has seen the list of threatened species rise by almost 10 per cent in a five-year period.⁹ This has only been worsened by disasters—the 2019/2020 black summer bushfires alone killed billions of animals—and the effects of climate change.

Climate change has shifted from a future possibility to a contemporary reality. According to the most recent IPCC report, average global temperatures are already 1.1°C over pre-industrial levels.¹⁰ This has resulted in more frequent and more severe disasters, species loss, changing rainfall patterns, desertification, rising sea levels, ocean acidification and has had devastating effects on ecosystems, some of which are vulnerable to relatively low-level temperature rises (e.g., coral reefs). And with the 1.5°C goal endorsed at Paris in 2015 looking almost impossible to achieve given steadily rising global emissions,¹¹ deliberations about the response to the climate crisis have shifted. In 1989, US Vice President Al Gore declared adaptation “a lazy copout on fighting the causes of climate change.”¹² Now, with climate change locked in, adaptation, resilience building, and reparations for loss and damage have joined mitigation as key topics in formal international climate deliberations, while more controversial interventions like geoengineering are increasingly finding their way into academic, public, and policy debates.¹³ The climate crisis is well and truly here.

Beyond the broad label of ecological crises, one idea that has been mooted as connecting these various dynamics of environmental harm—in both origins and effects—is that of the Anthropocene. In 2000, Paul Crutzen made a case for the arrival of this new geological epoch. For Steffan and colleagues elaborating this case,¹⁴ this epoch can be understood as one in which

Human activities are now so pervasive and profound in their consequences that they affect the Earth at a global scale in complex, interactive and accelerating ways; humans now have the capacity to alter the Earth System in ways that threaten the very processes and components, both biotic and abiotic, upon which humans depend.

Humanity, in this schema, is a planetary force profoundly affecting the conditions of our own existence.

⁹ Ian Cresswell et al., *Australia: State of the Environment, 2021* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). See also Michelle Ward et al., “Lots of Loss with Little Scrutiny: The Attrition of Habitat Critical for Threatened Species in Australia,” *Conservation Science and Practice*, Vol 1, 11 (2019).

¹⁰ IPCC, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2022). Of course, temperature changes, and their effects, will be uneven throughout the world.

¹¹ International Energy Agency, *CO2 Emissions in 2022* (Paris: IEA, 2022).

¹² In Matt McDonald, “Geoengineering, Climate Change and Ecological Security,” *Environmental Politics*, Vol 32, 4 (2023), p. 579.

¹³ See Harriet Bulkeley and Peter Newell, *Governing Climate Change*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2023).

¹⁴ Will Steffan, *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet under Pressure* (Berlin: Springer, 2004), p. 1.

While the concept of the Anthropocene has been subjected to critique,¹⁵ it does point to something fundamentally important to the way we think about humanity, the natural world, and ecological crises: that it is no longer tenable, if it ever was, to conceive of humanity as separate from the ecological conditions of our own existence. Anthropocene realities, whether ecosystem destruction, climate change and its effects or even the origins of the coronavirus,¹⁶ represent existential and fundamental challenges to human societies and the biosphere. We cannot assume a “quiescent” Earth¹⁷ as the backdrop to human activity, and in this context the Anthropocene framing represents a fundamental challenge to the human-nature divide central to modern thought. Clark and Szerszynski describe this, in turn, as a fundamental challenge to the social sciences.¹⁸ So just how well equipped is political science as a field for coming to terms with this challenge, and giving us resources for both understanding and addressing the ecological crises confronting us?

Political Science and Ecological Crises

There is, of course, a strong tradition of environmental politics research, including in the Australian context, where the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* has been an important host of debate.¹⁹ Australian scholars have been at the forefront of debates about environmental political philosophy, environmental movements and their engagement with the political process, policy responses to environmental crises, the role of environmental issues in elections, and the global politics of environmental

¹⁵ Of a significant range of scholarship, see, for example, Simon Dalby, *Anthropocene Geopolitics* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2020); Jason Moore ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene* (Oakland, PM Press, 2016). It should also be noted that the International Commission on Stratigraphy voted against formal endorsement of the Anthropocene epoch in 2024. One commentary in response, however, noted that “although the Anthropocene probably will not be added to the geological timescale, it remains a broad cultural concept already used by many to describe the era of accelerating human impacts, such as climate change and biodiversity loss.” See Alexandra Witze, “Geologists Reject the Anthropocene as Earth’s New Epoch—after 15 Years of Debate,” *Nature*, 627 (2024), p. 649.

¹⁶ Cristina O’Callaghan-Gordo and Josep Antó, “COVID-19: The Disease of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Research*, 187 (2020), 109683.

¹⁷ Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For example, Mark Beeson and Matt McDonald, “The Politics of Climate Change in Australia,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol 59, 3 (2013), pp. 331–48; Christopher Rootes, “Exemplars and Influences: Transnational Flows in the Environmental Movement,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol 61, 3 (2015), pp. 414–31; Astrid Mignon Kirchhof and Chris McConville, “Transcontinental and Transnational Links in Social Movements and Environmental Policies in the Twentieth Century,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol 61, 3 (2015), pp. 331–8.; Willem Van Rensburg and Brian W. Head, “Climate Change Sceptical Frames: The Case of Seven Australian Sceptics,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol 63, 1 (2017), pp. 112–8; Francesca Da Rimini et al., “Climate Policy Networks in Australia: Dynamics of Failure and Possibility,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol 67, 2 (2021), pp. 295–311.

cooperation.²⁰ But in examining the capacity of ecopolitics research in Australia to address contemporary and interrelated ecological crises, we are aware that the core concerns of traditional political science appear to push against the breadth of scholarship necessitated by those crises. We identify three core tendencies here around (narrow) conceptions of agents, responses, and the scope of analysis that potentially resist the type of ecopolitics research necessary for understanding and addressing the contemporary challenges we face.

First, there is a tendency in traditional political science research to define the central focus of such research in terms of *policy* responses to (environmental) issues at the level of *formal political institutions*, particularly at the state level. On the institutional focus, we certainly see some engagement with local governance arrangements or international cooperation to guide national policy responses, but there is a broader tendency to limit our focus to existing formal political institutions. Scholars have highlighted the risks of depicting the space of politics in such narrow (disciplinary) terms. This can potentially serve to exclude forms of Indigenous governance of ecosystems or care for country that challenge Western responses to environmental change.²¹ Similarly, distinctive and new sets of regional governance arrangements to address specific ecosystem management might be overlooked with this focus.²² These are certainly increasingly prominent areas of research engagement in the field, but these are still at risk of being on the other side of the boundaries we draw around the *space* of politics and governance in (environmental) political science. This is a significant challenge for the field given the transnational nature of much environmental change, the importance of localised responses to ecosystem management, and the inconsistency between administrative and jurisdictional borders and the (globally entangled) boundaries of ecosystems themselves.

Second, on the question of responses to ecological crises, the focus on *policy* responses by institutions noted earlier emphasises the strengths and limitations of particular forms of government regulation, taxation, markets, or economic incentives. Indeed, the IPCC highlights the need for more work to be done on the capacity of actors, including governments, to manage “solution spaces” and transitions that enable climate resilient development within the short timeframes remaining.²³ Research on the design of governance arrangements, economies, and decision-making processes that include diverse participation and that enable climate resilient development is also required. Clearly, a focus on effective policy responses through existing institutions is

²⁰ Of a substantial range of scholars and scholarship, see, for example, Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992); John Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997); Timothy Doyle, *Green Power: The Environment Movement in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000); Timothy Doyle and Aynsley Kellow, *Environmental Politics and Policy Making in Australia* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1995); Kenneth Walker and Kate Crowley eds, *Australian Environmental Policy 2* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999); Lorraine Elliott, *The Global Politics of the Environment* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1997).

²¹ Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019); Graeme Reed et al., “Indigenous Guardians as an Emerging Approach to Indigenous Environmental Governance,” *Conservation Biology*, Vol 35, 1 (2021), pp. 179–89.

²² For example, Elana Wilson Rowe, “Ecosystemic Politics: Analysing the Consequences of Speaking for Adjacent Nature on the Global Stage,” *Political Geography*, Vol 91 (2021), pp. 102497; Anthony Burke and Stefanie Fishel, “Across Species and Borders: Political Representation, Ecological Democracy and the Nonhuman,” in *Non-Human Nature in World Politics: Theory and Practice*, eds, Joana Castro Pereira and André Saramago (Berlin: Springer, 2020), pp. 33–52.

²³ IPCC, *Climate Change* 2022.

important given the imperative for these institutions to substantively address environmental challenges with the tools they have at their disposal, as scholars working on the idea of the “green state” have long argued.²⁴

While this research remains necessary for addressing multiple ecological crises, the danger in this prioritisation of formal sites of politics is limiting our discussion of “response” to environmental challenges to those tools, resources, and practices within the capacity of current institutions. This appears inconsistent with the failings of those institutions and practices in effectively addressing these problems to date and the need to consider and explore radical responses to ecological crises.²⁵ It also appears inconsistent with recognition of limits to state capacity and the centrality of other forms of agency to addressing environmental challenges.

Traditional political science scholarship on environmental issues suggests an inclination towards allowing existing political institutions, including their conventional remits and practical capacities, to determine the limits of our imagination in engaging environmental issues, despite their demonstrable failure to address ecological crises to date. Lövbrand et al. refer to this tendency as a “post-political ontology of the Anthropocene.”²⁶ This was the central thrust of a critique of both the field and practice of international relations in response to ecological crises,²⁷ but is also evident in the discipline of political science more broadly.

Third and finally, on the issue of ethics and justice in political science literature there is a tendency towards focusing on obligations to other human populations, with the associated tendency towards reaffirming a human-nature divide. Indeed, for Soper, this is a tendency in broader social science thought.²⁸ As the Anthropocene context suggests, however, the inclination towards reaffirming such a divide appears increasingly untenable. Alternative forms of analysis that recognise and address ethical obligations to other beings, challenging the human-nature binary in the process, are clearly needed. Increasingly, we are challenging that binary, and contributors to this paper engage precisely with these questions.²⁹

Ultimately, the (necessarily brief and partial) picture painted here of the capacity of political science to give us resources for understanding and addressing contemporary ecological crises highlights the need to go beyond traditional political science research. While traditional political science scholarship has produced analysis of great value, we

²⁴ For example, Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); John Barry and Robyn Eckersley, eds, *The State and the Global Ecological Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

²⁵ See Tiffany Morrison et al., “Radical Interventions for Climate-Impacted Systems,” *Nature Climate Change*, Vol 12, 12 (2022), pp. 1100–6.

²⁶ Eva Lövbrand et al., “Who Speaks for the Future of Earth? How Critical Social Science Can Extend the Conversation on the Anthropocene,” *Global Environmental Change*, Vol 32 (2015), p. 214.

²⁷ Anthony Burke et al., “Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR,” *Millennium*, Vol 44, 3 (2016), pp. 499–523.

²⁸ Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). See also Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

²⁹ See also Danielle Celermajer et al., “Multispecies Justice: Theories, Challenges, and a Research Agenda for Environmental Politics,” *Environmental Politics*, Vol 30, 1–2 (2021), pp. 119–140; Robyn Eckersley, “The Discourse Ethic and the Problem of Representing Nature,” *Environmental Politics*, Vol 8, 2 (1999), pp. 24–49; David Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007); Matt McDonald, *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2021).

demonstrate here how contemporary ecopolitics research in Australia does go beyond the narrow sites of politics, a limited number of (formal) political actors and responses (defined in policy terms), and even a narrow vision of ethical responsibility. This enables us to tackle the scale and nature of ecological crises, but it is worth reflecting on what this means for the visibility and impact of our discipline.

There are two important caveats to this analysis and conclusion, however.

First, these are broad tendencies and inclinations within the field of political science. Looking back over past scholarship there are important exceptions to all of the above.³⁰ In recent years we have also see the broader ecopolitics research programs emerging internationally: the development of the “earth systems governance” project, for example, proceeds from recognition of the need to reckon with the global scale of ecological challenges in a world of states.³¹ Some scholars, moreover, have pointed to Indigenous forms of environmental governance,³² some to transformative political solutions to environmental crises,³³ and some to the imperative for recognition of moral obligations to other beings.³⁴

Second, and a crucial point to note here: analyses that speak to existing political institutions and landscapes, articulating prospects for change within that context, remain essential. Indeed, some of the research noted below does precisely that. Given the scale of ecological crises there is clearly an important—even urgent—need to understand and speak to key existing policy communities and policy debates. But these are not the limits of the political space. Addressing ecological crises arguably necessitates a division of labour, with some working within existing systems to improve policy appreciation and understanding, and some imagining and enabling radical alternatives to these systems that have proven inadequate for addressing ecological crises. What we present below is a snapshot of accounts of the sites, agents, and scope of ecopolitics that draws on existing political science resources while consciously moving beyond these to develop an illustration of what a fuller account or understanding of ecological crises might look like. Some interventions even suggest pathways towards alternative, potentially more effective, responses. In doing so this paper highlights the plurality, and possibly even polycentricity, in Australian ecopolitics research, demonstrating a commitment to analyses of spaces, sites, and agents of politics consistent with addressing the scale of contemporary and interrelated ecological crises.

Beyond Traditional Sites of Politics

As noted, the tendency in the traditional political science literature on the environment has been to approach sites of politics as spaces in which responses to environmental change, and contestation about those responses, focuses on policy development at the

³⁰ See Doyle, Dyer and Gunnell, *The Ecopolitics Conferences*.

³¹ Frank Biermann, “Earth System Governance as a Crosscutting Theme of Global Change Research,” *Global Environmental Change*, Vol 17, 3–4 (2007), pp. 326–37.

³² Reed et al., “Indigenous Guardians.”

³³ Burke et al., “Planet Politics.”

³⁴ Celermajor et al., “Multispecies Justice.” It is telling that in the process of conducting this research, however, that researchers have frequently—even consistently—drawn on intellectual resources from other disciplines, whether sociology, anthropology, or philosophy, for example. And while cross-disciplinary research, endorsed here, would clearly help address this challenge, it is important to recognise what is driving research in this direction given disciplinary norms (in employment, promotion, or grant funding) that disincentivise this type of research and researchers from undertaking it. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

level of formal political institutions responsible for enacting that policy. But this is only a segment of what constitutes Australian ecopolitics (ecopolitics research in Australian institutions), and a partial representation of the research required to understand and address ecological crises.

While sites of environmental governance are often taken as given, Mélodie Ruwet suggests the need to examine how ecological spaces are defined in the first instance.³⁵ Her work suggests that semantics can be a fruitful means of examining the governance of oceans. While the ocean is one continuous body of water, practitioners and scholars alike often routinely refer to oceans rather than the Ocean. Human populations have, over time, divided the global Ocean into different ocean systems, through naming, subdividing, and territorializing. These subdivisions are consistent with the current organisation of ocean governance, which is highly fragmented and mostly organised around human property. Yet, these subdivisions are usually not relevant to the nonhuman world. Fish, for example, do not recognise borders and other political boundaries. This example serves as a reminder of the tendency to impose (arbitrary) spatial limitations and borders on ecological spaces, then to take these constructs as the starting point of our analysis with limited critical reflection on the politics of their constitution.

International law has emerged as a key means of “governing” spaces such as oceans, but as a range of critics have noted,³⁶ such law often tends towards enabling extraction and undermining climate mitigation and biodiversity protection. This could be viewed as a limitation of international law in general, with decades-old agreements serving as key instruments for the governance of environmental space even after the arrival of ecological crises. In this context, Anthony Burke and others have examined the failures as well as the value of the Convention on Biological Diversity or the Paris Agreement on Climate Change,³⁷ treating these as *sites* of politics. Recent research in this space has also moved beyond this critical examination to propose new forms of international law to respond to contemporary ecological crises. These range from reforms to trade and oceans law, bans on fossil fuels and deforestation, new “rights of nature” in law, and an international crime of ecocide.³⁸ In this sense, rather than international law constituting the backdrop for or foundation of environmental governance, recent research suggests the need to critically reflect on the politics of international law and interrogate its efficacy.

Core concepts and principles of environmental governance are also potentially key sites of politics and political contestation in the context of ecological crises. Simon Friederich and Jon Symons, for example, examine how conceptions of sustainability—

³⁵ Mélodie Ruwet, “Ocean governance in the Anthropocene.” Paper presented at *Ecological Crisis and the Politics of the Anthropocene* workshop, Brisbane, 17–18 November 2022.

³⁶ Kyla Tienhaara, Kyla, “Regulatory Chill in a Warming World: The Threat to Climate Policy Posed by Investor-State Dispute Settlement,” *Transnational Environmental Law*, Vol 7, 2 (2018), pp. 229–50.

³⁷ Anthony Burke, “Blue Screen Biosphere: The Absent Presence of Biodiversity in International Law,” *International Political Sociology*, Vol 13, 3 (2019), pp. 333–51; Hayley Stevenson, “Reforming Global Climate Governance in an Age of Bullshit,” *Globalizations*, Vol 18, 1 (2021), pp. 86–102; Michelle Lim, “Biodiversity 2050,” *Yearbook of International Environmental Law*, Vol 30, 1 (2019), pp. 79–101.

³⁸ See, for example, Kyla Tienhaara and Lorenzo Cotula, *Raising the Cost of Climate Action?* (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 2020); Anthony Burke, “An Architecture for a Net Zero World: Global Climate Governance beyond the Epoch of Failure,” *Global Policy*, Vol 13, 3 (2022), pp. 24–37.

a master concept of environmental governance—are changing.³⁹ The starting point for their analysis is a policy dilemma: how to assess which local activities are consistent with global sustainability? As environmental conditions diverge from the Holocene, the focus of environmental concern is shifting from *conservation* of common pool resources (e.g., forests and fisheries) towards *restoration and provision* of global public goods such as a habitable climate. Earlier conceptions of sustainability that sought to conserve stocks of natural capital were amenable to empirical assessment, for example, by stipulating a rate of logging that preserves timber stocks. Contemporary conceptions of dynamic and open sustainability are harder to specify. If an activity's sustainability is assessed against its anticipated contribution to future well-being, assessments of sustainability will be complicated by *uncertainty* about the preferences of future societies and about the activity's impacts on complex, social-ecological systems.

Policy development which requires legislative resolution of the concept of sustainability's many ambiguities and contradictions thus prompts deliberation on desirable futures. Negotiation of the European Union Taxonomy for Sustainable Activities is an example. European legislators' difficulty in identifying technical criteria that would classify nuclear energy as less sustainable than renewables illustrated the inherently political character of "sustainability." Friederich and Symons argue that these uncertainties mean that efforts to develop comprehensive measures of sustainability must inevitably fail.⁴⁰ However, the wider trend towards self-consciously "experimentalist" environmental governance that is subject to open-ended review in the light of changing societal knowledge might be instructive. Instead of seeking empirical assessment, policymakers might focus on *processes* to ensure continuous democratic reflection on environmental standard setting.

Susan Park points to a distinctive space of ecopolitics in the intersection between the international development agenda, local communities and ecological (and social) harm.⁴¹ She notes that many people harmed by transnational extraction, production, and development projects choose non-legal, non-binding international grievance mechanisms (IGMs) to have their voices heard. Often this is because legal and political options may not be available to them. Indeed, around the world people put themselves in grave harm from state and corporate reprisal for seeking to protect themselves and their environment.⁴² IGMs are increasingly used to provide recourse for people suffering environmental and social harm from internationally funded development projects, with approximately 41 per cent of such funding channelled through institutions such as the World Bank Group.⁴³

Yet development projects may have dramatic and irreversible environmental and social impacts: loss of lives, livelihoods, and land, a breakdown in community cohesion, species extinction, habitat loss, and irreparable damage to local ecosystems. The World Bank's Inspection Panel provides recourse for harm from international development projects, to identify whether the harm resulted from the World Bank

³⁹ Simon Friederich and Jonathan Symons, "Operationalising Sustainability? Why Sustainability Fails as an Investment Criterion for Safeguarding the Future," *Global Policy*, Vol 1 (2023), pp. 61–71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Susan Park, *The Good Hegemon US Power, Accountability as Justice, and the Multilateral Development Banks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁴² Nathalie Butt et al., "The Supply Chain of Violence," *Nature Sustainability*, Vol 2 (2019), pp. 742–7.

⁴³ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Multilateral Development Finance* (Geneva, OECD, 2018).

breaching its own environmental and social safeguards. Yet, despite operating for nearly 30 years, we still do not know how it—or any other international grievance mechanism—contributes to improving conditions in project areas.⁴⁴ While only approximately 1 per cent of the projects from these lenders contribute to overt devastation, the World Bank is a leader in shaping our understanding of what constitutes “sustainable development.” We need more research on how communities are using a range of strategies to defend their lives, livelihoods, and land in the face of ever-increasing demand for the global production, trade, and consumption of goods.

In this context there is a compelling case to turn our gaze to the local and community level when examining the context of environmental governance and the implications of ecological change as experienced by local communities. This clearly applies to disasters linked to climate change. While many climate change, disaster, and sustainable development policies are set at the global level by states and international organisations, the effects of disaster and climate change are acutely felt at the local level. In political analyses of disaster response, however, local actors are most often presented as victims in the first instance, then as passive recipients of disaster aid, at the whim of donors and the international community.

In the Pacific Islands region, Rebecca McNaught and colleagues found that local actors are working collaboratively at a range of levels to improve disaster response and preparedness in the face of climate change.⁴⁵ These local actors often indicate that the scale and recent history of disasters in the region has left them with no other option. Yet despite this movement towards localisation, approaches to disaster relief remain donor dependent. In some cases where national governments are unwilling to share power and donors prefer helicopter modes of fly-in–fly-out support, the private sector, NGOs, and citizens are collaborating to address food security challenges in response to these limitations. The study concludes that Pacific Island practitioners build on a rich cultural capital and history of relationship building to navigate across political arenas and actors to achieve resilience outcomes. Additionally, in a global review of localised participation in climate and disaster resilient development, McNaught found that while tangible outcomes of participatory forms of governance are evident, participation can be performative, with those in power reluctant to take political risks associated with increasing the number of seats at the table.⁴⁶ This finding points to the need for dedicated skills development in navigating participatory local governance of climate change and disaster solutions, both inside and outside formal structures.

A final alternative “site” of politics showcased here concerns the finance sector and biodiversity conservation, examined by Anantharajah and Evans.⁴⁷ The rise of private biodiversity finance is representative of a broader shift to non-state market-driven (NSMD) global environmental governance. Here, the cost and regulatory burden of environmental protection is shifted from government to non-government actors, and

⁴⁴ Park, *The Good Hegemon*.

⁴⁵ Rebecca McNaught, “Visualising the Invisible: Collaborative Approaches to Local-Level Resilient Development in the Pacific Islands Region,” *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, Vol 26 (2022), pp. 28–52.

⁴⁶ Rebecca McNaught, “The Application of Collaborative Governance in Local Level Climate and Disaster Resilient Development—A Global Review,” *Environmental Science and Policy*, Vol 151 (2024), 103627.

⁴⁷ Kirsty Anantharajah and Megan Evans, “Biodiversity Finance as a Technology of Power,” *SocArXiv Papers*.

biodiversity must “pay for itself” to be conserved.⁴⁸ Moved into financialised territory, regulation primarily has a role in market creation and facilitation of profit. Under for-profit conservation, biodiversity is subordinate to market rationales, and the space for symbiosis between conservation and profit is very narrow.⁴⁹ Sites of conservation are dramatically transforming, motivated by speculative rationales of future financial flows. The critical agenda for environmental politics is thus arguably less about considering the material potential for biodiversity finance, and more about understanding how its discourses and power dynamics are being reproduced and making visible the related material futures that follow.

These necessarily selective illustrations suggest that sites of contemporary Australian ecopolitics research extends well beyond the cut and thrust of politics at the level of formal institutional arrangements of states, local governments, and international conventions. Indeed, as these illustrations suggest, a much wider appreciation of the sites of politics is evident, whether stepping back to consider the politics of core spatial categories or concepts, examining forms of governance taking place at the localised level or in the private sector, or interrogating the assumptions underpinning forms of international governance designed to address transnational challenges. This broad scope of analysis is clearly necessary in the context of contemporary, complex, and interrelated ecological crises.

Beyond Traditional Agents of Politics

If sites of ecological politics are significantly wider than traditional accounts of political science suggest, it stands to reason that our understanding of what constitutes “ecopolitics” needs to extend beyond those deemed responsible for enacting environmental policy. The following illustrations provide an insight into contemporary Australian research on the range of actors engaging with ecological crises in political terms that push precisely in this direction.

Clearly, states are viewed as central political actors in the field of political science, especially international relations. At the international level, however, the tendency is to focus on powerful states and their contribution to the problem of environmental change or the prospects for meaningfully addressing it. Yet existing accounts of material power and its significance in international relations thought do not allow us to fully appreciate the potential significance of alternative agents: small states. As Wesley Morgan argues,⁵⁰ Pacific Island states have played a significant (and constructive) role in the global response to the climate crisis. By working as a coalition with island countries of the Caribbean, Pacific Island states have shaped global climate agreements.⁵¹ The first draft of what became the Kyoto Protocol, for example, was put forward by Pacific diplomats on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States, while Pacific nations proved crucial for securing the Paris Agreement in 2015.

⁴⁸ Vijay Kolinjivadi et al., “Neoliberal Performatives and the ‘Making’ of Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES),” *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol 43, 1 (2019), pp. 3–25.

⁴⁹ Jessica Dempsey and Daniel Chiu Suarez, “Arrested Development? The Promises and Paradoxes of ‘Selling Nature to Save It,’” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, Vol 106, 3 (2016), pp. 653–71.

⁵⁰ Wesley Morgan, “Ripple Effect: How Climate Inaction Jeopardises Our Pacific Standing,” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, 12, (July 2021).

⁵¹ Wesley Morgan, George Carter, and Fulori Manoa, “Leading from the Frontline: A History of Pacific Climate Diplomacy,” *Journal of Pacific History*, forthcoming.

It is worth noting too that in advocating strong international action on climate change, Pacific leaders have routinely declared that climate change is their “single greatest threat” and have lobbied the UN Security Council to recognise “the dangers that small islands and their populations face are no less serious than those faced by nations and peoples threatened by guns and bombs.”⁵² In advancing these claims these states directly challenge dominant accounts of security and the national interest in international relations thought that tend to separate states and their communities from the ecological conditions of their existence. This in turn challenges the human-nature divide noted earlier as central to modern (political) thought.

While clearly key instruments of the state, defence establishments have not traditionally been viewed as agents for addressing environmental change. Yet they increasingly recognise a role for themselves in this context, especially in considering the security implications of climate change. Anselm Vogler’s analysis suggests that around 70 per cent of security strategies published by defence departments after 2008 identified climate change as a national security concern.⁵³ It should be noted that these Defence bureaucracies often fall short of accounting for their own considerable emissions from military mobility, remain overly focused on possible second-order consequences of climate change (such as population movement and conflict) and too often discuss climate change as a future rather than immediate concern.⁵⁴ Yet the embrace of some type of role for defence clearly suggests that even within formal political institutions such as states, the range of actors responding to ecological crises is expanding alongside the increase in the scope and severity of crises.

Below the state, civil society movements encompass a wide range of actors who seek to both engage in the political arena while concurrently enacting change outside the bounds of formal political processes. Robyn Gulliver’s extensive empirical analysis charts the Australian environmental movement’s changing characteristics, networks, activities, and outcomes across the last decade.⁵⁵ Thousands of groups have engaged in environmental collective action, most of whom consist primarily of volunteers. Only a small fraction are institutionalised NGOs with paid staff and formal organisational structures. Instead, loose conglomerations of volunteer activists engage with environmental issues in diverse communities across all corners of the country, with only around half of their campaigns aiming to directly influence or change policy. Campaigns targeting businesses, such as those that demand banks refuse financial support for fossil fuel projects, have also fostered the development of new forms of

⁵² Pacific Islands Forum, “Boe Declaration on Regional Security,” *Forty-Ninth Pacific Islands Forum Communiqué*, 3–6 September 2018; Fulori Manoa, “The Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS)’ early advocacy on climate and security at the United Nations,” *Griffith Asia Insights*, 27 May (2021).

⁵³ Anselm Vogler, “Barking up the Tree Wrongly? How National Security Strategies Frame Climate and Other Environmental Change as Security Issues,” *Political Geography*, Vol 105 (August 2023), 102893; Anselm Vogler, “On (In-)Secure Grounds. How Military Forces Interact with Global Environmental Change,” *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol 9, 1 (2024), pp. 1–19.

⁵⁴ Anselm Vogler, “Tracking Climate Securitization: Framings of Climate Security by Civil and Defense Ministries,” *International Studies Review*, Vol 25, 2 (2023), pp. 1–27.

⁵⁵ Robyn Gulliver, Kelly Fielding, and Winnifred Louis, “The Characteristics, Activities and Goals of Environmental Organisations Engaged in Advocacy within the Australian Environmental Movement,” *Environmental Communication*, Vol 14, 5 (2020), pp. 614–27; Robyn Gulliver, Kelly Fielding, and Winnifred Louis, *Civil Resistance against Climate Change* (Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021).

distributed network campaigns which link thousands of volunteers under a shared campaign ask.

However, while these campaign targets may reside outside the bounds of traditional political arenas, most campaign activities utilise legal and well-trodden avenues for political communication, such as petitions and submissions, to effect change. As a result, the tendency to prioritise research on activities of large NGOs such as the Australian Conservation Foundation and Greenpeace reduces our understanding of the effectiveness of grassroots, local and volunteer activism. Furthermore, a preoccupation with activists who engage in disruptive protest—such as blocking roads—both contribute to a negative stereotype about activists and propel ongoing attempts to criminalise this form of protest.⁵⁶ Tracing how grassroots activism evolves in the face of ecological crises and suppression of dissent will help extend academic analysis beyond traditional agents of politics and enhance our understanding of impactful responses to ecological crises.

The role of actors and agents below the state and formal institutions is also evident in response to disasters linked to climate change. Clearly, the scale of disaster impacts during the 2019/2020 Black Summer and the 2022/2023 floods across Australia demonstrate that in a warming world, the needs and inaccessibility of communities will outstrip even the most resourced of governments' abilities to respond. In the past, Australians handed their safety to the nation state. However, the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements prompted by the Black Summer fires admitted that the state can no longer guarantee protection and that communities need to accept that emergency services won't always be there to assist.⁵⁷

Rebecca McNaught's work examines the ways in which, out of necessity, communities have stepped in to fill these gaps and are using their own resources and networks to respond to and recover from disaster impacts.⁵⁸ A flood recovery study in Northern New South Wales found that the closer an actor is to the affected population, the higher the level of trust citizens had in them, with informal community responses the most trusted.⁵⁹ A new politics is arguably emerging here around the contested space of disaster management actors. Formal emergency services, which have a traditional top down "command and control" and increasingly centralised approach to managing disasters, struggle to acknowledge the value of local knowledge or work alongside these community led responses. In this region new forms of governance networks are emerging to draw upon the strengths of different types of actors to address the enormity of the challenge.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Robyn Gulliver et al., "The Criminalization of Climate Change Protest," *Contention*, Vol 11, 1 (2023), pp. 24–54; Avelie Stuart, Emma Thomas, and Ngaire Donaghue, "I Don't Really Want to Be Associated with the Self-Righteous Left Extreme," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, Vol 6, 1 (2018), pp. 242–70.

⁵⁷ Mark Binskin et al., *The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements—Report* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

⁵⁸ Rebecca McNaught, "The Application of Collaborative Governance in Local Level Climate and Disaster Resilient Development—A Global Review," *Environmental Science and Policy*, Vol 151 (2024), 103627.

⁵⁹ Jacob Birch and Hannabeth Luke, *The Northern Rivers Flood Recovery Study* (Lismore: NSW, 2022).

⁶⁰ Rebecca McNaught et al., "Innovation and Deadlock in Governing Disasters and Climate Change Collaboratively—Lessons from the Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales, Australia," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (2024), forthcoming.

Another way of understanding the expansion beyond traditional political agents is to examine the role of individuals and collectives in shifting everyday and consumer practices. This focus on *material* participation illustrates an inclusive, participatory engagement with democratic practice—one focused on democratic control, oversight, and attention to the flow of materials through bodies and communities. Illustrated in studies of more practical and system-changing approaches to sustainability, or what David Schlosberg has called “sustainable materialism,”⁶¹ this work examines movements focused on changing the systems that supply basic needs—including the redesign of food systems, energy systems, sustainable fashion, and more. The core political motivations of these movements include frustration with the political status quo, a challenge to the power behind the material flows of many of our basic needs, a desire for social and environmental justice, and a demand that real sustainability, reconnected to the nonhuman world, be practiced in everyday life.

For example, community food or food justice movements are not just about buying ethical produce, but the development of sustainable food *systems* and a more transparent relationship between producers and consumers. Such food movements are increasingly seen as alternative systems of the organisation and material flow of food through environments and communities across the globe.⁶² Activists focused on such material participation repeatedly emphasise the importance of increasing both individual and community engagement with, and involvement in changing, material flows; this is a matter of both democratic action and social and environmental justice. Such action is not only about *individual* material acts as politics—movements that engage with material participation are about *collective* action, participation, and social inclusion in everyday material practices and the mutual redesign of systems and flows.

Finally, in the space of biodiversity finance there is a need to recognise the salience of actors such as corporates and financial institutions, and indeed intermediaries.⁶³ Intermediaries are key “winners” of financialised responses to biodiversity loss: the “innovators” and experts that translate nature into transactions and value. Interestingly, these actors are elite, and financing is primarily a product of elite relationships rather than a marketplace per se, limiting market access. The products generated themselves are also important actors, reinscribing financialised logics. An example of this is the biodiversity credit, a novel “innovation” that has emerged in the last two years, despite decades of poor experience with biodiversity offsets.⁶⁴ Nature loss is obfuscated in the discourse of the credit, reflecting the subjugated position of nature as an actor in this financialised context.

Again, this selective illustration of contemporary Australian-based research on a wide range of actors addressing ecological crises reminds us of the plurality of approaches in how we examine and understand ecopolitics, including and beyond

⁶¹ David Schlosberg and Luke Craven, *Sustainable Materialism: Environmental Movements and the Politics of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019); David Schlosberg and Roman Coles, “The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life: Sustainability, Material Flows and Movements,” *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol 15, 2 (2016), pp. 161–81.

⁶² Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, “Beyond Development, What?,” *Development in Practice*, Vol 8, 3 (1998), pp. 280–96; Joshua Sbicca, *Food Justice Now!* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

⁶³ Paula Kivimaa et al., “Towards a Typology of Intermediaries in Sustainability Transitions: A Systematic Review and a Research Agenda,” *Research Policy*, Vol 48, 4 (2019), pp. 1062–75.

⁶⁴ World Economic Forum, “Biodiversity Credits: Unlocking Financial Markets for Nature-Positive Outcomes,” *Briefing Paper* (2022), https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Biodiversity_Credit_Market_2022.pdf.

formal political institutions. in response to the realities—and imperatives—of ecological crises. This is evident even without a discussion of the potential agency of non-humans, discussed briefly below and an increasing focus of critical scholarship in this field.⁶⁵

Beyond the Traditional Scope of Theorising

Finally, addressing ecological crises includes extending boundaries of moral concern beyond currently living human populations, rethinking the traditional scope of political science's engagement with environmental politics in the process. This is also particularly apparent in contemporary ecopolitics research in Australia.

Engaging with debates about the relationship between climate change and security, Matt McDonald makes a case for approaching the security implications of climate change through the lens of ecological security.⁶⁶ Here, the focus is less on the protection of existing institutions from the indirect effects of climate change—like population displacement or even armed conflict—and more on how we should orient our actions towards best ensuring the resilience of ecosystems themselves in the face of immediate and direct threats associated with climate change. In the process, the case made is one in which our orientation is towards the rights and needs of the most vulnerable across space (marginalised populations in the developed world), time (future generations), and species (other living beings). And the practices designed to advance security are less about militarised vigilance, border control or adaptive responses to indirect effects, and more oriented towards significant mitigation action aimed at minimising harm for the most vulnerable. The ecological security case is located within a broader recognition of the need to come to terms with the Anthropocene context and the limits of forms of ethical reasoning that cut us off from the biological world in which humanity is embedded and upon which it relies. Ecological security is a case for a shift in the way we think about what might be called a master concept of international relations—security. And it is a move necessitated by the nature of ecological crises confronting us.

Although political science, like other social sciences, has had to contend with its implicitly raced, gendered, abled, and other “falsely universalist” disciplinary assumptions, the idea that the subjects whose lives are its concern are solely humans has generally remained unchallenged. Working with a team of interdisciplinary scholars, Danielle Celermajer has insisted that to address contemporary ecological crises, theories and practices of justice require a radical rethinking of the subject of justice.⁶⁷ The deleterious ecological and social effects of excluding other earth beings from the realm of justice and from the reach of political institutions whose operation is (at least nominally) underpinned by principles of justice cannot be countered through approaches that continue to treat beings other than humans as moral patients or side-constraints on human interests. Even more than this, this fundamental conceptual and institutional exclusion of the more-than-human belongs to and operationalises the larger binary and hierarchical ontologies that have given licence to the systems of

⁶⁵ See, for example, Anthony Burke, “Interspecies Cosmopolitanism: Non-Human Power and the Grounds of World Order in the Anthropocene,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol 49, 2 (2023), pp. 201–22.

⁶⁶ McDonald, *Ecological Security*.

⁶⁷ Danielle Celermajer et al., “Justice through a Multispecies Lens,” *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol 19 (2020), pp. 475–512.

extraction of the more-than-human world⁶⁸ and the systematic devaluation of the Indigenous knowledges that defied such logics.⁶⁹

Just as traditional accounts of security and justice in international relations and political theory have neglected the more than human world, so too have most accounts of domestic and international political order. As Robyn Eckersley has shown, these accounts abstract political orders from the socio-ecological relations and systems (including the climate system) in which they are embedded and therefore provide an incomplete understanding of what is needed for the maintenance of order and a misguided understanding of the causes and effects of instability.⁷⁰ For example, global heating is understood as a “source of instability” for states and the international order rather than as the effects of international climate disordering practices that are condoned by the international economic order. An ecological materialist perspective highlights how these ongoing practices are producing an increasingly harmful “metabolic rift”⁷¹—a rupture in the material and energetic metabolism or exchange between socio-economic systems and ecosystems/Earth systems that has benefited the few at the expense of the many.

Moreover, dominant accounts of the relationship between international order and justice in IR maintain that international order (particularly among great powers) is necessarily prior to international justice because it is a precondition for the management of conflict and for collective debates about justice. Yet, by conceptually separating order from justice, this approach ignores the many ways in which international orders produce and maintain climate injustices. Eckersley argues that addressing the climate (in)justice claims of the most vulnerable communities (both human and more than human) allows the demands of justice and prudence to converge to protect all socio-ecological communities and the climate system.⁷² However, this will demand a new and more just international economic order and not only a fairer and more effective climate regime.

At all these levels, the Anthropocene context reminds us of the imperative of challenging and moving beyond the human-nature divide that continues to limit our imagination and enable practices that render ecosystems and other living beings vulnerable, and with it undermine the conditions of our own existence. In this sense, ecopolitics entails widening the scope of our ethical concerns, and contemporary Australian ecopolitics research has contributed to that purpose.

Conclusion

The above account is a partial and selective illustration of the plurality of contemporary research on ecopolitics in Australia from a range of different perspectives to make sense of, and respond to, ecological crises in political terms. Clearly, the scale and nature of these crises compel us to reflect on the possibilities for different research trajectories in addition to traditional political science scholarship. Current ecological

⁶⁸ Val Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” *Hypatia*, Vol 6, 1 (1991), pp. 3–27.

⁶⁹ Christine Winter, “Unearthing the Time/Space/Matter of Multispecies Justice,” *Cultural Politics*, Vol 19, 1 (2023), pp. 39–56.

⁷⁰ Robyn Eckersley, “(Dis)order and (In)justice in a Heating World,” *International Affairs*, Vol 99, 1 (2023), pp. 101–19.

⁷¹ John Foster, “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 105, 2 (1999), pp. 366–405.

⁷² Eckersley, “(Dis)order and (In)justice in a Heating World.”

crises reinforce the need for innovative and broader forms of scholarship that move beyond existing disciplinary boundaries, and Australian ecopolitics research is engaging directly with these questions. Three other points are important to make by way of conclusion.

First, the preceding analysis should not be viewed as a case for disengaging from scholarship that works with existing political institutions and policy mechanisms to address challenges of environmental change. Clearly, given the power, legitimacy, and capabilities of governments it is important to work with and through them to advance action consistent with addressing ecological crises. But we cannot allow those institutions and their policy instruments to define the limits of our analysis when it comes to making sense of, and guiding, the politics of a response to ecological crises. It is the latter tendency that is most dangerous, allowing the status quo to determine the limits of the possible and instantiating problematic disciplinary boundaries of scholarship in the process.

Second, and following this, there is clearly a need for continued scholarship that consciously (even courageously) extends analysis beyond dominant accounts of the sites, mechanisms, agents, and ethical scope of existing theorising in political science and international relations more traditionally defined. The preceding illustrations provide some insight as to what that scholarship can look like, building on a strong tradition of such innovative scholarship in the Australian context. These are illustrations and are in no way assumed to capture the limits of what constitutes scholarship consistent with a broad vision of “ecopolitics.” There is a compelling case not only for ongoing analysis of ecological crises that moves beyond the limits of existing frameworks, but for intersectional research that connects the examination of ecological crises self-consciously and reflexively to other sites of economic, social, and political marginalisation. Indeed, much of the above research, along with a range of research in the field, moves in this direction. And in the context of contemporary and interrelated ecological crises, such research is sorely needed.

Finally, research consistent with understanding and addressing the scope of ecological crises necessarily involves moving beyond single disciplines, a project this journal consciously contributes to. Much innovative work in ecopolitics, including illustrations above, directly draws on insights from other disciplines to develop intellectual resources to bring to bear on ecological crises. A challenge here, for political science as for any discipline, is recognising the (disciplinary) impediments to genuinely interdisciplinary research (evident in employment, publication and funding norms, for example), and retaining a sense of disciplinary identity capable of bringing researchers together, while exploring what other disciplines bring to the table to help us understand and address the defining challenges we face.

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