

Special Issue of Australian Journal of Environmental Education

## Power and Politics: Re-engaging Environmental Education Research Within Critical Environmental Politics

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### Ecological paradox

Following recent global assessment reports from several international bodies (IEA, 2021; IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2021; 2023; UNDRR, 2019), it is a crucial time for environmental education (EE) research to engage questions of “approach” that critically implicate future directions for EE research and practice. The IPCC Synthesis Report (AR6) states that the “pace and scale of climate action are insufficient to tackle climate change” (IPCC, 2023). As humans impact global systems, issues driving the change become increasingly political, informed by concepts such as planetary boundaries, resilience, tipping points, and finite limits. These are embedded within a range of political discussions on transformation and transgression in relation to what Blühdorn (2011, p. 34) called the “ecological paradox,” the paradox of wanting to sustain the unsustainable. Foucault (1979) anticipated this juncture in history where “modern” human politics could place our very existence as living beings in question (e.g., Gunderson, 2022; Stickney & Skilbeck, 2020).

There are recent indications that environmental education scholarship is engaging ‘transition’ discussions. For example, in 2018, Payne edited a special issue of the *Journal of Environmental Education (JEE)* focused on the politics of EE in respect of critical inquiry concerning sustainable development. The intent was to open up the politics of policy making and policy engagement, power and politics and possibilities beyond policy making and the limitations and silences of standard research practices. The *JEE* special issue signaled concerns about the intensities and complexities of conversations about direction, focus, and progress in policy and praxis. Cross-paper connections could be seen in onto-epistemic motivations to ‘want to’ change and grow with the reconceptualised discourses of, for example, critical realist and transgressive agency that undergird the politics of the economics of people, society and environment.

As Payne (2018) quotes in the *JEE* preamble, it is crucial to continue conversations about the unsustainable politics of sustainability (Blühdorn, 2011). More recently, there seems to have evolved a proliferation of discursive activity concerning environmental politics, but mostly from outside the field of EE within publications such as *Geopolitics*, *Political Geography*, *Global Environmental Politics*, *Millennium*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, and *Journal of Political Ecology*. This Special Issue intends to build on these interdisciplinary foundations, developing nuanced and insightful considerations for EE scholarship.

### The invitation

The Special Issue of the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education (AJEE)* **Power and Politics: Re-engaging Environmental Education Research Within Critical Environmental Politics** is intended to create openings for necessary and (likely) difficult, critical and political writings concerning the futures of EE research. We anticipate contributions from diverse thinkers/practitioners who conceptualise matters of politics and power regarding theory, discourse, worldviews, philosophy, and practice. Our interest is in the application of critical reflexivity, troubling complex futures or past-presences that implicate potential contradictions and differing viewpoints on new political, empirical, and ethical work. For example, Koro and Wolgemuth (2022) describe the “unthinkable presence in/of/for research designs” (p. 4).

We anticipate contributions that attend to ideas of methodological repair as a major means of world-making in responsible ways. Thus, inquiry needs to be responsibly responsive, given insufficiencies of social and political infrastructures. Methods are needed where methodologies are unthinkable and/or lack ecological/relational thinking. Hybrid theories and diversified conceptual spaces are needed to address complexities of world-building. Visions of possibility may call for speculative inquiries into possible futures and multiple scenarios, perhaps sticking a crowbar in the machinery of capitalism, neoliberalism, or other 'isms.' Could it be claimed that our thinking is too fast, reflecting the speed of destruction, or too slow to meet urgent, shifting demands for inquiry?

### **The challenge**

In order to take up the challenge of becoming political within EE, consideration of socio-political ideas of power could prove useful. Political thinking could be organised not around classical themes of sovereignty and law, but the play of power within social microprocesses instantiated by specific discourses, including quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Power, as efficacy of action, is always in the making (i.e., transformative sociopolitics) amongst coalitions of varyingly stable formations with specific pre-defined interests (e.g., STSE - science, technology, society, environment and STEM - science, technology, engineering, mathematics). The political task is to question and explore specific functions of power, including those as visible as sustainable development and, more recently, 'degrowth' (Trantas, 2022). In respect of subjects such as STSE and EE, it seems crucial to recognise power as inherently unstable and transformative. Power is shaped by ongoing interactions between practices, discourses and institutions and, in order to resist specific functions of power, one must engage critically within a variety of discourses. This implies considerable savvy and flexibility amongst the constellations of people who temporarily take shape around a cause such as STS(E) as a matter of concern. Rather than construct an overall political program of resistance, perhaps we need to position ourselves as beginning affirmatively, engaged within political theory.

This Special Issue of the *AJEE* is intended to engage serious discussion concerning the growing literature in "critical political ecology" as crucial and necessary exploration of the "turn to ontology" that impels EE researchers to engage current thinking in the politics of possible futures for EE research. With the recent introduction of post-qualitative perspectives in educational and subsequently in EE research, it could be argued that EE research has become part of a more substantial transpositional (Braidotti, 2006) process in relation to educational theory and praxis. For further example see the *AJEE* Special Issues:

- Post-qualitative inquiry (Volume 38, Issue 3 and 4)
- School strike for climate (Volume 38, Issue 1) and
- Coming soon Indigenous Philosophies in EE (Volume 39, Issue 3).

Given these crucial theoretical turns, it is a strategic time for this Special Issue of the *AJEE* focused on the critical political ecology of education within the politics of environment. For example, Gerrard et al. (2017) forecasted, as have many others in their reading of post-qualitative inquiry, that an unpacking of the 'boundary politics' has the intention of interrogating humanism, representation, and neoliberal governance. Another provocation reconsiders the place of power and politics within EE research in order to clarify how post-qualitative inquiry engages with ethical and political questions. Such engagements within post-qualitative political ecology publications have substantially opened more pressing critical, environmental and political imperatives to challenge inquiry within EE that obfuscates important political and ethical considerations.

Exploring widely for post-qualitative political possibilities suggests a deeper engagement with claims to "know" when centering on strategic issues such as biodiversity, biopolitics, citizenship, climate

change, colonisation, consumption, feminism, ecocentrism, and governmentality within contexts of neoliberal and global social inequities that manifest beyond representational logic. It is anticipated that this expanded focus, however diverse, implicates the ethical and political responsibilities of environmental political theory to think “possible worlds” beyond Anthropocentrism (e.g., Cudworth & Hobden, 2013) in terms of complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics in relation to education, that is, to EE.

This “Call” for a Special Issue of the *AJEE* is intended to explore this extended range of dimensions implicated within a broadly conceived “politics of change” as might relate to immanent needs and directions for post-sustainable EE research praxis. The intent is to create possibilities for participating authors to engage and to generate openings for serious, politically aware discussions/critiques/ideas of the complex meanings and possible directions for EE research and application.

### **Examples of critical discussions**

We encourage critical discussion of, for example, population, environmental, and sustainability issues suggesting human actions have become a geological force. Such reckoning has critically engaged myths of prevalent technoscientific optimism and linear economic progress that appear to foreshadow a biopolitical turn in educational theory and increasingly in educational provision. Coole (2016) exemplifies the sheer physics of an increasing global population. As well, concerns of serious sustainability issues (e.g., Blühdorn, 2016) are part of the ongoing politics of approaching changes.

Considering EE scholarship, Poelina et al (2022) tune awareness of colonial practices through a post qualitative inquiry foregrounding country’s animacy and presence where our agency is a responsibility. They call for focus on regeneration time and for us to listen for planetary wisdom as we imagine new ways of being. Slowing the fast pace of degradation and immobility that might come with the urgency to enable reflective, reflexive practices to unfold could enable change. Similarly, Poelina et al (2020) describe the reciprocity from country as we learn to ‘become family with place’. Decolonising practices or anticolonialism (Liboiron, 2021) enable transformations towards innovations in EE scholarship (Tuhiwai, et al, 2019; Williams, 2018; Williams et al, 2018).

What has also become clear is that in order to secure and ensure longer term planetary wellbeing, the matter of reaching agreements on how to proceed educationally has political incentives described in terms of complexity, ecologism, and global politics (Cudworth & Hobden, 2013, 2018; Death, 2014). Post-Anthropocene reckoning has dispelled the prevalent myths of technoscientific optimism and linear economic progress and engaged politicised notions of scenarios such as planetary boundaries, climate change, and questions of human population and human-induced mass extinctions (Coole, 2016). These new scenarios are overtaking earlier debates about (for/against) sustainable materialism and are being replaced by re-engagement with political science.

Authors, such as Phelan (2020), see thought itself as both inherently political (i.e., ontological) and recognised in cultural studies in terms of the micropolitics of social life (on different scales) (Chandler, Cudworth, & Hobden, 2018; Hayes et al., 2021). The distinction between “political thinking” (often individualist) and “politics” (collective action) also requires thinking to be voiced and practised (collectively) with a strategic view to achieve post-hegemonic formations, traversed by larger and often more strident lines of public debate concerning both ideas and actions. These mutual entanglements of political thought and action serve as background for a Special Issue intended to engage political complexities of social and environmental change. For example, Liboiron (2021) challenges science research method suggesting some practices align with colonialism and that pollution is a violent enactment of colonial land relations. Bird Rose (2017) applies the Yolngu Aboriginal term ‘shimmer’ to

remind us of the complexities of our world, our more-than-human world, and encourages us to practice relational care ethics for all species.

Such are the political dimensions that challenge EE research thinking to be voiced and practised with a strategic intent to achieve what might be conceptualised as broader hegemonic formations. These then are conceptualised within a political frame capable of engaging complexities of social and environmental change at all levels (personal, social, global) beyond the Anthropocene. This is EE research and practice conceived within environmental politics as traversed by large and more strident lines of political challenge and perhaps even conflict (of ideas and actions). The bottom line—a political ecology of environmental education worthy of deepening engagement within the politics of transforming “standard” sustainable research praxis.

### Timeline

- **Call for papers:** April 2023
- **Abstract proposals due:** September 2023
- **Manuscripts due:** March 2024
- **Publication of Special Issue:** September 2024 (manuscripts published on FirstView asap)

Send abstracts to Peta White ([peta.white@deakin.edu.au](mailto:peta.white@deakin.edu.au)).

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