Political ecologies of professional practice: Plurality and possibilities in environmental governance, Introduction to the Special Section

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Abstract

This Special Section explores the *plurality* of professional practice in the environment and development sector, and centers the *possibilities* this offers for more transformative and just futures. We bring together and foreground a uniquely (feminist) political ecology perspective on those working in environment and development, centering power and politics as a necessary component of political ecology as 'hatchet', and unpacking the often-stereotyped category 'professionals', extending solidarity and care to them as a necessary component of political ecology as 'seed.' Each of the eight articles in this Special Section offers their own version and vision of a political ecology of professional practice, articulating and evidencing a *plurality* of practices, perceptions and politics among the professionals they engage with. They bring to the fore the contradictory positions some professionals find themselves in, and the ways in which structural factors limit their opportunities for engaging in or promoting transformative change. They also highlight the importance of sharing ideas and practices, both in creating tensions in the workplace, but also as offering opportunities for learning and doing things differently. With regards to *possibilities* for more transformative and just futures, the articles may be read as both disheartening and hope-ful. Whilst the limits of individual agency are a source of despondency, it is in the coming together and collective efforts of individuals that hope emerges. The everyday 'implicit activism' of some professionals is amplified and accelerated when others learn of/from them and join with them, and when care is centered in these relationships and actions, the emotional labor is shared and thus the ultimate cause is better supported. Political ecologists have an important role to play in creating new or engaging with existing collective efforts that actively pursue more transformative and just futures.

Key words: feminist political ecology, professional practice, practitioners, implicit activisms, solidarity

Résumé

Ce numéro spécial explore la *pluralité* des pratiques professionnelles dans le secteur de l'environnement et du développement en s'attachant aux *possibilités* que cette diversité offre pour des futurs plus transformatifs et plus justes. Nous apportons une perspective originale de (*feminist*) *political ecology* sur celles et ceux qui travaillent dans ce secteur. Nous y plaçons à son centre le pouvoir et la politique comme composantes essentielles de la *political ecology* – son côté 'hachette', tout en manifestant solidarité et *care* aux multiples acteurs que recouvre la catégorie, souvent stéréotypée, de 'professionnels', exprimant ainsi son côté 'graine.' Chacun des huit articles de ce numéro spécial offre sa propre version et vision d'une *political ecology* des pratiques professionnelles, en articulant et démontrant la *pluralité* des pratiques, perceptions et politiques chez les professionnel.le.s qui y sont décrit.e.s. Ils mettent particulièrement en lumière les positions contradictoires et ambigües dans lesquelles certain.e.s professionnel.le.s se trouvent tout en analysant comment les facteurs structurels limitent leurs possibilités de promouvoir et de s'engager pour des changements transformatifs. Ils démontrent aussi l'importance pour ces professionnel.le.s de partager des idées et des pratiques, à la fois pour favoriser l'émergence de tensions productives sur les lieux de travail, mais aussi pour leur permettre d'apprendre et de faire les choses différemment. En ce qui concerne les *possibilités* pour des futurs plus transformatifs et plus justes, les articles peuvent inspirer à la fois découragement et optimisme. Alors que l'on y observe avec amertume les limites de l'*agency* individuelle, on perçoit également que l'espoir réside dans l'union de ces individus et leurs efforts collectifs. L'activisme implicite' du quotidien de certain.e.s professionnel.le.s est amplifié et accéléré quand d'autres apprennent de leurs expériences et se joignent à elles et eux. Quand le *care* est placé au centre de ces relations et de ces actions, le travail émotionnel est partagé et la cause profonde qui les réunit est mieux supportée. Les chercheur.e.s en political ecology ont un rôle important à jouer en créant ou s'engageant dans des initiatives collectives qui poursuivent activement des futurs plus justes et plus transformatifs.

Mots-clés*: feminist political ecology*, pratique professionelle, professionnels, activismes implicites, solidarité

Resumen

Esta Sección Especial explora la *pluralidad* de la práctica profesional en el sector de medio ambiente y desarrollo, y se centra en las posibilidades que esta diversidad ofrece para futuros más transformadores y justos. Reunimos y ponemos en primer plano una perspectiva de ecología política especial (feminista) sobre les profesionales quienes trabajan en medio ambiente y desarrollo, centrando el poder y la política como un componente necesario de la ecología política como "hacha de guerra", y desempaquetando la categoría a menudo estereotipada de "profesionales" y extendiéndoles la solidaridad y el cuidado como un componente necesario de la ecología política como "semilla". Cada uno de los ocho artículos de esta Sección Especial ofrece su propia versión y visión de una ecología política de la práctica profesional, articulando y evidenciando una *pluralidad* de prácticas, percepciones y políticas entre la comunidad de profesionales con la que se relacionan. Destacan las posiciones contradictorias en las que se encuentran algunes profesionales y las formas en que los factores estructurales limitan sus oportunidades de participar o promover un cambio transformador. También destacan la importancia de compartir ideas y prácticas, tanto para crear tensiones en el lugar de trabajo como para ofrecer oportunidades de aprender y hacer las cosas de otra manera. En cuanto a las *posibilidades* de un futuro más justo y transformador, los artículos pueden interpretarse como desalentadores y esperanzadores a la vez. Mientras que los límites de la agencia individual son una fuente de desaliento, es en la unión y los esfuerzos colectivos de las personas donde surge la esperanza. El "activismo implícito" cotidiano de algunes profesionales se amplifica y acelera cuando otros aprenden de elles y se unen a elles. Cuando cuidar está centrado en estas relaciones y acciones, la labor emocional se comparte y así se apoya mejor la causa última. Les investigadores de ecologia política tienen un importante papel que desempeñar en la creación de nuevos esfuerzos colectivos, o en la participación en los esfuerzos ya existentes, que persigan activamente futuros más transformadores y justos.

Palabras claves: ecología política feminista, práctica profesional, profesionales, activismos implícitos, solidaridad

1. Introduction

This Special Section emerged from a conference session we (the editors) organized for the third biennial conference of the Political Ecology Network (POLLEN) in 2020, 'Contested Natures: Power, Possibility, Prefiguration', which aimed "to explore plural natures and plural futures as sites of struggle and

possibility." Our response to this was to invite scholars engaged or with an interest in political ecology to speak about the *plurality* of professionals working in the fields of environment and development, and the *possibilities* offered by engaging with their practices as (potential) *sites of struggle* towards more transformatory and just futures. By transformatory and just futures, we mean altering the social, economic and political systems perpetuating the ongoing climate and biodiversity crisis, ensuring equitable sharing of benefits and burdens, and recognizing and prioritizing the voices of marginalized individuals and groups disproportionately affected by environmental degradation in decision-making.

This kind of constructive and hope-ful focus on professionals is not so typical within political ecology, which has arguably favored critique. However, through their work for the state, (I)NGOs, private companies and civil society as policy-makers, managers, consultants, service-providers etc., professionals occupy central positions in the design, implementation and funding of environment and development interventions, and in the promotion of particular discourses and desires about the operation and outcomes of environmental governance. Professionals can also be catalysts for change, through silent or invisible forms of resistance within bureaucratic apparatuses, or by utilizing their roles to influence and drive discourse towards environmentally friendly and socially responsible practices in environmental governance. We believe that a political ecology of professional practice, that explores its *plurality* and *possibilities*, is thus long overdue. This is particularly important given the increasing blurring of boundaries between the state, private sector, civil-society actors, communities and social movements, and with individuals working across those boundaries, practices, discourses and agendas.

Our interest in exploring professional practice through the lens of political ecology stems, at least in part, from our own variously positioned identities at certain times in our careers as 'political ecologists' and at other times as 'professionals' working at the interface with the environment and development sector. Moreover, as *feminist* political ecologists, we are interested in the everyday and embodied practices and struggles of these professionals (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021), in extending to them a politics of care and solidarity in their efforts (Askins & Blazek, 2017), and in practicing intellectual humility in listening deeply to them (Koch, 2020).

This Special Section brings together eight articles which speak to the plurality of professional practice in the environment and development sector, and the possibilities it offers for more transformatory and just futures. We do not see these as a panacea, however, and we highlight and explore the limits of these possibilities. In order to push beyond these limits, we nevertheless urge political ecologists to consider working *with* professionals who are engaged or willing to engage in critical reflection, to support them in their critical analysis of relationships of power, their struggles to resist oppressive systems, and their efforts to engage in practices and relationships of care.

Why a political ecology of <u>professional practice</u>?

The world is facing intersecting and deepening climate and biodiversity crises, environmental injustices, and social inequalities. As such, it seems perhaps only fitting to apportion some blame to the environment and development professionals whose job it is to address these issues, and as potentially contributing to political and corporate greenwashing. A range of critical scholars (including those working in critical development studies and political ecology) have long drawn attention to the shortcomings of mainstreamed approaches to environment and development, highlighting issues of the 'rendering technical' of complex social realities (Li, 2007), of depoliticizing inherently political issues (Ferguson, 1994), of the tyranny of so-called 'participatory' approaches (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), of techno-managerialism and professionalization that sideline alternative ways of knowing and being (Kothari, 2005; Nightingale, 2005; Ojha, 2006), and of racist and colonial ways of thinking and working (Pailey, 2019; Sultana, 2019). Ultimately, interconnected environmental and social crises and injustices are attributable to a lack of attention to power and politics which favor and maintain imperialist, capitalist, white-supremacist, patriarchal and other interconnected systems of oppression. Centering and conceptualizing professional practices within these systems of power, and considering the politics of their positions, offers ways to shift a focus on 'blame' to perhaps something more constructive and potentially productive.

Indeed, having reviewed 40 years of research on gender and environmental policy, and its limited gains, Arora-Jonsson (2014, p. 305) argues that we need "more research on knowledge producers, practitioners and policy makers – to understand how we work and our own preconceptions". As Bee and Sijapati Basnett (2017, p. 797) rightly conclude in their study on gendering participation in REDD+: "The key, then, is to identify possible points of reversal or switches, whereby potential openings for struggle and contestation occur."

A seminal text on professional practice in international development is David Mosse's (2005) *Cultivating development. An ethnography of aid policy and practice*, in which he offers "a more insightful ethnography of development capable of opening up the implementation black box" (p. 5), seeking "to reinstate the complex agency of actors in development at every level, and to move on from the image of the duped perpetrators and victims caught up [in development]" (p. 6). Mosse (2005) directs attention to the 'social lives' of development projects, and to the ways in which development actors negotiate the implementation of policy and programs, such that whilst they use "the authorised scripts given them by projects – they make something quite different" of them (p. 7). Drawing on work on governmentality and agency by the likes of Foucault, Li, de Certeau and Latour, Mosse highlights how governmentality acts on subjects not by repression and overt control, but by a *productive* power which engenders subjectivities and aspirations amongst development actors. He also highlights that central to the 'social lives' of projects is the intertwining of ideas and relationships. Mosse's work has an explicit goal of questioning not whether development works i.e. its outcomes, but rather how it works, i.e. to create representations of policy coherence. Whilst our goal in this Special Section encompasses both of these things, Mosse's work is instructive for and helps to justify our call for a political ecology of professional practice, as it draws attention to the need for insightful research that opens up the 'black box' of environment and development practice, that gives agency to the professionals involved, and that directs attention to aspects of professional practice including discourses, desires, ideas, identities and relationships.

This Special Section strives to enhance and build upon the work of Mosse, as well as studies in a wider array of disciplines exploring and demystifying the 'black box' of professional practice. These include work exploring the role and agency of individuals as 'intermediary actors' and 'bricoleurs' (Cleaver, 2012; Funder & Marani, 2015), 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010), interface bureaucrats (Bierschenk, 2010) and 'justice brokers' (Dawson *et al.*, 2018; Lai *et al.*, 2021). Other work draws attention to the multiple knowledges of development practitioners (Eyben *et al.*, 2015; Hayman *et al.*, 2016), the politics of mobilizing that knowledge (Staddon, 2021), and the importance and potential of reflective practice (Eyben, 2014; Fechter, 2012) in shifting professional practice to more effectively challenge hegemonic and oppressive systems 'from the inside.' It has been noted that "NGOs are not only structures but also practices, communities, and sites of negotiation" (Kontinen, 2016, p. 29), with some drawing attention to the idea of 'implicit activisms', i.e. everyday practices which are "small-scale, personal, quotidian and proceeding with little fanfare" (Horton & Kraftl, 2009, p. 14). Individually and collectively, the articles in this Special Section explore such 'sites of negotiation' or 'points of reversal or switches' where 'struggle and contestation' may occur, and which highlight from the plurality of professional practice the possibility of shifting environmental governance towards more transformatory and just futures.

Why a <u>political ecology</u> of professional practice?

Professional practice is better studied and served by other fields and disciplines, including organizational studies, management theory, public policy, anthropology of development, and in the broad field of environmental governance. Much theoretical, conceptual and empirical insight emerges from this work – and some of this is highlighted in and drawn upon in the articles in this Special Section. We argue, however, that there remains a need for a *political ecology* of professional practice, in order to explicitly address and attend to issues of power within intermediary/interface spaces. Portrayals of political ecology often draw on Robbins' (2004) notion of the 'hatchet', i.e. political ecology's critique that cuts away at and exposes flaws in dominant approaches to environment and development and their "pernicious social and environmental outcomes" (p. 12), as well as to political ecology as the 'seed', i.e. its documentation of ways

people cope with change, organize for survival and unite in collective action to resist injustices. In much political ecology scholarship, the focus is "from the point of view of local people, marginal groups, and vulnerable populations" (Robbins, 2004, p. 12). Here, we argue that this attention is equally relevant for professionals and their practices. With the *hatchet* of political ecology, we can expose flaws in dominant narratives that 'black box', stereotype and homogenize professional practices, and then more carefully critique them to explore their agency and expose the relationships of power inherent within their discourses, desires, ideas, identities and relationships. However, the political ecology *seed* pushes us to consider how professionals cope with, negotiate and resist these power relations, and potentially the ways in which they may push for positive change within their policies and interventions. It is in this way that we see the productive possibilities of a political ecology of professional practice, one that is grounded in power and politics, but hopeful of articulating and supporting resistance to oppressions 'from within.'

In advocating for a *feminist* political ecology of professional practice, we also direct attention towards issues of scale and the importance of the everyday and embodied interactions within relationships of power, as well as to the relevance of engaging with 'emotions' and 'affect.' The burgeoning field of emotional political ecologies is pushing us to engage with emotions and affect as they relate to local communities and indigenous people's relationships with power and (in)justices (González-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2019; Sultana, 2015), and we wish to extend that to the 'office' space of professionals' everyday work practices. We are greatly inspired by Resurrección and Elmhirst's (2021) edited book *Negotiating gender expertise in environment and development: Voices from feminist political ecology*, in which they unpack and unsettle 'the gender expert', rejecting simple dichotomies between 'good feminism' or feminist activists, and 'co-opted feminism' or 'femocrats.' Their work aims to reveal the 'slow revolution' that arises from professionals' "small, messy, fragmented and everyday kinds of subversions, conscious and unconscious" (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021, p. 404), concluding that "vigilance and reflexivity help resist hegemonizing rationalities that depoliticise and technocratize the work of advancing gender equality in technical environments" (p. 227). What stands out from this feminist political ecology work is its sympathetic and supportive account of professionals' struggles to resist power and to promote social justice through their work, and that it does so through a series of co-written stories with the professionals. Within this Special Section, we are interested in exploring such participatory and collaborative ways of working as political ecologists, as we recognize the need for, but also the difficulty of researchers engaging in both critical and relational ways with environment and development actors (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018). This is particularly relevant when engaging with environment and development professionals, who may have similar education backgrounds and share to some extent similar values and worldviews with us, but who evolve in very different professional spheres and cultures.

This Special Section brings together eight articles, each of which offers their own take on what a political ecology of professional practice can mean. They offer cases from the so-called Global South and Global North. They draw on a range of theories and bodies of knowledge (including political ecology and beyond) to understand how environment and development programs and policies get re-interpreted and translated through professional practices, using a variety of methodological approaches to engage with professionals and explore their everyday sites of negotiation and struggle. The articles address questions such as: How can participatory action research support identifying 'points of reversal or switches' to challenge hegemonic and oppressive systems and move beyond identification towards action? To what extent and how might everyday, undercover and individual forms of resistance and negotiation by professionals lead to significant and transformatory change on the ground? How do such forms of resistance and negotiation get acknowledged, accepted and institutionalized, and what are the risks and trade-offs of such institutionalization? How do individual professionals create space for reflexive and transformative practices within technocratic structures, and how do structures impede or support critical and reflexive agency through professional discourses, culture and institutions?

2. Article contributions

The articles gathered in this Special Section analyze the practices of professionals across a diversity of settings. Those are all broadly related with environmental governance (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2025), and

specifically across sectors including water (Blackstock *et al.*, 2023), agriculture and food systems (Clement *et al.,* 2023; Covey, 2023; Delabre & von Hellermann, 2023), forests (Staddon *et al.*, 2023), natural resource management (Giambartolomei *et al.*, 2023) and climate change adaptation (Weger, 2023). They also cover a wide range of settings, with professionals working in non-governmental organizations, third-sector organizations, private companies, government agencies, research institutes or semi-public organizations, and evolving within broader structures, such as catchment and landscape partnerships, development projects or commodity chains.

To analyze the work of professionals and practitioners operating at the interface across different social worlds, the authors draw on different concepts and theories, often combined in theoretical assemblages, among which are institutional work (Beunen & Patterson, 2016; Patterson & Beunen, 2019), institutional bricolage (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015), street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 2010), governmentality and environmental subjectivities (Foucault, 2008; Agrawal, 2005), actor-network theory (Callon, 1984; Latour, 2007), policy coherence (Nilsson *et al.,* 2012), feminist political ecology (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021), caring-with (Tronto, 2013), and transformative learning (Mezirow 1990). Methodologically, the articles draw upon qualitative research involving interviews, participant observation and ethnography (Blackstock *et al.*; Covey; Delabre & von Hellermann; Weger), participatory action research (Giambartolomei *et al.*; Staddon *et al.*) or a mix of both (Clement *et al.*). Rather than generating new empirical material, one article offers a personal account and reflection on how a feminist political ecology lens supports decolonizing gender knowledges and expertise (Resurrección & Elmhirst).

Among this diversity of theoretical approaches and methods, the empirical articles show some commonalities. In particular, they evidence the agency and creativity of professionals in navigating institutional structures, the importance of understanding practical and on-the-ground policy and program implementation, and the dynamic relationships between various actors involved in environmental governance. By engaging with a diverse set of analytical lenses that support nuanced analyses of agency, they extend, enrich or question political ecology studies.

A first striking feature is the plurality of professionals' values, visions and motivations in environmental governance, and how these may be kept hidden when perceived as conflicting with stated organizational goals or project or program objectives (Delabre & von Hellermann; Clement *et al.*; Covey). Individual values and motivations emerge as key drivers for exercising forms of agency that go beyond (and sometimes against) official roles and responsibilities, and thus require high levels of personal commitment to bring extra time and resources (Blackstock *et al.*; Clement *et al.*). Here Staddon *et al.* usefully note that the binary between 'professional' and 'personal' is misleading, as such types of professional commitment actually require people to reflect on their multiple intersectional identities and to align their practices to social and environmental justice issues across these. Several authors also observe that professionals may hold contradictory subjectivities (Clement *et al.*; Covey; Delabre & von Hellermann), e.g. shaped at the same time by altruistic normative commitments and by the necessity to perform as a 'good professional' to secure their 'professional future.'

Most articles also show that this heterogeneity of values and visions within the state and powerful development actors creates interstices, cracks and internal spaces for resistance, for counter-hegemonic narratives, alternative subjectivities and for the existence of internal contradictions: hence this heterogeneity opens up possibilities for transformative change. For Giambartolomei *et al.*, it is not only the diversity of individuals' values, experiences and meanings that hold transformative potential but also the encounter and sharing of this diversity. Weger also points to the role of external factors, such as new discourses, in the emergence of possibilities for transformative change.

The articles also evidence how structural constraints and inequalities shape not only individual agency, but also the possibility of opening collective spaces for change and exercising power. Some authors show how this generates tensions and dilemmas among professionals who are committed to transformative change (Clement *et al.*, Resurrección & Elmhirst). A governmentality perspective evidences, however, more subtle forms of power at work, which many individuals are not aware of, i.e. how their subjectivities themselves are reshaped through their practices (Clement *et al.*), and how practices are embedded in technocratic and

managerial modes of implementation, in neoliberal discourses and in Eurocentric scientific knowledge (Delabre & von Hellermann; Blackstock *et al.,* Resurrección & Elmhirst). Here Giambartolomei *et al.* and Staddon *et al.* usefully demonstrate the potential of creating safe and caring spaces for encouraging reflexivity on professional practices, located outside people's desks and offices, to support transformative learning, and for supporting meaning-making and the emergence of forms of commoning, i.e. creating common subjects who can produce change (Federici, 2011). Political ecology scholarship could pay greater attention to forms of implicit activism as potential drivers for radical change and analyze the conditions under which these may be nurtured. Yet, as pointed out by Covey, and Giambortolomei *et al.*, implicit activism, tacit resistance and processes of meaning-making require high levels of emotional labor to build trust and maintain relationships with actors who may hold different visions and values. Maintaining relationships is indeed essential to overcome rigid hierarchies (Weger).

Beyond their theoretical and methodological contributions, these articles also share a core commitment: going beyond academic inquiry to explore the potential for achieving just and transformative outcomes within systems entrenched with structural limitations. For example, Delabre and von Hellermann analyze the role of committed individuals in triggering changes within the sustainable palm oil drive. Similarly, both Covey and Weger explore how the work of intermediary actors may shape climate adaptation pathways and development practices. Others take a more hands-on approach, engaging with professionals through participatory action research to co-experiment with transformative processes. Giambartolomei *et al.* explore the potential of the concept of caring-*with* in rethinking sustainable natural resource management in the UK. Staddon *et al.* co-reflect on how transformative learning may foster meaningful engagement with social justice issues among forestry professionals in Nepal.

Some authors in this Special Section also explicitly exhibit reflexivity by critically considering their own positionalities. For example, some of the authors in Staddon *et al.* reflect on the potential power dynamics and cultural influences that shape their research interactions and interpretations as white researchers working with development professionals. In another instance, Blackstock *et al.* reflect on the challenges they face as researchers in adopting a caring approach when engaging with their informants while simultaneously questioning the underlying political aspects of their practices. This highlights the dilemma researchers may encounter when balancing the emotional and political dimensions of their research. The need to consider emotions explicitly in methodological design may prove particularly useful for researchers wishing to follow an ethics of care, while also analyzing the political nature of affects and emotions (see Staddon *et al.*, 2023a, Staddon, 2022). The reflexivity demonstrated by these authors thus emphasizes their commitment to transparency and self-awareness in navigating the intricacies of qualitative research, particularly when exploring sensitive topics and engaging with participants from diverse backgrounds.

3. Conclusions

Responding to the calls of feminist political ecologists (Arora-Jonsson, 2014; Bee & Sijapati Basnett, 2017; Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021), this Special Section seeks to explore the *plurality* of professional practice in the environment and development sector, and to center the *possibilities* this offers for more transformatory and just futures. Whilst other disciplines and literatures have engaged with professional practice and practitioners working across these and related sectors (Cleaver, 2012; Eyben 2014; Lipsky, 2010; Mosse, 2004; Patterson & Beunen, 2019; Schaltegger *et al.,* 2023), we wished to bring together and foreground a uniquely (feminist) political ecology perspective on those working in environmental governance and development. In our eyes, a political ecology of professional practice does two things. Firstly, it centers power and politics, as a necessary component of political ecology as 'hatchet' (Robbins, 2004). Secondly, it unpacks the often-stereotyped category 'professionals', and extends solidarity and care to these people working 'from within' to promote justice, as a necessary component of political ecology as 'seed' (Robbins, 2004). When layering insights and agendas from feminist political ecology, attention is also necessarily directed towards everyday and embodied interactions within relationships of power, as well as to emotions and affect.

This Special Section contains eight articles, each of which offers their own version and vision of a political ecology of professional practice. They certainly articulate and evidence a plurality of practices, perceptions and politics amongst the professionals they engage with. They bring to the fore the contradictory positions some professionals find themselves within, and ways in which structural factors limit their opportunities for engaging in or promoting transformative change. They also highlight the importance of sharing ideas and practices, both in creating tensions in the workplace, but also as offering opportunities for learning and doing things differently. With regards to possibilities for more transformatory and just futures then, the articles may be read as both disheartening and hope-ful. Whilst the limits of individual agency are a source of despondency, it is in the coming together and collective efforts of individuals that hope emerges. The everyday 'implicit activism' of some professionals is amplified and accelerated when others learn of/from them and join with them, and when care is centered in these relationships and actions, the emotional labor is shared and thus the ultimate cause is better supported. Political ecologists have an important role to play in creating new or engaging with existing collective efforts that actively pursue more transformatory and just futures.

There are many things that this Special Section and this Editorial do *not* do that they usefully might have, for example drawing directly and comparatively with work on social movements, of aligning more closely with anthropologies of development, or engaging with activist political ecologies. Nonetheless, we do explore a set of actors within environmental governance who have to date received less nuanced and often less sympathetic attention from political ecologists. We draw on feminist political ecology to view the tensions inherent in the work of environment and development professionals as potential "sites of generating or creating multiple imaginings and world-making" (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015, p. 17). We thus engage with these professionals and practitioners with an explicit appreciation of the importance of power and politics, but also of the imperative to engage with solidarity and support wherever possible. As such, we align with other recent work in this journal that explores the opportunities offered up through experimental and speculative political ecologies (Harris & Santos, 2023) and relational praxis in/for environmental governance (Kenney-Lazar *et al.*, 2023).

As professionals and feminist ecologists ourselves, we, the 'editors', harbor a profound commitment to environmental justice. As professionals inside and outside of the academy, we strive towards challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for more inclusive and sustainable approaches and practices within the field. By bringing this dimension of our positionality to bear, we have interpreted our editorial role as not merely being about assembling articles, but as a conscientious effort to shape a narrative that resonates with the principles of feminist political ecology and actively contributes to the broader discourse on political ecology and environmental governance. Given a collective alignment with the agenda of feminist political ecology, and as part of an aspiration and politics to 'stray from business as usual' (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015, p. 17), this Special Section urges political ecologists to engage with professionals with empathy, and emphasizes the fostering of community across differences (hooks, 2003).

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