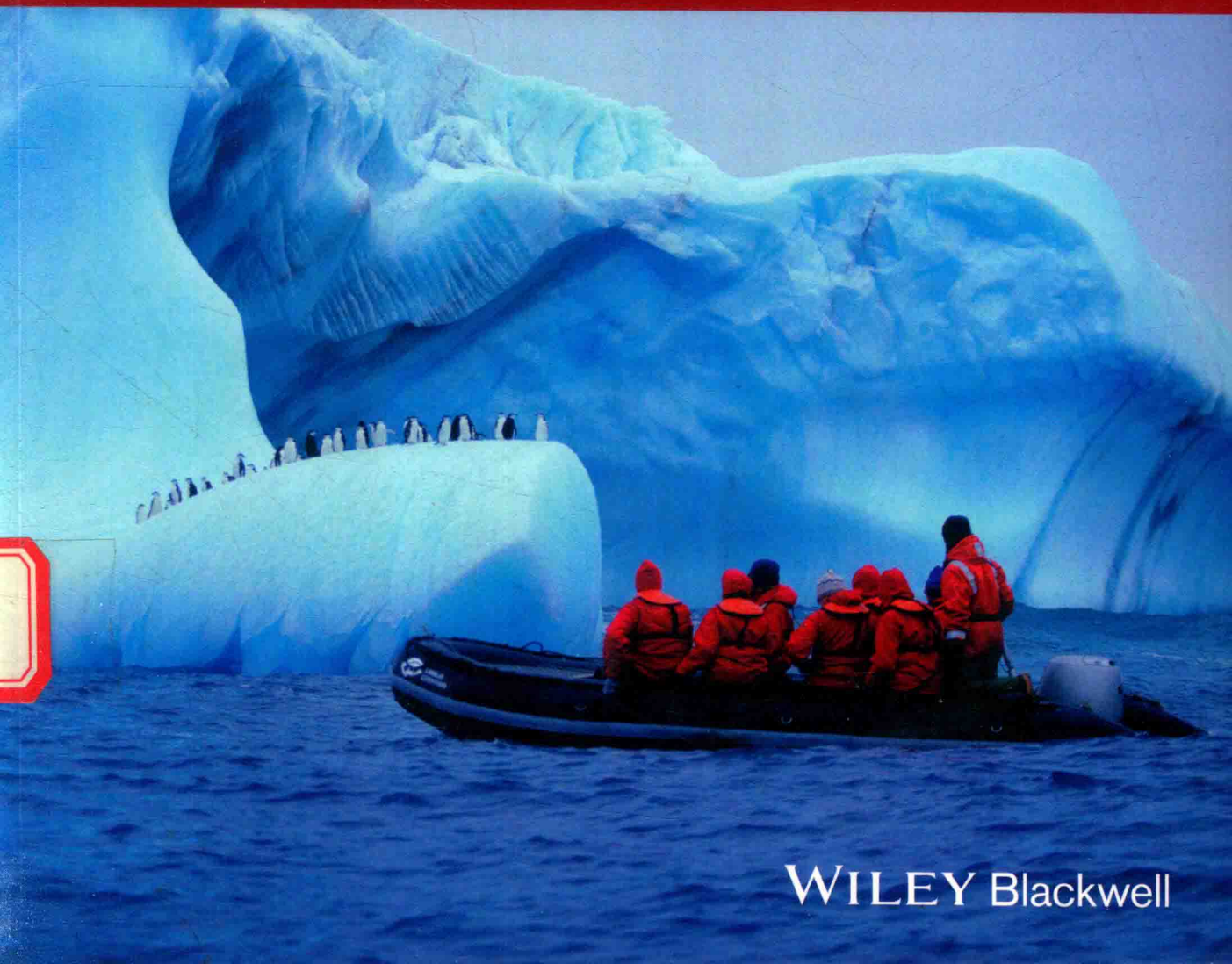


Paul Robbins, John Hintz and Sarah A. Moore

Environment and Society

A Critical Introduction

Second Edition



WILEY Blackwell

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This second edition first published 2014
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd

Edition history: Blackwell Publishing Ltd (1e, 2010)

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Robbins, Paul, 1967–

Environment and society : a critical introduction / Paul Robbins, John Hintz, and Sarah A. Moore. – Second edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-45156-4 (pbk.)

1. Environmental sciences–Social aspects. 2. Environmental protection–Social aspects.
3. Human ecology–Social aspects. I. Hintz, John. II. Moore, Sarah A. III. Title.

GE105.R63 2014

333.72–dc23

2013032142

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Tourists in boat watching penguins on an iceberg, Antarctica. © DreamPictures / Getty Images

Cover designer: Design Deluxe

Set in 10/13 pt Minion Pro by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

Printed and bound in Malaysia by Vivar Printing Sdn Bhd

Environment and Society

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Acknowledgments

The book would have been impossible without the impeccably polite prodding of Justin Vaughan at Wiley Blackwell, an editor whose creative interventions extend beyond editing and were key sparks in imagining the book and setting us writing. He also sprang for dinner that time in Boston. Many thanks too to Ben Thatcher at Wiley Blackwell for his patience and hard work.

Paul Robbins and Sarah Moore would like to thank the School of Geography and Development at the University of Arizona for the stimulating environment in which to think and write, and especially John Paul Jones III, Sallie Marston, and Marv Waterstone. They would like to thank the students of their Environment and Society classes for slogging through early performances of some of the material presented here. They owe a debt of gratitude to their current and former graduate students who embody and convey much of the plural thinking in the book. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has become an equally invigorating home, including both the Department of Geography and the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. Paul and Sarah would also like to thank Marty Robbins, Vicki Robbins, and Mari Jo Joiner. Special thanks to Khaki and Onyx the Great Danes, who are profound society-environment problems in their own right.

John Hintz would like to thank his colleagues in the Department of Environmental, Geographical and Geological Sciences (EGGS) at Bloomsburg University for helping keep the stresses of academic life to a minimum. Innumerable thanks also need to go to his incredibly supportive family (Michelle, Lyell, Claire, Theo, Carolyn, Mom, and Dad).

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1

Introduction

The View from a Human-Made Wilderness



Source: Oostvaardersplassen, a nature reserve in the Netherlands.

Keywords

- Anthropocene
- Political ecology
- Reconciliation ecology
- Rewilding

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News headlines from forests, fields, rivers, and oceans suggest we are in a world of trouble. Storms ravage the coasts of Asia and the Americas, with more looming as sea levels slowly rise. Fresh water is increasingly scarce around the globe, owing not only to heavy water use but also widespread pollution; there is not a single drop of water in the Colorado River in the United States or the Rhone River in France that is not managed through complex dams and distribution systems, or affected by city and industrial waste along their paths to the sea. Agricultural soils are depleted from years of intensive cropping and from the ongoing application of fertilizers and pesticides in the search for ever-sustained increases of food and fiber; in North India, after decades of increasing production, yields of wheat and rice have hit a plateau. Global temperatures are on the rise and, with this increase, whole ecosystems are at risk. Species of plants and animals are vanishing from the Earth, never to return. Perhaps most profoundly, the world's oceans – upon which these global systems rest – show signs of impending collapse. The accumulation of these acute problems has led observers to conclude that the environment may be irreversibly lost or that we may have reached “the end of nature” (McKibben 1990).

And yet in Flevoland, a province in the Netherlands, wild species are thriving as never before. Red deer roam the landscape, feral horses travel in herds, and an ecosystem of foxes and wild birds has arisen, including egrets and wild geese. Aurochs – the massive wild cattle of Europe – have been extinct for centuries, but their human-bred cousins, Heck Cattle, graze the landscape, their long horns and hairy forms rumbling across the marshland (Figure 1.1). This 15,000-acre wilderness, called Oostvaardersplassen, is filled with wild



Figure 1.1 Heck Cattle. Source: Roel Hoeve/Foto Natura/Corbis.

life. Remarkably, all this wildlife is thriving in one of the places on Earth most densely populated by people. For safari visitors, who pay 45 dollars for a visit to the park, there is no question that the place creates a great sense of wonder, as visits to wild places do for most all of us in a world that is increasingly encroached by human activity, pollution, and influence.

But if this place is a wilderness, it is by no means a natural one. Envisioned and created by biologists in the 1980s, this park had previously been little more than muddy lowlands devoid of wildlife. Over time, and with the careful introduction of various animals and plants, the landscape has been crafted to produce these animals. Most notably, the very ground upon which the park sits was reclaimed from the sea, as much of Dutch land was long ago. In the time of the Aurochs, Oostvaardersplassen would have been under meters of water! Though intended to mimic a late Pleistocene (10,000-year-old) ecology, therefore, the place is artificial. It is the product of **rewilding**, where long-lost ecosystems are crafted by people from whole cloth, in order to reclaim – or create – landscapes as they might have been before human influence (Kolbert 2012).

Rewilding A practice of conservation where ecological functions and evolutionary processes, which are thought to have existed in past ecosystems or before human influence, are deliberately restored or created; rewilding often requires the reintroduction or restoration of large predators to ecosystems

The wonderful landscapes of Oostvaardersplassen therefore raise as many questions as they answer. Which animals are introduced and which are not? Who says this state, devoid of people, is the natural one? Where some animals like the Aurochs are extinct, is a human-bred substitute ecologically acceptable? Given that the Heck Cattle were in fact bred by the Nazis in their effort to restore “pure” European nature, are such introductions socially acceptable? In a world desperate for the protection of existing wilderness (to say nothing of clean water and air), are expensive efforts at creating new wildernesses practical, or elitist?

This view from the Netherlands makes our global situation easier to understand, though perhaps no simpler to solve. The contradictory proposition – dramatically transforming the environment in ways that may preserve the environment – is a metaphor for the condition of our longstanding relationship to the non-human world. From this view, Oostvaardersplassen is in no way unique. Yellowstone National Park in the United States, though heralded as a wilderness, was created through the violent extirpation of the dozens of native tribes who lived in the region, transformed its landscapes, and relied on the resources of what would become a park devoid of people. Coffee plantations throughout Asia and Latin America, though regarded purely as economic and artificial landscapes, often teem with wild birds, mammals, and insects, all beyond the intent and control of farmers, conservationists, or anyone else for that matter. Everywhere we seek some place beyond people, the marks of human creation and destruction confront us, and wherever the works of humans are in evidence, there are non-human systems and creatures, all operating in their own way.

Decisions made in places like Oostvaardersplassen, therefore, cannot be made solely on the basis that the region is a “natural” one, nor a “social” one. The area is simultaneously neither and both, with animals, plants, and waterways springing from human interventions, creating altogether new habitats and environments. Wildlife parks and coffee