

# A new rhetoric

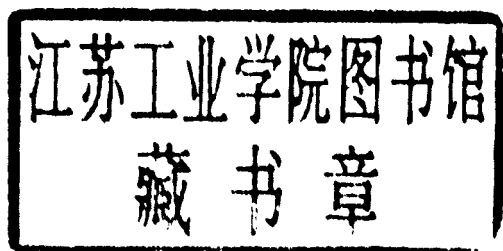
George Myerson &amp; Yvonne Rydin

# The language of environment

## *A new rhetoric*

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## Preface

"Environment" challenges modern knowledge and its institutions: academic disciplines, research groups, journals and presses, syllabuses and texts, professions and data banks, media experts and policy advisors. The challenge is twofold. First, "environment" does not fit the divisions of modern specialization. In academic terms, "environment" belongs to every discipline and to none: chemistry and biology, ecology and sociology, philosophy and geography, engineering and politics, psychology and history, media studies and cultural theory. In media terms, it is harder and harder to draw a line around certain issues and say: this is an environmental issue. War and trade, food and transport, weather and protest, animal rights and international relations: "environment" is inescapable, and it challenges the boundaries between news areas that are otherwise distinct, domestic or international, major catastrophe or minor incident, good news or bad news. "Environment" is beyond the disciplines of modern knowledge, and beyond the grid of modern media expertise. This book is an attempt to understand the cultural presence of environment, its peculiar and particular "interfusion", to adapt Wordsworth's "sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused". How has environment come to pose its profound challenge, a challenge not to one area of knowledge but to our whole conception of knowledge?

This takes us to the second challenge of environment: how can we use all our knowledge and ideas, in the face of a possible or potential environmental crisis? Which knowledge will help? And how do we begin to rethink the role of diverse fields? How does a culture that has invested so much in ever more complex specialization now address an agenda that transgresses all the divisions, science and arts, objectivity and feeling, experiment and ethics, forecasting and mythology? *The language of environment* makes no policy proposals, it is not prescriptive. But it is an attempt to think about the cultural context of all proposals and prescriptions, the cultures of authority and expertise in our time. How is knowledge made to count, and how do all the different claims connect, or collide?

In one way, there is something provocative about "language of environment": isn't environment above or beyond language? Must we linger over the words, when the subject is so important? But all the knowledge and all the proposals, all the expertise and experience, the values and visions, they only act on society in terms of language. If there are no words, there are no impacts.

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And it is because environment has impacted so profoundly on contemporary language, that the challenge is so pervasive and deeply felt across such diverse areas. We like to think of specialized disciplines, each following their own necessary course, responding to discoveries and research developments, scholarly debates and theories. The story is partly true. But there is another perspective too, the cultural perspective in which specialisms are responses to a more diffuse and general agenda of questions. By “language of environment”, we also mean the clusters of image and story by which that general culture impacts on all the specialized fields. Specialized knowledge needs to use current language in order to have an influence; it is also a response to current language, in the broadest sense.

For language is more than words, and the language of environment is more than environment words. We do concentrate around certain key “environment words”, but in order to hear the voices which write and speak with them, the arguments that are made through them. Language is our consciousness of the world. If environment represents a changed consciousness of the world, then environment must also be a changed language. We want to explore how deep the change of cultural consciousness has gone.

*The language of environment* is not a review of environmental debates; it is an active engagement with them, not a polemical engagement but an involved inquiry. This inquiry necessarily overlaps disciplines, as its subject matter does. It is, in some sense of the word, an “interdisciplinary” text. This of course raises the issue of what is meant by “interdisciplinary”.

There is one, fairly conventional rendering of the term which suggests two or more disciplines coming together, bringing their own skills, knowledge and other professional baggage to a conversation which takes place on borders or other neutral ground. Each then retreats to their own disciplinary space, reinforced with a bit more new knowledge and insights from the frontier of that space. This book does not fit with this model.

There is another model, also conventional in its own arena, which sees a grander future for interdisciplinary work. Here interdisciplinarity becomes a field of work in its own right. It occupies the space between disciplines, the large background of deep space against which the disciplinary solar systems exist. And it develops its own theories and knowledge which exists across and above disciplinary theories and knowledge. Interdisciplinarity produces super-theories. Structuralism and marxism come to minds as examples of this model. Again, this book does not fit with this model.

Rather we hope to have produced a text which is part of a growing development, to which cultural geography may testify, that the disciplines themselves are not homogeneous. There is already dialogue occurring within each discipline, dialogues between different kinds of insight and between different claims to knowledge. Therefore there is no radical difference between disciplinary and interdisciplinary work. Both involve dialogues between

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intellectual stances and it is more fruitful to think of academic work as engagement with a variety of these dialogues. We see this in the "field" of cultural geography which is simultaneously part of geography, cultural studies, politics and a separate entity on its own. Again, environmental studies is a set of its own dialogues as well as belonging to geography, ecology, economics and sociology.

So our book is itself a dialogue with these existing sets of dialogues. This is not to make a weak claim. We argue that a dialogue of engagement is itself a source of knowledge and validity claims. After a seminar given at an early stage of development of the book, an Oxford academic said "Oh, so the point is to read texts more intelligently!" That is indeed our hope. Reading is essentially a personal activity; it cannot be done for someone else. Neither do we offer a mechanism or recipe for doing so. We seek to provide a path by example to engaging with texts and the dialogues within them.

In doing so it is our belief that encouraging the richest set of dialogues is the best way to keep environmental issues on the political and social agenda. And it is also a way of forcing, prompting and shaping change. Stating one's own view forcefully is not necessarily the most effective way to achieve change. But in a democracy, understanding and making dialogues is itself a powerful resource.

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There are many wider intellectual debts and engagements. We are grateful to colleagues from LSE, UCL and Turin with whom we collaborated on a CEC study of *The economic and cultural conditions of the sustainable city*. It is hard to acknowledge conversations, as if they were texts, but since we have interpreted texts as dialogues, we ought to try: reading groups formed by Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, and by Jacqueline Burgess's "Society and Nature" group; discussions arising around the Penn State Rhetoric and Composition Conference of 1994, creatively hosted by Don Bialostosky of Penn State, with many people, and particularly with Susan Miller of the University of Utah; engagement with the ideas and planning theory of Patsy Healey; rhetorical dialogues with Paul Kenny and economic utopias and realities with Simon Zadek. The whole project is surrounded by dialogue with Simon and Eleanor. Other voices run deep, "unheard melodies" still.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Environment words, environet and the rhetorical web*

#### *Environment words and environet*

Anything *can* be argued about, but only some things *are* argued about, a fact easily taken for granted. Almost automatically, naturally, we discuss certain issues, the issues of the day and of the times. People recognize what is topical; this is “cultural literacy”. We recognize the agenda, the viewpoints and key words. We speak for ourselves, but we also know what is generally being said and how to say it. Cultural literacy is consciousness of what is topical and how to be topical. It is reflected in talk, but it also applies to writing and reading, as much as to talking. Such literacy is widespread within society and is highly developed by specialists. Anyone trying to write an article for a newspaper, a magazine or an academic journal has an acute sense of what we are meant to be discussing now, even if the aim is to change the subject. We know the topics, and the turns of phrase, as talkers, as readers, as writers. But there is knowing and *knowing*: being aware of what one knows “naturally” is reflexive insight (Giddens 1994). This book encourages reflexive insight into environmental discussion, and specifically insight into the language people use to write about the environment, and how that language transmits feelings, shapes ideas, and connects visions.

It is difficult to be reflexive about what we do naturally and what we appear to know without effort. Ironically, such knowledge is hard, because its object is why we do certain things so easily. Reflexivity is a layer of thinking that contemporary life increasingly

requires (Giddens 1992, 1994). But why should we think about what we do without thinking about it? And, in particular, why should we think reflexively about the environment, the environment seems the most natural of all topics: it is “out there”, a physical entity, a real problem with real solutions – or not – real facts – or not. It is, surely, not like, say, economic debate, where the whole subject seems verbal, at some level, and where the issues are not separable from the words we use about them. Does “marginal utility” – the concept of an individual gaining more satisfaction from one more unit of consumption – exist prior to the economist’s definition of it? This is even more of an issue with some moral questions: how could one discuss “freedom” or “rights” without having a language to frame the question in the first place? But “global warming” is not like either “inflation” or “the right to silence”: global warming is a physical phenomenon: the temperature rises, or does not rise, the causes are either understood or not understood. We read and write about the environment, because of its material reality, because there is something evidently there to address. The agenda is doubly natural: we recognize it culturally, and we feel it around us.

At this point, authors sometimes announce a twist: “but we shall show that the agenda is far from natural, it is foisted upon us/you, beware you are being manipulated. Distrust the knowledge of what to discuss and how.” We do not announce a twist, an unmasking. We do not see “reflexive insight” as an *antidote* to ordinary thought; on the contrary, without ordinary understanding there is nothing to reflect with or on (Aristotle 1926, Billig 1995). To think about how environmental texts are written does not free us from some wicked spell. We aren’t uncovering hidden traps, showing how audiences are mis-led, tricked by clever and false words: “rhetoric” in one degraded sense. We are exploring a world, a world that comes into being through discussion, the discussion of real things, real problems, real crises, losses and remedies.

Our theme is *meaning*, how culture gives meanings to the worlds we inhabit. Environmental discussion has many functions: to protest, to expose, to reassure, to propitiate. And, as a result, laws are enacted, rules are revised, institutions are created and destroyed, lives endangered and saved. At the same time, meanings are created, thickened, discarded. And the meanings rebound, they affect the outcomes, the laws, rules and institutions. Indeed, the meanings become

the "situation", the cultural moment in which the environment is discussed – sympathetic to environmentalism, or wearied of it, anxious about pollution or inured to it, hopeful of improvement or cynical. Environmental arguments are factual, informative, often scientific. But they are also meaningful, suggestive and atmospheric.

Consider an encounter between opposing viewpoints, a staged debate took place in 1992 at the Columbia University of between two influential voices in the environmental debate: Norman Myers (a campaigning intellectual) and Julian Simon (an academic economist), reported in *Scarcity or abundance?* (1994). Julian Simon defends growth, industrial production and the market system; Norman Myers sees danger, a world at risk in contemporary trends. Simon is reassuring: "The picture also is now clear that population growth does not hinder economic development." (ibid.: 114–15). The phrasing matters: "does not hinder" leaves room for interpretation. In reply, Myers evokes a crisis in precise terms:

And at the same time our Earth has taken on board another 93 million people, equivalent to more than a "new Mexico" – and this at a time when our Earth is straining under the burden of its present population of 5.5 billion people. (ibid.: 126–7)

Facts abound and, at the same time, meanings flow and collide. Simon's world is expandable; Myers's world is bounded, an ark at sea. Simon advances ". . . the theory which I believe explains how these good things can all be happening at once." (ibid.: 134). Myers replies: "To reiterate, I believe there is much evidence we are at a breakpoint in the human enterprise." (ibid.: 142).

Claim counters claim, but, ultimately, one language encounters another, and one self-presentation challenges another. Simon synthesizes: economic growth and population growth goes together; good things naturally combine. Myers disrupts the harmony by threatening another Mexico every year. (And why *Mexico*? What are the relevant associations here?) Simon's self-presentation is reassuring and energetic; Myers's self-presentation is urgent and alarmed, yet also objective and definitive. The contrast involves whole human personalities. The facts exist in relation to those personae, and we cannot choose between the facts without being involved in the personalities, and their languages. Whom do you admire, which would

you trust? The “whom” is not personal; the audience must choose between different worlds, different ways of life. The choice is about meanings and cultures.

Myers & Simon each offer a distinctive, personal voice, but they do not start from scratch. They draw on available facts, theories and examples. But it is more than that: phrases are ready-to-use forms of argument, even styles of personality. Since the late 1980s environmental issues have received a tremendous influx of controversial energy; it is this energy that we *feel* as we argue or read others’ arguments, the push of possible things to say. Discourse – the totality of things written and read, spoken and heard – has flowed towards the environment, and it has not gone away. The environment remains topical: in this book we explain how that “topicality” works, at the level of language. Of course, from one point of view, topicality is attributable to events, things happening: the Chernobyl explosion, the “discovery” of the ozone hole, evidence on global warming, oil spills at sea. Institutions react, and people actively make new political agendas: the Brundtland Commission’s work, leading on to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio in 1992, Agenda 21 and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

*Things* are topical. But topicality has an interior dimension too, a cultural dimension. Language itself renews discussion and moves the agenda. It feels natural to write and read about a subject; it feels possible to talk about it in a certain way; there are ready ways to put a case. Topicality also means new ways to write, new idioms, new words. Environment is discussed because things happen, have happened, may happen; it is also discussed because arguments are available, rich arguments, and new cases keep arriving. Attention is waiting to be grabbed, and we already know how to grab it: the words are there. Books, articles, policy documents, pamphlets – all sorts of texts abound, specialist and public, official and personal, philosophical and strategic. Where do they all come from? How are they all writable and readable? Why do they not run dry, but on the contrary boil up again and again? How are *new* texts on the environment always possible today? What supports the production of so much new arguing? The questions are cultural, and require cultural analysis, a new analysis.

Furthermore, the world is at issue in environmental texts and their arguments. Three extracts illustrate this:

If we do not stem the proliferation of the world's deadliest weapons, no democracy can feel secure. If we do not strengthen the capacity to resolve conflicts among and in nations, those conflicts will smother the birth of free institutions, threaten the development of entire regions and continue to take innocent lives. If we do not nurture our people and our planet through sustainable development, we will deepen conflict and waste the very wonders that make our efforts worth doing. (President Clinton, reported 27 September 1993 by Associated Press)

The ecological teaching of the bible is simply inescapable: God made the world because He wanted it made. He thinks the world is good, and He loves it. It is His world; He has never relinquished title to it. And He has never revoked the conditions, bearing on His gift to us of the use of it, that oblige us to take excellent care of it. (Berry 1990: 98)

Since the Montreal Protocol was signed in 1987, scientists have found that reductions on CFC use called for were not nearly enough to save the ozone layer. They are seeking a total worldwide phase out as quickly as possible. (*Independent*, 15 June 1990)

In these quotations, the planet needs nurturing; the world wants care; science calls for a "worldwide" strategy: politics, religion and chemistry are invoked. These examples of oration, essay and expert evidence are all voices on what we shall term the environet. But why does "the world" present itself so compellingly in these texts, why does the environment make such strong texts nowadays? In this book, we address the questions in terms of language and how language drives arguments forwards. When one says "language drives", that does not mean people are passive, at the mercy of linguistic structures. We are studying invention, cultural invention and creativity as present in our use of language. People change language, and language changes us. Language can mean many things: abstract structures, rules, forms; in this book, we start from *the words*, not as in a dictionary, but words in voices, and voiced words, voices in relation to other voices. Myers & Simon are cultural voices, so is President Clinton (indeed he is many voices), and so are Wendell Berry and the nameless scientists.

We look specifically at voices from texts. By texts we mean any instance of talk, argument, discourse in a written form and we draw on poetry, newspaper articles, magazines, books and policy documents. However the term can and is used more broadly to indicate any object which can be "read", interpreted for its meanings and the interrelations between different viewpoints, lines of argument and use of imagery. Thus a text can be a radio or television programme (Livingstone & Lunt 1993), news or fiction (Leith & Myerson 1989), a film (Harvey 1989), a building or even a city (Dear 1995). And the text refers to both the part and the whole; in our case, where we quote many extracts, out texts are both the specific extracts and the larger document they are drawn from. A close metaphor is the religious sermon whose text is both the portion of the Bible under scrutiny and the argument of the whole speech by the preacher. Across the texts run what we call "environment words". To our approach, these words are central. The environment words are markers in the texts. Their presence reveals the environmental agenda. As they appear, change and are contested, they show the dynamics of that agenda. More important, the words carry the viewpoints; without these marker words there would be no focus for the viewpoints. Imagine the debate about the rainforests without the environment word "biodiversity". Different voices, expressing these viewpoints, use the words, are heard through the words. By looking at environment words we come to hear the different voices of the environmental agenda. And as words engage with each other in argument, so the voices engage. The multiplicity of environment words, their repeatedly changing nature, the continuing quest to define their meanings are all central to the feel of contemporary environmental debates and to the feeling of present times. The arguments multiply, the words change, meanings are contested, not settled.

The words come alive in the voices, voices that contend, "criticize or uphold an argument" (Aristotle 1926: 3). The voices speak from texts, each text containing one or more voices, depending on how it is organized. For instance, Simon has an "expert" voice, an economist voice, and he also has a "forceful person" voice; Myers has a "biological" voice and an "anxious citizen" voice. The environment words leave their traces in text after text. As we have said, "text" means many things: it may be specialist, a monograph on biodiversity; or it may be a newspaper article on summer heatwaves and global warm-

ing; it may be polemical, denouncing environmentalists or developmentalists; it may be personal, a journey across South American rainforests; or it may be a catalogue of facts collected from different sources, an information collage about the climate or resource depletion. The text may be authorized by the UN or peer reviewed in a discipline; it may be vetted by a publisher or constructed by a political party. The environment words cross official policy documents and expert reports, news items, poems and statistics, presidential speeches and bestsellers, political theories and newspaper headlines.

The texts vary, shorter and longer, denser and simpler, more direct and more oblique. But each has a topical consciousness of the environment, of what currently should be argued about and how. Our metaphor for the aggregate collection of texts, words and voices is "the environet", a network making linkage upon linkage between the environment words. Such a network is a system for correcting elements with the language of environment, identifying stronger and weaker connections. However, it is only a metaphor for how language works; we do not suggest an object for network analysis (Dowding 1995).

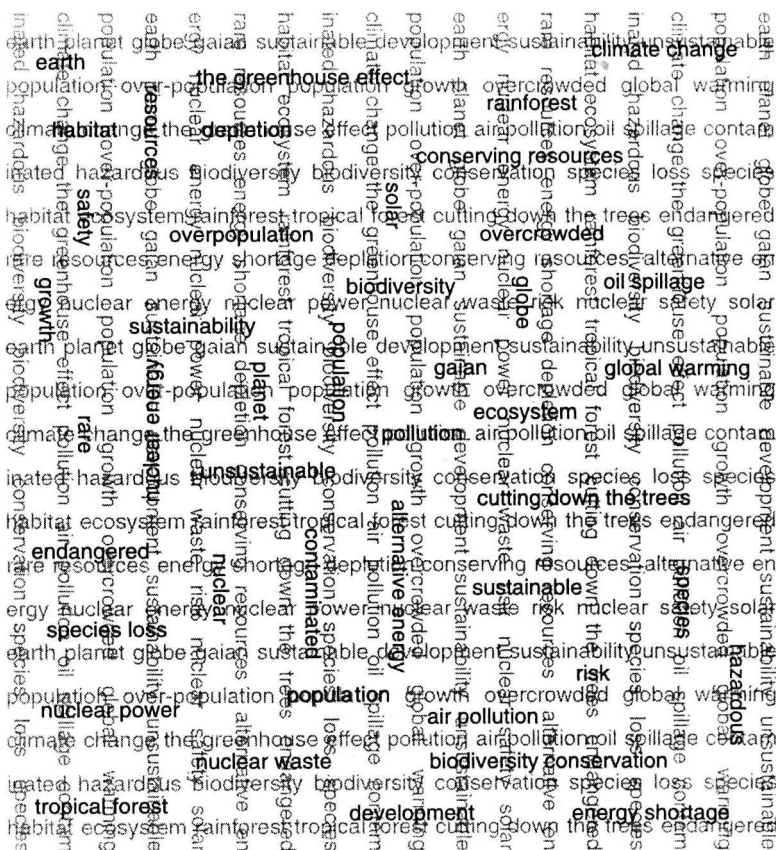
The environet can also be imagined as a "textual carnival" in the metaphor of Susan Miller (1991). A carnival is also dynamic, full of connections made and broken in the *melée*. And a carnival (such as the Rio Earth Summit?) mixes people and voices: the prestigious and peripheral, authoritative and popular, would-be weighty and knowingly transient. So, the environet is also a dynamic system of changing connections spread across society. And this net is busy with environmental arguing, competitive and collaborative, controlled and spontaneous. "Environet" is a textual carnival for contemporary times, where high and low can exchange views and change places.

Each text comes from the environet, and adds to it. However, it is not necessarily *easy* to distinguish the voices (Box 1.1): is "a good atmosphere" so radically different from "the great smog switch-off"? The media articles convey specialist information, a university report and a NASA project; the academic article uses everyday phrases; a poem can mix science and politics in a phrase.

It was once asserted that modern culture would be dominated by "the image" and that the word would decline (McCluhan 1967). Certainly, images are everywhere and a different study could analyze the environet in terms of its images. Another study could look at



### *Environment words, environet and the rhetorical web*



**Figure 1.1** Environment words and the environet.

speech, everyday conversation and the environet of words and issues. But alongside image and talk, a sea of texts exists. In modern culture, communication is multiplied and diverse. Any argument cuts across many different media. Culture is made by texts, although not only by texts. Texts are one map of culture, and one expression of its contemporary riddle: what is everywhere linked and always fragmenting (Bauman 1992, Connor 1992). For behind this notion of environet is the analysis of society as structured by cultural practices, but only temporarily. The net holds in place the practices of communication