

INTRODUCTION

We might imagine that, at the close of the 20th century, the case for both democracy and environmentalism has been successfully established. However difficult it may be to reach agreement on these terms in detail, our intuitive sense is that both relate to justifiable ideologies; the former suggests a way of organizing our social affairs in which we are able to participate equitably in decision-making affecting our interests, and the latter expresses a shared concern with maintaining and improving environmental quality (understood in a broad sense). Furthermore, while there is a notable late 20th century disposition to 'deconstruct' and deflate any notions that claim to ground arguments for improving quality of life on this planet, democracy and environmentalism stubbornly stand for a moral universalism. This is not to deny that these deconstructive tendencies often help us to unmask the particular behind the universal and the historical behind the natural. The contention in this book is that, even in the face of such necessary questioning, there remains a common normative space for democratic governance and environmental justice – a justification that extends across borders, resonating with all non-fundamentalist cultures: one also that reaches back through history to the nameless victims of past social and environmental injustices, and at the same time stretches forward to consider the interests of future generations. It is also my argument that the two political projects are mutually reinforcing; a democratic determination of collective choices requires necessary ecological (and social) preconditions, while only a socially inclusive environmentalism justifies long-term public support.

I will term the convergence of the two 'environmental democracy': this is the subject of the book and the first chapter will make explicit its theoretical outlines. In short, environmental democracy is defined as a participatory and ecologically rational form of collective decision-making: it prioritizes judgements based on long-term generalizable interests, facilitated by communicative political procedures and a radicalization of existing liberal rights. Environmental democracy is a normative conception that connects with intuitive presuppositions of ordinary language use; in particular, that communication is partly about coming to a shared understanding about something. It also describes existing political practices and institutions that respect the social and ecological conditions of communicative freedom. Of course the terms 'ecological democracy' and 'green democracy' have

been used before to refer to a variety of philosophical positions ostensibly sympathetic to the dual challenge of democratic self-determination and ecological sustainability. There is a newly burgeoning literature on the democratic credentials of green political thought, as well as on the green challenge to prevailing ideas of liberal democracy (see, for example, Dobson and Lucardie, 1993; Doherty and de Geus, 1996; Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996). In Chapter 1 I will introduce some of the recurrent themes running through that discussion, registering my affinity with particular perspectives and outlining my own conceptual position – one indebted to discourse theories of democracy.

Until these recent theoretical exchanges around the relationship between environmentalism and democracy – the academic response in the English-speaking world to the upsurge in public environmental concern at the end of the 1980s – there had been little examination of the democratic self-understanding of environmentalists. Anna Bramwell's (1989) ideological and political history of the 20th century ecology movement provoked reactions from green activists for laying bare the anti-democratic beliefs of some of its intellectual forebears, although she noted the later leftward shift to more egalitarian beliefs. The understandable preoccupation of environmentalists with ecological campaigns, and the wish to be seen as apolitical, nevertheless left unexamined, at least in public, the assumption that the association between environmentalism and democracy was unproblematic. This study will examine those recent academic debates that have problematized this relationship, but in a methodological fashion that contrasts with their largely abstract exchanges. This introduction aims to provide an intellectual rationale for an approach that recognizes the need to combine theoretical commentary with reference to relevant empirical investigations in order to conjoin the general and the particular in a productive way. Before that, though, there is a need to demonstrate why there is a very pressing *practical* justification for bringing environmentalism and democracy together in political terms; and why we should want to make any expression of environmentalist values accountable to principles of human justice.

'SAVE THE RHINO: KILL THE PEOPLE': CREATING A BURMESE NATURE RESERVE

We found them deep in the Burmese jungle, east of the Tenasserim River. About 200 of them, hungry, exhausted and fearing for their lives. They have no money, no change of clothes, and they eat what they can find. They sleep under palm trees propped up teepee style against the trees. A sickly child is crying. An old woman sobs endlessly (Levy, Scott-Clark and Harrison, 1997).

The sight of fleeing refugees, the sound of crying: this description of members of the Karen ethnic group, recorded in March 1997 by journalists from the British *Observer* newspaper, sadly evokes a not uncommon scene of human distress in our time. In this case, however, the ethnic cleansing was in order to make way for a million-hectare 'protected area' – the Myinmoletkat Nature Reserve in Kayin (Karen) State in eastern Myanmar (Burma) (see Figure I.1). The launch ceremony for the 'biosphere' reserve had taken place the previous September in Rangoon, hosted by the forestry and energy ministers. Shortly after this announcement the Myanmar army, the *tatmadaw*, began the forced removal of Karen civilians and the political role of the nature reserve soon became clearer.

In February 1997 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) – the military government of Myanmar – launched a large-scale armed offensive against the Karen National Union (KNU), an armed separatist movement (Amnesty International, 1997c, p 2). This was only the latest move in an eight-year campaign by the *tatmadaw* against the KNU in Kayin (Amnesty International, 1996). In its total war against the Karen ethnic minority, the *tatmadaw* has, according to independent observers, taken part in extrajudicial killings, forced labour and portering, looting and burning of villages, and forcible relocations (Amnesty International, 1997b). Two months after the start of the 1997 military onslaught, human rights groups claimed that 2000 Karen people had been killed, at least 20,000 had fled across the border to Thailand and tens of thousands – including children – had been driven into forced labour (Levy, Scott-Clark and Harrison, 1997).

The creation of the Myinmoletkat Nature Reserve thus served, firstly, as a cover for an attempt to eradicate the KNU by forcibly removing the Karen ethnic minority. Secondly, it provided the military regime with a cynical means of appealing for international environmental legitimacy in the face of an appalling human rights record. Given the very high levels of biological diversity in Myanmar, the country has attracted attention from prestigious international conservation organizations. Following a visit to Washington in 1994 from a representative of SLORC, the Office of Biodiversity Programs at the Smithsonian Institution began working with the regime on its biodiversity conservation projects. According to senior policy advisors at the Myanmar Forestry Ministry, interviewed by *Observer* journalists in March 1997, the Smithsonian Institution and the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society were both involved in helping to run the Myinmoletkat Nature Reserve. They had also been brought in to advise on the creation of the Lambi Kyun coral islands reserve – a combined marine national park and ecotourism venture (Levy, Scott-Clark and Harrison, 1997). The Myanmar forest policy, influenced by their advice, anticipates designating 30 per cent of the land area of the country as reserved forests and another 10 per cent as parks and wildlife sanctuaries under the national protected areas system.

The statements of representatives for the two American conservation organizations, when contacted for responses by the *Observer*, warrant direct



Figure I.1 Myinmoletkat Nature Reserve, Myanmar

quotation (both in Levy, Scott-Clark and Harrison, 1997). Firstly, the science director of the Wildlife Conservation Society emphasized:

We do not sanction forced relocation, torture or killing. But we have no control over the government. We are in Burma because it is one of the highest biodiversity countries in Asia. We can walk away from it, but that wouldn't do any good for biodiversity. We are focused on biodiversity and conservation.

In the same vein, the reported comments of a spokesman for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington were:

We are there to do important conservation work. We may disagree with a regime but it is not our place to challenge it.

For these environmentalists concerned with the global biodiversity crisis – what Edward O Wilson correctly describes as ‘one of the greatest extinction spasms of geological history’ (1993, p 268) – the moral ledger can be drawn up in favour of involvement with a repressive regime. There is no question that Myanmar possesses an exceptional level of biological diversity, ranging across three zoogeographic zones: the Indian, Indomalayan and Palaeartic regions. While Rangoon sits in the rice-producing delta zone of the River Irrawaddy, extensively cleared of its monsoon hardwood forests by the British in the latter half of the 19th century (Myers, 1985, p 340), the Myinmoletkat Nature Reserve envelopes a remote jungle environment, isolated from adjoining Thailand by the densely vegetated slopes of the Dawma range. It includes the Heinza-Kaleinaung and Luwaing reserved forests which are believed to contain the rare, endemic Sumatran rhinoceros. The whole reserve area also stands in stark contrast to the Malay peninsular further south – one of the 18 conservation hot spots across the world identified by Norman Myers (1988), all with high levels of biological endemism and where the danger of species extinction is deemed to be critical. Yet the tragic environmentalist irony of the Myinmoletkat Reserve creation is that it displaced a pre-existing network of unofficial community wildlife sanctuaries established by the Karen people and other ethnic groups. For those Western environmentalists seeking to convince such peoples of the value of protected natural areas, participatory examples of community park design and management have represented increasingly influential models of biodiversity conservation, both ethically fair and practically effective (Furze, de Lacy and Birkhead, 1996).

What then is the moral worth of a conservation programme seemingly indifferent to the political means of preservation? Have we come to regard the use of environmental science – in this case conservation biology – in such an instrumentalist manner that we are immune to the social consequences of its production and reception? Above all, how can the motives informing environmental concern seem to exclude, at great misanthropic

cost, consideration of their inter-relatedness with fundamental human rights and interests? The above may be read as an 'extreme' example (an unhelpful category to the Karen victims of ethnic cleansing), but environmentalism cannot afford to ignore questions of political justice and civic self-determination. In other words, a fixation on natural attributes – the content of biodiversity – is not sufficient *anywhere*, I believe, to justify environmental preservation in the public realm. It must also be attached to universal human interests about self-determination and quality of life.

The practical necessity for a project of environmental democracy is in helping to redefine environmentalism as a humanistic programme for ecological and social change, with procedures of moral self-determination at its centre. Unless environmental preservation facilitates equitable decision-making, my claim is that it will lack the support of those suffering most from social and ecological injustices across the world. And without demonstrating this participatory democratic intent, it will not be a force for progressive social change in the 21st century. This book is concerned above all with showing how this presents challenges to the North American and Western European democracies – those countries responsible in the 20th century for the productive and consumptive excesses at the heart of global environmental problems, yet, at the same time, those countries which are often the most complacent about their green and democratic credentials. In making a case for a critical environmentalism, this book will explore several political projects, at different scales, that make a claim to combining meaningfully civic self-determination and ecological sustainability – that is, a claim to environmental democracy.

The violations of environmental democracy appear tragically clear in the Myanmar case. Ultimately, responsibility must be assigned to the authoritarian regime in Rangoon, although the rush of the *Observer* to charge the American conservation groups with a lack of conscience should not prevent us from a wider soul-searching. Crisscrossing the northern end of the national nature reserve is the route of a gas pipeline which, when complete, will pump natural gas from the Yadana gas field in the Andaman Sea across Burma to power plants in Thailand (see Figure I.1). The pipeline is being constructed by the French Total Company in partnership with an American oil company, Unocal Corporation, while Thailand's PTT Exploration & Production Public Co Ltd and Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise have lesser stakes in the venture. According to Thai-based human rights groups, the gas project represents a grave threat to human and environmental interests in Myanmar (Mon Information Service, 1996; Greer, 1998). Allegations of the use of slave labour and forced relocation of ethnic groups – including Mon and Tavoyan communities as well as Karen people – have led, as we shall see in this book's conclusion, to a transnational human rights lawsuit launched against the energy companies in the United States in 1996. The *Observer* team gathered first-hand accounts on the rape, execution and enslavement of Karen villagers by the *tatmadaw* in the vicinity of the pipeline (Levy, Scott-Clark and Harrison, 1997).

According to human rights groups, there is corporate complicity in these systematic human rights violations because the pipeline, and its promise of US\$400 million a year income for the Myanmar government, was the main reason for the security operation to establish the park. Behind the green zoning of the Myinmoletkat are the more sinister 'black areas' designated by the Myanmar army, signifying 'free-fire areas' against resident ethnic groups in the region. The French Total Company has reportedly directly paid the salaries of the SLORC military personnel responsible for securing the pipeline construction (Mon Information Service, 1996, pp 4–5). None of the ethnic groups have been allowed to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process of the pipeline project, even though it directly affects their interests: this includes the refusal of Total and Unocal to divulge the results of their environmental impact assessments for the pipeline (Greer, 1998, p 35). They claim that the pipeline route, following environmental field surveys of three suggested routes, is following the most environmentally responsible option. Neither Total nor Unocal have divested from the project, claiming that they are undertaking socio-economic development programmes for the principal villages in the pipeline region, while arguing more generally that economic development is encouraging democratization in Myanmar. For those ethnic communities not displaced, the only significant 'economic return' so far has been the reported pushing of young women, some only 13 or 14 years old, into giving their services as prostitutes to the French field personnel from Total Company in the region (Mon Information Service, 1996, p 8).

Whatever the veracity of the claims of the ethnic groups in eastern Myanmar, and many have been corroborated by independent observers, the clear absence of social and ecological accountability of private capital investment in this case is, as will be argued more generally in this book, inimical to environmental democracy. Furthermore, as will be mentioned at the end of the book, there is a failing of us as consumers in not being aware of – let alone questioning – the social and environmental costs of the profusion of products we incessantly demand.

What of the responsibility of other governments? Within Asia, Myanmar was admitted into the Association of South-East Asian Nations in July 1997, resting on a claim that engagement would encourage democracy, although the desire for greater political stability in the region was at least as important. But the human rights violations have continued (Amnesty International, 1998). The member states of the European Union proved slow in formulating a common response to the situation in Myanmar. Following repeated resolutions from the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers finally suspended preferential trade tariffs to Myanmar in 1997; but this limited measure has been the only action to ensue. In the United States, in contrast, federal financial sanctions introduced against Myanmar in April 1997, and renewed in May 1998, have been supplemented by 21 American state and city jurisdictions refusing to conduct business with companies operating in the country. These subnational American measures have in

fact been *opposed* by the European Commission, which has formally challenged them under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules prohibiting governments from basing purchasing decisions on political grounds (the WTO Government Procurement Agreement). European companies have continued to invest in Myanmar – in Britain, for example, Premier Oil moved in to replace the American company Texaco when the latter withdrew from the Burmese gas fields – but they now face in return the loss of US state and city procurement contracts. Opposed by a European Parliament powerless to stop the action, the European Commission diplomatic challenge sharply exposed the democratic deficit in the union.

In December 1997, the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution expressing grave concern at the continuing human violations in the country (Amnesty International, 1997a, p 2). The absence of an action-enforcing resolution, in contrast to the contemporaneous security council obsession with weapons inspections in Iraq, seems to give support to those who note the consistent subordination of international justice considerations to geopolitical interests within the United Nations. Insofar as the five permanent security council members remain the driving force between enforcement of United Nations resolutions – choosing strategically which ones to pursue and which to ignore – power politics indeed plays a decisive role. Yet, as will be argued in this book's conclusion, the inculcation of environmental equity at this level of governance, while requiring a democratization of global institutions, nevertheless finds support in existing international law and the efforts of nongovernmental organizations pressing for transnational justice. However, this is to fast-forward. The rest of this introduction will mark out the author's conceptual and methodological frame of reference for environmental democracy.

THE DISCOURSE PRINCIPLE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEMOCRACY

This study seeks to explore the environmental implications of a discourse theory of democracy (Habermas, 1996). It is concerned with democracy as a form of political communication that is both inclusive and rational. The term 'discourse' relates to the importance of language in addressing political phenomena: language, in this communicative approach, is a central medium of political action (and of social reproduction generally). Discourse refers to modes of communication between people in which understanding rests upon, or presumes the possibility of, agreement motivated by convincing reasons rather than by any form of coercion or deception. Applied to the realm of politics, a *discourse principle* can be invoked to question the rightness of socially binding decisions or the generalizability of different interests: that principle, according to political philosopher Jürgen Habermas, states that 'only those action norms are valid in which all possibly affected persons

could agree as participants in rational discourses' (Habermas, 1996, p 459). Democratic justification or 'legitimacy' can, through the employment of this discourse principle, be connected to communicative criteria of inclusiveness and impartiality. One of the key aims of this work is to examine some promising candidates for environmental democracy – both governmental and nongovernmental forms of social action – where environmental interests have been developed with explicit reference to participatory democratic norms.

This book claims that environmental democracy has both a normative and explanatory aspect. In normative terms, it describes a radical democratic project which extends and radicalizes existing liberal norms in order to include the ecological and social conditions for civic self-determination; in explanatory terms, it accounts for existing tendencies for noncoercive green communication found in various political forms and practices. The discourse principle encompasses simultaneously these logically distinct but inter-related normative and explanatory components.

The Normative Role of the Discourse Principle

At a normative level, the discourse principle enables us to specify and justify the institutional conditions for rational collective decision-making – conditions that *ought* to govern political communication about the environment. Chapter 1 presents the argument that environmental democracy is strongly participatory, extending democratic influence into all areas of social choice affecting our interests. This occurs not only in the formal political sphere: the collective, often nonsubstitutable nature of ecological structures and processes vindicates, however unwelcome to private corporations, the democratization of economic governance. The single greatest cause of ecological degradation remains private investment decisions, structurally bound to externalize or socialize environmental costs unless reined in by democratic controls. Of course, the feasibility of democratic incursions within corporate economic sovereignty currently seems to be beyond the bounds of democratic possibility. According to the 'economic fatalism' of dominant neoliberal thinking, there is no alternative to the unfettered rule of market forces and the increasing concentration of global wealth in the hands of a small minority (Bourdieu, 1998). Under these circumstances, the normative promise of the discourse principle seems hopelessly utopian, remote from the practical experience of all those across the world with little or no say in the collective political and economic decisions affecting their lives. Even for the liberal democracies of the global North, this means the overwhelming majority of citizens.

However, according to Habermas, the discourse principle finds practical currency in the conditions of reaching understanding that are faced by individuals in ordinary communication. This is commented upon as a philosophical source of environmental democracy in the first chapter, while

its moral implications are elaborated upon in Chapter 4. All we need note here is the assertion that in everyday communication, individuals are subject to a set of unavoidable idealizations without which mutual understanding would be impossible. These presuppositions include conferring identical meanings on expressions employed and the expectation that interacting actors are mutually accountable – that is, they could, if requested, give good reasons that they are expressing something faithful to their intentions (truthfulness), recognizing a social norm as legitimate (rightness), and representing something accurately (truth) (Habermas, 1984, pp 18–21). Reasons to doubt any of these ‘validity claims’ can block or delay efforts at reaching shared understanding. Processes of reaching understanding ordinarily take place against a background of unquestioned, taken-for-granted knowledge, and the meaning of these validity claims, Habermas notes, is only ascertained from the way they are justified when they are problematic (1984, pp 100–101). Argumentation stands apart from everyday communication as a *reflective* continuation of action orientated to reaching mutual understanding. As a type of speech, argumentation involves participants focusing on contested validity claims and, under suitable circumstances, supporting or criticizing them. Discourse then means, more precisely, those attempts to resolve problematic validity claims by the force of the better argument alone, free of strategic motives of self-interest or coercion, aspiring to a rationally motivated agreement. Habermas concedes that discourses are improbable forms of communication, but reminds us that they are shaped by the idealizations built into everyday linguistic exchanges.

The preoccupation of the discourse principle with norms indicates the central role of *practical discourse* – the mode of argumentation concerned with claims to normative validity (rightness) – in political deliberation and decision-making. In short, the discourse principle provides us with a standard for impartial justification with which we can assess the validity of norms of action (Habermas, 1996, pp 108–109). Subcategories of practical discourse can be distinguished according to the relevant problem under collective discussion: *pragmatic* discourse refers to the determination of rational choices when the underlying values or goals are not up for question (for instance, the appropriate management techniques to enhance biodiversity in a nature reserve); *ethical* discourse covers critical reflections on shared values – the space of collective understandings and cultural traditions (for example, obligations of humane treatment in our relations to domestic animals). Lastly, *moral* discourse relates to the regulation of competing interests in a just or impartial manner (such as deliberation over the distributional implications of a locational strategy for toxic waste dumps). The environmental examples merely illustrate the different types of argumentation at stake in each discourse. In practice, any given issue in environmental politics is, of course, likely to involve all three at different intensities: all forms of argumentation are only recognizable in connection with particular contexts and domains of action. While Habermas maintains

that the validity claimed for particular norms transcends concrete locales, perhaps appealing to universal values, actual claims are always raised in specific contexts in which acceptance or rejection has practical consequences (1996, pp 20–21). Methodologically, we must therefore study their expression in particular forms of argumentation.

The discourse principle relates to action norms animated by moral, ethical and pragmatic concerns. However, in outlining the normative meaning of environmental democracy in Chapter 1, Habermas and also John Rawls (1988) are followed in arguing for the *political* priority of moral rightness (justice) over ethical ideas of the good. Moral discourse assumes primary importance in democratic decision-making on account of its concern with the impartial regulation of conflicts, where the interests of each person are given equal consideration. Justification of moral norms in argumentation relates, then, to generalizing or universalizing interests, while their application in practice takes into account their appropriateness for those relevant interests (Habermas, 1996, p109). Placing such an emphasis on moral questions – issues of ecological and social justice – might seem to downplay the very important ethical content of environmentalism and contrasts with discussion in environmental philosophy. Is not a concern with environmental quality predicated on distinctive environmental values, on how we see ourselves in relation to nonhuman nature, and on spiritual and aesthetic traditions of environmental respect and responsibility? In addition, we can all point to formative moments or relationships in our life histories that catalysed convictions about the way we should live. All these sources of ethical reflection and valuation inform political action addressed to environmental protection: they are a critical element of environmental politics. Nevertheless, the stress on moral questions is designed, at the normative level, to demonstrate the social relevance of environmentalism as a political project of environmental justice, implying institutional designs based on public participation and fairness. It is also intended to signal the cosmopolitan reach of environmentalism as a global political programme.

Democracy finds its universalistic green premise by connecting with the moral discourses of environmentalism. This book argues that these moral discourses are broader than commonly portrayed (at least in the northern hemisphere); they include the struggles of organized labour (Chapter 5) and multicultural inner city communities (Chapter 6), as much as environmental conservation and preservation (Chapter 4). The discourse principle is extended to the institutional framework of environmental democracy by addressing legal norms – norms that govern political decision-making, including their interpretation by the judiciary and their application by administrative mechanisms. A fundamental precondition for democracy is thus discursive procedures of legitimate lawmaking:

...the democratic principle states that only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent ... of all citizens in a

discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted
(Habermas, 1996, p 110).

Democratic legitimacy therefore rests on the claim that political deliberation and law-making is rational, and that this decision-making can be justified as recognizing all citizens as free and equal members of their political community. When related to the whole range of government activities, the belief of citizens becomes that public authorities will justly represent and consider all relevant interests. The formal political realization of the discourse principle, with reference to environmental problems, directs attention to the institutional environmental capacity of nation-states (Chapter 2) as well as regional experiments in institutional participatory practice (such as the one described in Chapter 3): how can public forms of communicative practice be encouraged? What are the criteria for judging the fairness of these? Furthermore, democratic legitimacy fans out wider still to institutions in the private sector. The social and environmental impact of capital investment decisions means that corporate governance needs to face meaningful democratic accountability. Applied to private economic choices, democratic legitimacy refers to the expectation on the part of citizens that capital investment does not, at the very least, undermine public environmental interests and minimally acceptable standards of social justice.

The Explanatory Role of the Discourse Principle

Attention to the notion of discourse in the academic literature on environmental politics has recently led to some innovative work on particular policy areas, notably Litfin (1994) on stratospheric ozone depletion and Hajer (1995) on acid rain, as well as more encompassing overviews of environmental discourses (Dryzek, 1997). These studies have cogently demonstrated the wide-ranging, often subtle, ways in which ecological politics involve competing discursive types. Their *explanatory* formulations of discourse – Hajer (1995, p 44) speaks of ‘a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to the physical and social realities’ and Dryzek (1997, p 8) of a ‘shared way of apprehending the world’ – dwell on the ways in which the linguistic framing of environmental problems has wide-ranging practical consequences. Any comprehensive analysis of environmental discourses must cover both their communicative *functions* (of expression, interaction and representation) and their *formats*. It has been a significant contribution of discourse analysis in the social sciences that the significance of the latter is more fully acknowledged: to study discursive forms, as evident in the research on environmental politics, is to map out the narrative construction of environmental story lines, the role of emblematic motifs, the employment

of metaphors and other rhetorical devices, and so on. Discursive forms are rich and complex.

In line with the discourse principle, the explanatory emphasis in this study is on the communicative role of environmental norms – particularly, for the reasons set out above, on moral norms. It means looking at actual political and policy examples of environmental communication. Discourses have a socially integrative force, actively shaping the constitution of political *actors, interests* and *institutions*. Each of these will be briefly taken in turn, referring above all to claims about their legitimacy or rightness.

Firstly, discourses mark out political agents or subjects, drawing on, and imputing, a variety of motives for action. Hajer (1995, pp 52–58) represents environmental politics as an argumentative struggle in which actors are configured in relational terms, politically constrained and enabled in unequal ways. These ‘subject-positions’ link personal goals and aspirations with wider political contests: they are reproduced through discourse. In practical discourses environmental norms either confirm or question those social rules and conventions that position actors in the field of ecological politics. Environmental philosophical debates interrogate the very conditions for moral and political agency – whether we can attach moral competence to nonhuman entities, whether a right to a safe environment is a valid claim even when restricted to humans, and so on. For questions of environmental democracy, the explanatory focus here is more on how environmental norms contribute to understanding ourselves as subjects of democratic citizenship.

Ranging over different geographical scales, this study examines the normative mix influencing the collective subject-positions of wilderness preservationists, organized labour and urban communities. How do they identify and justify themselves in the terms of environmental democracy? How compatible are green and democratic sources of political orientation? Politics, in this sense, is the power to craft group allegiances against competing sources of collective identity. The democratic legitimacy of ecological activism lies partly in demonstrating how regard for the social and environmental interests of others, including those not yet born, enlarges our understanding as self-governing subjects with responsibilities beyond conventional political boundaries. For environmentalism, it is both an opportunity and challenge thrown up by the fluid social and cultural bonds of late modern society that political identities are more open ended (Giddens, 1991; Berking, 1996).

Secondly, and linked to the creation of political subject-positions, discourses shape motives for political action, including actors’ perceptions of social and environmental needs. In other words, discourses fashion political interests. Environmental interests, as other-regarding or public interests, pose a theoretical problem for those social scientists who seek to explain political action in terms of self-interest motivation. The rational choice tradition (see Weale, 1992, pp 38–46) argues that those ecological organizations classifiable as public interest groups must rely on selective

benefits for their members in order to encourage political mobilization, otherwise there would be no incentives for individuals to contribute to environmental public goods (since others can always ‘free-ride’ on the environmental improvements they achieve). In contrast, appreciating the role of the discourse principle in motivating collective political action highlights the role of nonpurposive incentives – normative motivations – in environmental activism. This is more than incorporating additional motives for action: communicative political action collectively defines the context of interaction, creating new political spaces – for example, demonstrations and community visioning – through argumentation over environmental interests. Practical discourse featuring environmental norms redefines the nature of the political: what should be subject to collectively binding decisions.

Of course, ecological science has played an important part in constituting environmental interests, but this book’s explanatory concern with environmental politics rests less on the content of that knowledge than its differential uptake and use by competing social groups. Giddens (1984, pp 342–343) pointedly shows how the possibility of discursively articulating interests is asymmetrically distributed in society. Those in the lower echelons, he claims, often face limitations – in terms of inferior educational opportunities, their more local milieux of action and their lack of access to relevant information – upon their capabilities to formulate, let alone pursue, their interests. And, to connect with environmental values, this may prevent them from influencing the long-term goals articulated by environmentalists (who, in advanced capitalist countries, are predominantly middle class), impeding their efforts to connect their interests to the political conditions for realizing environmental interests.

A last explanatory role for the discourse principle fixes onto this relationship between institutionally established relations of power and political argumentation. In the political field, more visibly than other areas of social action, linguistic relations reflect and reproduce dynamic relations of power. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990, pp 123–139) has developed the ideas of ‘symbolic power’ and ‘symbolic violence’ to explain how institutions endow certain communicative acts with authority, maintaining particular forms of domination. Objective power relations thereby tend to reproduce themselves as symbolic interactions. The concentration of political power in the state, with its ‘monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence’ (1990, p 136), permeates the official discourses of state representatives through authoritative classifications and names, hierarchies of rank, administrative prescriptions and so forth. Symbolic power presents as self-evident that which is historical, including liberal democracy itself. The practical import of oppositional environmental discourses depends upon the extent to which they convince social actors not only to question environmentally and socially destructive consequences accompanying ‘legitimate’ institutional practices, but also to push for these political (and economic) institutions to open up to environmental interests. In spite of

the seeming proliferation of communication on environmental problems, it is still commonplace for there to be nondecision-making about the possibility for addressing these democratically (Crenson, 1971, pp 85, 117).

The discourse principle has emerged from an intellectual domain targeted on uncovering the rational characteristics of human interaction. Disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, cognitive and moral psychology, and discourse analysis are, in this area, united by an academic interest in explaining the background intuitive knowledge used in everyday linguistic action. Habermas (1990, pp 31–42) terms this academic field ‘reconstructive science’ in recognition of the common goal of making explicit that which is taken for granted by communicative subjects, and includes his own theory of communicative action (1984, 1987) as a sociological attempt to account for the general and necessary conditions for validating communicative claims. While his democratic theory starts off from the premise that positive law and democratic constitutions embody the normative self-understanding expressed by the discourse principle, however imperfect its realization in liberal political institutions and practices, this discourse principle is logically related to the communicative presuppositions claimed for ordinary language use. What needs to be borne in mind, though, is that like any academic thesis, Habermas’s claims pertaining to the universal structure of language use are open to falsification by work in the reconstructive sciences. Nevertheless, even if his philosophy of language is not sustained, the discourse principle may still be offered as a model for democratic legitimacy (Bohman, 1990).

This book’s concern is not a detailed linguistic exposition of particular environmental discourses, analysing the linguistic rules operating within them. Rather, it is to account for various institutional and noninstitutional tendencies towards environmental democracy. The intellectual and research interest is in the discourse principle at the level of environmental policy and politics. Since this principle directs us to examine the social effects of its *existing* democratic influence, through prevailing norms of equal treatment, it therefore becomes a methodological technique for looking at the quality of democratic communication on environmental issues, whether applied to state structures and initiatives (Chapters 2 and 3), environmental preservationists (Chapter 4), organized labour (Chapter 5), or local communities (Chapter 6). This is where an explanatory interest in the actual reach of deliberative forms of communication meets up with a normative perspective in building discursive democracy. The discourse principle examines examples of ecological argumentation according to democratic criteria of responsiveness and fairness.

CASING THE DISCOURSE PRINCIPLE: THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The theoretically informed empirical work that constitutes the bulk of this book reflects my professional background as a human geographer: this entails a sensitivity to regional or local context and, in my case, an intellectual preoccupation with the politico-ecological aspects of society–land relations. The case studies detailed in Chapters 3 to 6 reflect personal research over the past couple of years – a biographical thread governed by a motive to explore notable and innovative examples of participatory environmentalism. In ‘casing’ these examples (Ragin, 1992, p 217) – that is, in delimiting them as objects for practical research – I have followed a distinctive methodological strategy. Most obviously, the examples represent institutionalized systems of interaction and/or environmental discourses with internal claims to environmental democracy. They offer themselves, in their different ways, as either champions or models for a more ecologically rational and democratic society. As cases, they were therefore chosen as promising candidates aspiring towards the practical embodiment of environmental norms compatible with the discourse principle of equal respect for all. In each case, the coherence and consistency of these democratic claims are examined.

While the discourse principle is thus a common theoretical strand, allowing a deductive selection of case studies, they nevertheless represent differentiated subject matter according to their formal institutional status. If the survey of secondary literature in the second chapter is included, the book runs from nation states (Chapter 2) and a regional planning body (Chapter 3) to a variety of more autonomous political entities – interest groups (Chapter 4), a union (Chapter 5) and, at the more diffuse end of political action, community voluntarism (Chapter 6). The chapters also range across different (but inter-related) geographical scales – local (Chapter 6), regional (Chapters 3 and 4), national (Chapter 5) and cross-national (Chapter 2), while the international implications of environmental discourse are discussed in the book’s conclusion. This organizational and geographical diversity of methodological choices is deliberate: it is designed to explore the range of application for the idea of environmental democracy. However, it should also be clear from each chapter that the intellectual focus is consistently on environmental institutional designs and/or ecological argumentation with reference to participatory democratic norms. A short summary of each will hopefully aid the reader in appreciating that fact, although I have also attempted to write the chapters so that they may be read in a self-contained manner.

Chapter 1 details a theoretical conceptualization of environmental democracy compatible with the normative benchmark of the discourse principle. It begins with a discussion of democracy and environmentalism as political categories, highlighting the naturalistic self-understanding of

environmentalism. A more sociological perspective on environmental degradation and ecological politics precedes a critical review of models of green democracy presented by both reformist and radical environmentalists. Following this survey, four general characteristics of environmental democracy are defined: an orientation to long-term generalizable interests; communicative political structures and practices; ecologically rational decision-making; and the radicalization of existing liberal rights. These signpost the necessary communicative and institutional conditions that must be met by any polity committed to realizing the discourse principle.

Equipped with this conceptual understanding, the second chapter presents a preliminary survey of environmental decision-making in Western Europe and North America in order to identify institutional tendencies sympathetic to the idea of environmental democracy. The chapter begins with some general comments on the resonance of liberal democratic polities to communication on ecological values and interests. Of three theoretical perspectives discussed, one is employed, the structuralist approach, to elaborate empirically upon several political-institutional conditions for environmental decision-making: participative capacity, integrative capacity, strategic capacity, and the role of noninstitutional political action. This is then linked to an influential economic-technological development path deemed consistent with environmental quality improvements: ecological modernization. The structuralist perspective claims that environmental decision-making is both more effective and democratically legitimate when the state facilitates the development of the above framework conditions. And it holds up the European neocorporatist states as successful policy innovators in these terms. That position is critically reviewed, concluding with comments on why there is still some way to go before we can speak of environmental democracy for the advanced capitalist states.

Chapter 3 continues the thematic focus on institutional conditions for environmental democracy, but relates the interest in administrative openness and participatory decision-making to a regional experiment in environmental negotiation in British Columbia, Canada. The Commission on Resources and Environment (1992–1996) was an ambitious attempt to facilitate democratic deliberation on environmental interests, with a view to resolving protracted ecological conflict over land-use allocation and management. Of particular interest here was the commission's articulation of the idea of administrative fairness, suggesting independent normative criteria for evaluating the democratic legitimacy of environmental decision-making. The chapter examines the understanding of environmental administration developed by the commission and how it had to adapt to prevailing political and policy constraints. It also scrutinizes the performance of the commission itself according to its own procedural criteria of fairness.

In Chapter 4, for the same area of the world, the discourse principle is applied to the preservationist arguments of environmental activists. By critically interpreting the 'political morality' of wilderness preservationists – that is, the key normative principles motivating their political actions –

the focus is on their reasoning. This requires, firstly, an elaboration of the moral philosophical status of the discourse principle, and then its employment to question the ethical rationale underlying the twin strands of the preservationist political platform – increased protection of natural areas and the democratization of land-use decision-making. My claim is that, as expressed through the naturalistic presumptions of deep ecology and bioregionalism, this dual agenda lacks political coherence and democratic legitimacy. However, the critique is a constructive one: at the end of the chapter, a moral justification of wilderness preservation, compatible with the discursive nature of environmental democracy, is offered instead.

Pulling organized labour into the political compass of environmental democracy might appear provocative to those familiar with the common representation of unions as indifferent to ecological concerns. Nonetheless, with reference to the Transport and General Workers' Union in Britain, Chapter 5 describes a union that lays claim to a decentralized democratic structure and a wide-ranging environmental commitment across its recruitment, bargaining and campaigning agendas. A critical examination of the union's attempts to link environmental concerns with health-and-safety regulations in the workplace and its ecological campaigning supports the characterization of organized labour in this case as a key actor for environmental democracy. In order for this to apply to organized labour in Britain and elsewhere, the chapter suggests four strategic political options available to unions to realize the radical democratic demands implied by the discourse principle.

In Chapter 6, turning to the local political realm in Britain, a series of participatory forms that have been at the centre of recent experiments in democratic governance are examined. A foremost catalyst for innovation here has been the remarkable uptake in the country of Local Agenda 21 consultation processes. The chapter outlines something of the political context of structural reforms in British local government before engaging with Local Agenda 21 initiatives – nationally and, above all, in London. Extended reference is made to the development of environmental democratic forms in the London borough of Islington, notably neighbourhood democracy structures, the borough's Local Agenda 21 consultation process, and community-led regeneration planning. Islington has been associated with developments in participatory decision-making sympathetic to the principle of subsidiarity, but at the limit of existing local authority powers. After reviewing these community-based methods of determining social and ecological interests, their implications are considered in light of the mix of representative and participatory political structures. They have raised expectations of democratic accountability and fairness, challenging the national government to make good its commitment to renew local democracy; and in a way that goes beyond community voluntarism to the local devolution of power.

The book's conclusion offers some general comments on the preceding chapters before outlining the global scope for environmental democracy.

This entails, firstly, a brief examination of the development of international environmental agreements, highlighting one perspective within regime theory to investigate the relevance of democratic norms. The increasing participation of nongovernmental actors in global environmental governance, associated with an emerging global civil society, enables me to locate a parallel thesis to the one provided in Chapter 1 on the democratic interplay between state institutions and nongovernmental political action. The environmental rights approach adopted in this book faces particular challenges at the international level from state sovereignty and market sovereignty. Both are addressed before illustrating one suggestive pathway to developing transnational liability for environmental harm (which returns to the Myanmar example). Finally, the book finishes by outlining the opportunities for, and constraints to, the development of global environmental citizenship.

The overarching theoretical claim governing this work is that mutual understanding, whether taken for granted in everyday communicative interaction or reflectively developed as discourse, is a basic ordering medium of social life. Communicative underpinning of social existence also presumes relations of symmetry and reciprocity that give us an intuitive handle on what democracy as civic self-determination means. The discourse principle articulates this philosophically through the idea of moral self-determination, but its social currency can only be gauged by examining particular institutional designs or examples of ecological argumentation. This book's main methodological aim is to look at several empirical instances where environmental understanding is structured or articulated in communicative terms; and to contextualize, with these cases, the operation of the discourse principle in practice. Unlike recent relativistic currents in the social sciences, this does not imply abandoning the project of uncovering any generalizable features of social life. As Thomas Schatski (1996, p 18) notes:

Underlying and thus connecting all the particulars populating the social world is a web of understanding and intelligibility that establishes meanings and possibilities and thereby institutes agents while coordinating them with their milieus.

That interpretive web, as theorized by Habermas, shows how understanding communicative claims implies evaluating the shared reasons animating them.

This communicative circle also encompasses the social scientist trying to make sense of social practice. Anthony Giddens (1984, p 348), among others, has demonstrated how the social sciences are inevitably involved in a 'subject–subject' relation, where the question of interpreting meaning is already taking place before the researcher intervenes as another party. The researcher starts off from the understanding of the participants involved in any given situation before proceeding to the unacknowledged

circumstances and unintended consequences of action. I take this interpretive character of research as given, which means that the book's 'case studies' represent the results of qualitative research concerned with investigating existing forms of political communication favouring the norms of environmental democracy. As such, they are not necessarily representative or replicated elsewhere, although the egalitarian promise of the discourse principle is prefigured in everyday communication. The dialogue between geographical context and generalization that this implies is as relevant to environmental policy as it is to scientific research (Trudgill and Richards, 1997). What the social scientist brings to this situation are objective but falsifiable claims to the validity that primary research findings are faithful to relevant factual evidence and theoretical understanding. In the dialectic of theory and practice evident in this work, I offer my own investigations for empirical corroboration and critical examination, as well as my own moral judgements for practical discussion.