

## SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT. CHANGING SOCIETY? (EDITORIAL)

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### ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes some approaches to the society and environment, using discussion of participants of conference “Our common present – Changing society?” and rich debate in literature concerning this topics. Diversity of approaches and disciplines show one common feature: seeking for some pro-environmental steps in our society. The term pro-environmental society is explained in this context. There are many questions and consequences connected with the measurements and indicators of pro-environmental society. Lack of qualitative indicators, including moral environmental values, is clear visible. Cultural ecology as a concept of cultural adaptation could offer some solution in terms of reaction to changing natural as well socio-economics environment. It seems one important factor for the shift to pro-environmental society is award of the dependences on biosphere.

**Keywords:** changes, strategies, cultural ecology, indicators, pro-environmental society

### INTRODUCTION

The international conference with the title “Our common present” and the sub-title “Changing society?” was held in March 2012, at Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague<sup>1</sup>. Some of the authors were asked to publish their papers in this issue of Journal of Landscape Ecology. We consider landscape to be the relevant space where all changes have their manifestation at the end. Some participants were involved in landscape ecology directly, e. g. Hannes Palang from the Center for Landscape and Culture, Tallinn University in Estonia, some of them were more involved in society and environment like James Sanford Rikoon from the Department of, University of Missouri in Columbia, US, and Fritz Reusswig from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Germany. Most of the participants, including students were involved in relationships between society and environment, their present and future.

The conference raised basic conceptual questions about the shift of the society; does this shift really head towards the pro-environmental society, compared with the society ten or twenty years ago? What progress has really been made since the preceding world conferences in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and Johannesburg (2002)? This simple question

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the conference and following publications see <http://www.ecoology.org/english>.

covers a huge number of problems, and a wide range of solutions followed by a myriad of treaties, agreements and conventions designed for achieving a sustainable way of life of human society on the Earth. The term “green society” as a charter for sustainability was at the centre of the Rio+20 discussions. Rio+20 brought great survey on a global scale, however, the conceptual as well as practical question what does the environmental shift mean and how to measure it still remains actual.

The purpose of the introductory paper is to analyze some approaches to the society and environment, using conference participants’ discussion and rich debate in literature concerning these topics.

On one hand, there were no new concepts introduced at the conference Our common present: Changing society? On the other hand all of the concepts presented dealt with the environment in terms of description of changes: changes in cultural values, changes in landscape, carbon footprint etc., or in terms of strategies: sustainable development, development of rural areas, a lesson from local cultures and their relationship to nature, woman as an ecological being, etc. The slightly apparent chaos and diversity of approaches and disciplines shows one common feature: seeking for some pro-environmental shifts in our society. “Pro-environmental” society, values, etc. in this context means changes in terms of intrinsic values toward respect to the environment, towards the consciousness of dependence of human culture to nature, towards environmental ethics. We use the term pro-environmental society rather than “environmental friendly society”, which is more connected with the results, with the technology and processes. Term pro-environmental society is focused more on ecological changes in internal cultural conditions. In fact pro-environmental society should manifest its environmental values in environmental friendly technologies, behaviour, laws etc. We used the term pro-environmental society also rather than the term environmental society for the sake of emphasis internal changes in culture (and social institutions) looking for the environmental context and values and their preferences. The changing “inscape” – our internal understanding of the world and the relationships between man and nature – is the first driving force in the process of building the pro-environmental society. “Man, from Magdalenian to modern times, has had a selective perception of the world about him and in turn a highly discriminating way of modelling the landscape to match his inner vision. In other words, the richness of our inscapes is a preliminary to a good management of our landscapes” (Dansereau 1975, p. 29).

At present nearly everything – at least in our Euro-American society – has the environmental labels. You will find thousands of non-governmental and governmental organizations and agencies around the world which claim to care for local or global environments. You will also find hundreds and hundreds of environmental companies, involved in everything from gardening and landscaping to environmental building construction and cleaning solutions. The relatively recent explosion of civic and commercial interests coupled by a boom of the terms “environmental” and “environmentalism”, suggests a shift of the term “environment”. There is shift from a neutral word towards the word that now focuses our attention on relationships of man and nature and nature protection, both the biotic and abiotic, the material and nonmaterial environment included.

From an ecological point of view, the question of whether or not we live in environmental society seems a little bit naive or pointless. Every society exists in an environment incorporating, among other things, natural resources and surrounding landscapes and ecosystems.

But can we document the environmental shift in the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of post-modern society? And, if so, is it a shift in principles only, or in social and economical systems, in terms of new cultural adaptation strategy? There are a lot of challenges associated with these questions. What does it mean to establish a pro-environmental society? A part of the problem is connected with definitions, concepts and principles of pro-environmental society. What are the criteria that distinguish pro-environmental from non-environmental society? Of course any conceptualization of pro-environmental society will be based on the adoption of critical ecological paradigms and programs. But beyond environmental goals, it would seem that basic criteria should include such societal and human values as justice and equity. Yet these are not given or inevitable components, particularly across space. In a world which today encounters problems on a global scale, we face the political and social difficulties inherent in the quantity of divisions between local governments and national states, each seeking their own local solutions and prosperity.

Under new conditions of both economic and environmental globalization, there are now increasing political and economic calls for a “green economy” as a way to resolve current crisis. The current crisis manifests itself as a global economical crisis with its social consequences, and ecological crisis. “Green economy” promises to find an economic solution how to get out of this crisis. “Green economy” represents a way to simultaneously address problems related to both global climate changes and economic crisis. In contemporary society, the idea of a green economy and the search for a “Green New Deal” is becoming a very popular refrain, we hear about it from diverse economic and political points of view. However, our question is: Do these economic and political shifts foretell real changes for society?

## **PROBLEMS WITH CRITERIA**

Looking for the shift of our society to one characterized by what Alan Schnaiberg more than thirty years ago termed the “ecological synthesis” (Schnaiberg 1980) requires that we have some clear criteria, some environmental indicators of change and success. A lot of work has been done in this field in terms of research and application. But the basic question remains – can we clearly document a shift of Euro-American society towards the state in which respect to the environmental values are primary objectives? A first problem is with measurement. What do we measure in our society when seeking to document environmental perceptions, attitudes and behaviours? Are we witnesses to the next “silent revolution” described by Ronald Inglehart in his the same name book (Inglehart 1977)? Are we able to provide evidence of cultural changes aiming towards pro-environmental society at this time?

The members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) use for example ten basic environmental indicators: from climate change – CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases emission intensities to biodiversity – threatened species. According to the OECD, environmental indicators are essential tools for tracking environmental progress, supporting policy evaluation and informing the public. Since the early 1990s, such indicators have gained of importance in many countries and in international forums. As part of their commitment to transparency and to better information of the public, OECD countries increasingly use these reduced number of indicators, so-called KEI – “key

environmental indicators”, selected from larger sets to report on major environmental issues (OECD 2008).

There can be little doubt about the useful application of these indicators. But these are measures focused often more on the technical and technological tools rather than the shift of values towards pro-environmental society.

The European Environmental Agency (EAA) developed their set of environmental indicators according to a typology based on the DPSIR (Driving forces, Pressure, State, Impact, and Response) framework for the purpose of sustainable development. In summary, in the field of environmental indicators, one can find there is a great number of proposals and indices, used in many ways, but in general with little commentary about their adequacy or interpretation (Smeets and Weterings 1999).

In fact, it is impossible to settle on only a few indicators that could comprise a set of working global, social, economic and cultural environmental indicators adequate to detecting the shift towards a pro- environmental society (van den Bergh and van Veen-Groot 1999). We can identify in sociology, economics, and ecology – to name only a few of the relevant disciplines – many compelling descriptions in terms of the concepts and principles of the environmental society. We can also find a high number of policy recommendations and ideas, as well as a healthy range of program alternatives and outcomes.

It seems to be the time for a set of “next generation” indicators based more on what we would call the social and cultural constructivism frameworks based on the concept of social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This means employing qualitative indicators, some of which must be able to document the changing structure and character of human culture. As noted in the *State of the World 2010* “In 2005 the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), a comprehensive review of scientific research that involved 1,360 experts from 95 countries, reinforced these findings. It found that some 60 percent of ecosystem services – climate regulation, the provision of fresh water, waste treatment, food from fisheries, and many other services – were being degraded or used unsustainably. The findings were so unsettling that the MA Board warned that “human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet’s ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted” (Assadourian 2010, p. 4-5).

Since the beginning of industrial revolution, focus on individual, the self-interested accumulation of wealth has been accepted as an ethical one only (throughout former human history, individuals were behaved to be responsible to his/her community) and after two hundred years of practising, it is valued as “financially profitable, nonsustainable aberration in human development” (Hawken et. al. 1999).

## **CULTURAL ECOLOGY AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION**

Culture as the unique human adaptation to environmental variations, conditions and opportunities is the focus of cultural ecology developed by Julian H. Steward and his school in anthropology in the 1950s. He stressed adaptive function of culture, multilineal process, influenced by environment as a natural constrains and by cultural institutions regulating behaviour of the people. He stressed the adaptive function of culture: “culture change...is

induced by adaptation to environment” (Steward 1955, p. 5). This concept of culture as a non-biological adaptation does not necessarily imply mechanical environmental determinism as a simple response on the environmental variety. “This adaptation, an important creative process, is called cultural ecology, a concept which is to be distinguished from the sociological concept, ‘human ecology’ or ‘social ecology’” (Steward 1955, p.5). But not every author considers culture in Steward’s concept as an active agent in process of cultural adaptations. “Steward argues that cultural patterns were directly shaped by adaptation to the physical environment and that different societies in similar environment would exhibit similar socio-political organizations... The causal relationships are very straightforward: the differences and similarities in the organization of human societies largely reflect distinct adaptation to environmental variations” (Moore 2009, p. 209).

Looking at the presentations and discussions of the conference Our common present, we can divide all contributions into three basic groups:

1. Description of changes in natural environment
2. Description of changes in socio-economic environment
3. Description/criticisms of our present strategies

This scheme is about cultural ecology filling all patterns – there are great changes in terms of natural as well as social and cultural environments, and the strategies of cultural adaptation to environment are needed. Cultural ecology can open our mind in a way of looking at the results of research like a material or environment for cultural adaptations. Research results, not being a part of cultural adaptations, could be the excellent contribution to the knowledge system, but not living part of our common culture. Despite of the historical and local facts, determining Steward’s cultural ecology, his approach suggests important consequences for the present time. One of them is the fact of decline and collapse of cultures (cultural groups) which are not able to pay attention to changes in the environment (we can add both natural and socio-economic) in all levels of their organizations. “Steward’s approach is still used today as a useful way to describe how society (culture group) interacts with its environment, obtains food and other natural resources and makes a living” (Andreatta and Ferraro 2012, p. 90).

We cannot consider all the data pointing to technological environmental friendliness as an indicator of complex cultural adaptation, despite the fact that they are very important and show the promising trend for future. The core of cultural adaptation lies in the internal changes of culture, social institutions included. It means changes in values, attitudes and strategies which are part of common everyday life of cultural group – society. It was clearly visible during the discussion at the conference Our common present. To summarize this discussion, we can see:

1. Emphasis on the environmental education like the beginning of the successful process of cultural adaptation – purpose are changing values.
2. The environmental education should bring the consciousness of dependence on nature, biosphere and landscape.
3. We are living in the society with a little tolerance to the other alternative than mainstream economic concept of development.
4. Moral leaders are missing, particularly in the Czech contemporary politics.
5. The role of universities is unclear in terms of environmental education; it shows a deeper crisis of educational non-environmental oriented system and raises the question of values transmission in university milieu.

## CONCLUSION

The international conference Our common present at Charles University in Prague, brings more open questions than solutions. We can expect it as it is common at the conferences concerning basic social, economic, cultural and environmental challenges of present days. Despite the huge diversity of topics and equivalent methodological approaches we can see the great effort to identify appropriate strategies for our common present and describe sources of our failures, which hinder the move towards pro-environmental society. Some of them, concerning environmental education, are summarized above. Some of them are underlying in the process of cultural adaptations of our society to the changing environments, natural as well as social-economic and cultural. It seems one important factor for the shift to pro-environmental society is aware of the contexts of our activities with the nature and dependences on biosphere like global living ecosystem. Looking at the title of this paper we can see not only changing society towards the way which is partly pro-environmental, partly not, as is characteristic of the society at the crossroad. We can see also rapidly changing environment, natural as well as socio-cultural. The cultural adaptation to the changing environment is tied with a temporal factor. Maybe, the lack of time and synchronization of cultural adaptation to the environmental changes is the key for the pro-environmental changes.

On behalf of the organizers of the conference I wish that the papers in this issue of Journal of Landscape Ecology, which are based on the conference ideas<sup>2</sup>, will bring new interesting information and viewpoints to the readers and will help a bit to tend to the pro-environmental society as it is described above.

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<sup>2</sup> Pavel Klvač's paper was not presented on the conference, however its topic fits very well into the scope of this issue of Journal of Landscape Ecology.

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