Born to Be Wild? Non-governmental Organisations, Politics and the Environment

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Abstract

The ways in which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) pursue environmental agendas via political processes have been a subject of growing interest to geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. This article examines how and why that interest has grown by assessing selected different approaches to the study of NGOs, environments and politics that characterise such research. Against a backdrop of growing debate over the ultimate significance of NGO action, I discuss three broad if interlinked approaches: ideology-related accounts, critical perspectives, and scholarship that 'normalises' NGOs as objects of study with the latter standing the best chance of capturing the contested and multifaceted contemporary significance of this actor.

Born to be Wild

Like a true nature's child
We were born, born to be wild
We can climb so high
I never wanna die

Born to be wild
Born to be wild
(Lyrics by Mars Bonfire 1968)

Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGO) are would-be 'saviours' of the environment. Witness names such as: Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Conservation International, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Environmental Defence Fund. They wish to be seen to be 'non-governmental' and 'not-for-profit' in order to differentiate themselves from states and business corporations. NGOs would purify and protect, cleanse and combat – oftentimes reminding us of the value of the 'wild' in our increasingly urban world. NGOs do for politics what TV nature documentaries do for culture: inform, motivate, enchant and disturb. NGOs have 'vision' – and wish us to share it too.

Powerful currents work against them. The phenomenon of global capitalism is complex but one of them (Bryant and Bailey 1997; Peet and Watts 2004; Swyngedouw 2004). What Schumpeter (1975) termed 'creative destruction' is central to this system, yet its vicissitudes seem to entail widespread environmental destruction (Harvey 1996; Heynen et al. 2007; Himley 2008). Ecological Marxists speak of a 'second contradiction of capitalism' (O'Connor 1998) and the 'ecological contradiction of capitalism' (Altvater 1993). Then there is the modern state. Here, complicated political and economic calculations encompassing everything from personal enrichment to national security, from bureaucratic rivalry to interstate geopolitics seem to ensnare this actor in a web of 'creative duplicity'. The norm is environmental sacrifice in a world in which short-term and non-holistic thinking is privileged – despite occasional evidence to the contrary (Carter 2007; Johnston 1996; Kjellén 2008; Whitehead 2008). Finally, there are proliferating cultural visions of how people should live under conditions of 'liquid modernity' (Baumann 2000) whereby qualities of contingency, irony, self-centredness and profligate consumerism are critical in identity formation. While geographers (among others) debate political meaning and consequences here (Bryant and Goodman 2004; Clarke et al. 2007; Mansvelt 2008), these qualities do challenge NGO environmental visions that rely on steadfast commitment, anti-consumerism, and 'other' regarding behaviour. Overall, then, formidable political, economic and cultural obstacles hinder NGOs.

And yet research highlights how bad news – paradoxically – can be good news for NGOs. The more difficult the environmental challenge, the more successful they seem to have become as a social actor (Bryant 2005; DeLuca 1999; Fisher 1998). NGOs have grown in number, size and influence over time (but with growth tailing off: Dowie 1995). Their voices are heard in the corridors of political power as well as in the boardrooms of large corporations. Some of them (e.g. Greenpeace; Friends of the Earth) are household names in some parts of the world and key stakeholders in international negotiations over such issues as climate change and ozone depletion (Newell 1999). In organisational terms, they are a great success – so far (Heins 2008; see below).

This article explores some of the connections between NGOs, politics and the environment. It does so by assessing in a selective manner key approaches and debates in diffuse literatures. The ways in which NGOs pursue environmental agendas via political processes have been a subject of deep interest to geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. This article examines how and why that interest exists by discussing different if linked approaches to the study of NGOs, politics and the environment. It does so in four main sections. The first section sets the historical context by assessing how the origins of environmental NGOs are understood. The second considers work that adopts an ideology-related approach to understanding NGOs, environment and politics – one seeing

these organisations as purveyors of progressive politics. The third section encompasses the backlash by canvassing research critical of upbeat views of NGOs. The final section describes work that interrogates what might be the distinctive impact and meaning of NGOs through an approach that 'normalises' this organisation as an object of study.

In the process, this paper simultaneously considers in a selective manner important shifts in the nature and dynamics of 'environmental' NGOs as well as trends in academic analyses of them over time. For our purposes, NGOs are understood as mainly concerned with protecting 'wild' aspects of the biophysical environment such as forests or oceans, even as some of them also seek to acknowledge related development issues, especially in the South. To be sure, discourses of the 'wild' resonant more in some settings (e.g. USA) than in others (e.g. Europe) while perhaps even meaning different things in different places and times – prompting divergent environmentalisms. At the same time, NGOs perform 'wild' political behaviour to a greater or lesser extent depending on diverse considerations, prompting in turn divergent political dynamics. And yet, there is something of the 'wild' about many who work in the NGO sector even if, as this article suggests, that may now only be a fading 'scent' for many be-suited and policy-oriented NGO 'professionals'.

NGO Origins: Penitent Butchers or Guardians of the Wild?

To appreciate debates that NGOs engender is to understand their complex and ambiguous lineage as vehicles for action designed to save the environment. As scholars observe with regard to NGOs who purport to be 'guardians of the wild', there is nothing necessarily 'progressive' about conservation even if images of anti-whaling and anti-logging campaigns may suggest otherwise (Adams and Hutton 2007; Neumann 1998).

Debate begins over what a 'non-governmental organisation' is since a great diversity of entities exist. Organisations differ according to size, structure, funding, philosophy, aims, strategy, nationality, scale of operation and issues. A definition by Clarke (1998, pp. 2–3, italics in the original) is useful: '*private, non-profit, professional organisations with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goals*'. For our purposes, 'public welfare goals' relate to a myriad of environmental issues, while 'distinctive legal character' refers to legal registration of an organisation – not whether it acts in a legal manner.

Concerns about ahistorical understanding led scholars to examine the origins of the NGO. The resulting picture is decidedly ambiguous. Work thus underscores the mix of passion, power, calculation and even remorse that motivated elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to safeguard the environment (for a fascinating analysis of how contemporary conservation intertwines wealth, power and celebrity, see Brockington 2009). The notion of the 'penitent butcher' (Beinart and Coates 1995) illuminated the shifting involvement of elites in the despoilation and

subsequent protection of prized bits of the 'natural world'. Mixed up in patriarchal colonial assertions of political, economic and cultural power, European elites spearheaded the mass slaughter of mega-fauna: tigers, lions, elephants and rhinos in Africa and Asia, bison, moose and bear in North America (Adams 2004; MacKenzie 1988). Yet, as the number of species plummeted, prominent hunters from England and America became concerned about the need to conserve them. The result was the creation of influential NGOs such as the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire established in England in 1903 and the Sierra Club founded in the USA in 1892 (Carter 2007; Neumann 1998). The goal of the penitent butcher was to use these associations to press for modest reforms centred on the creation of game reserves and parks. Seen from another light, these reforms were hardly modest. Political ecologists thus reveal that it entailed the wholesale displacement of indigenous residents as part of 'a self-conscious attempt at wilderness creation in formerly inhabited lands' (Adams and Hutton 2007, p. 154). In these areas, though, European elites could still hunt according to a 'sporting ethos' (Neumann 1996).

Elite-based conservation also reflected a romanticising of the environment. Here was a larger cultural movement in the arts and literature that elaborated an Anglo-American nature aesthetic thereby re-shaping European visions about social–natural interaction (Adams 2004; Neumann 1998). This was never innocent: it presumed a moral politics of ecological transformation insofar as it specified how natural and social relations *ought* to look, with protected areas and parks its territorial expression (Adams and Hutton 2007). Early NGOs were an organisational expression of that new look drawing on the writings of influential naturalists, landscape architects and foresters such as John Muir, Frederick Law Olmsted, George Perkins Marsh, Dietrich Brandis and Henry David Thoreau. As scholars show, these organisations mounted sophisticated political campaigns to enshrine conservation at the heart of rural land policy at a time when (neo) colonial territorial expansion and consolidation in the Americas, Antipodes, Asia and Africa was the norm (Adams 2004; Anderson and Grove 1987; Jacoby 2001; Neumann 1998). These campaigns were often authoritarian and racist and thus not surprisingly held considerable appeal in Nazi Germany (Bramwell 1989).

The push to create conservation NGOs finally reflected a reaction to the deepening hold of modernity on society. This was certainly embedded in the aforementioned romanticising of the environment since nature 'worship' was the flipside of disgust about environmental destruction wrought under capitalism. Yet it was more than that. As Sutter (2002) shows in his account of the wilderness movement in early twentieth century America, the foundation of the Wilderness Society reflected a deep fear of hordes of automobile-owning Americans using their leisure time for wilderness recreation. Here, that key symbol of modernity – the automobile – was the threat as a rapidly growing road network enabled people to be much

more mobile than before, and hence able to reach hitherto unreachable lands. Degradation of 'pristine' wilderness was the result. Yet this was a love–hate relationship inasmuch as membership in the new wilderness organisations grew as a direct by-product of such 'automobility' (Paterson 2007). Thus, citizens enamoured with wilderness became members of the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society and other organisations – using automobiles to pursue their new passion!

Typically elite-based, prone to nature romanticising, often politically conservative, and frequently distrustful of yet dependent on modernity – these were key features that scholars note in describing early conservation NGOs. By the late 1960s, though, other environmental concerns had combined with a new generation of activists to transform the environmental movement, thereby lending a whole new meaning to the description of NGOs as 'wild'.

Green Pin-ups: Embodying Ideologies of Political Action

The new NGOs involved in environmental action became poster bearers of green thinking: seemingly the organisational embodiment of a progressive politics. Many writers tended to evaluate them in relation to green ideology and usually in a normative tone.

It is not difficult to see why. For one thing, attention was focused on NGOs created in the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to confront an array of environmental problems. Initially, they were part of radical movements that privileged political confrontation over cooperation. Two NGOs – Greenpeace (founded in Canada in 1971) and Friends of the Earth (FoE) (founded in the USA in 1969) – captured the popular imagination via media-savvy anti-whaling and anti-nuclear campaigns. Scholars commonly saw them as the face of a modern environmentalism – to be distinguished from elite conservationism. For another thing, people involved with these NGOs were usually young, radical and combative – the 60s generation critical of the Vietnam War, industrial capitalism and patriarchal society. The new NGOs exported their model of political action to other countries in the North (on France, see Cans 2006) and the South (Wapner 1996), even while such models were usually adapted to local political, economic and cultural conditions (Eccleston and Potter 1996).

That NGOs like FoE and Greenpeace were often seen to embody a radically new form of environmentalism is owed in no small measure to a steady stream of insider accounts. This literature created an impression of organisations driven by a selfless ideology based on progressive green politics. Thus, Lamb (1996) accounted for FoE's development from a small band of protestors into a large transnational entity battling against everything from tropical deforestation to toxic waste, while writers such as Hunter (1979), Bohlen (2001), and Weyler (2004) catalogued how Greenpeace became perhaps *the* global protest organisation (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Greenpeace is an environmental activist group that campaigns to change attitudes and behaviour and to protect and conserve the environment.
Source: Greenpeace (http://www.greenpeace.org).

Most scholars eschew such hagiography. Yet they tend to share its core assumptions about the ideological significance of these NGOs as purveyors of modern environmentalism (Dobson 2007; Pepper 1996). In the North, influenced by models of political pluralism, resource mobilisation and social movement behaviour, writers have described the development of NGOs in terms of political lobbying and protest (Doyle and McEachern 2008; McCormick 1991), relative 'greenness' (Mauch et al. 2006) or change in organisational structure and practice (Lowe and Goyder 1983; Doherty 2002). Debate notably centres on the political efficacy of NGOs as well as the extent to which they reflect internally the progressive politics they espouse (Rucht 1995; Rawcliffe 1998). Comparative work has probed divergent political opportunity structures and NGO styles of engagement with the state across the industrialised countries (Dalton 1994; Dryzek et al. 2003). This literature, mainly based on political science, seeks to assess the potential of environmental movements to transform mainstream political practices (Carter 2007). However critical of specific NGO practices, there tends to be a disposition to see them as a positive and indeed an essential intervention in politics.

A similar disposition can be seen in scholarship that addresses NGO action over the environment in the South. Here, research relates the politics of environmental action to the issue of development, thereby tapping into an established pro-NGO literature (Edwards and Hulme 1992; Ekins 1992; Korten 1990). Environmental issues are usually related to people's livelihoods in recognition of the links that bind people and environments together (Bebbington and Kothari 2006). A classic example is *Plundering paradise: the struggle for the environment in the Philippines* (Broad and Cavanagh 1993):

Fig. 2. June 5, 2008, a child stands outside a Greenpeace Climate Defenders camp built to oppose the construction of a coal power plant in Iloilo City, central Philippines.
Source: Greenpeace (http://www.greenpeace.org).

an epic account of Philippine NGOs that approvingly noted how they lead in pursuing sustainable development. This kind of work was also expressed through comparative texts (Farrington and Bebbington 1993; Fisher 1993, 1998; Heyzer et al. 1995; Hjelmar 1996) – many stressing the social and ecological benefits of NGO action in societies wracked by corruption and violence (Figure 2).

NGO action is often understood in relation to the notion of civil society: that part of society formally separate from the state yet not part of the business world. Here, we have an appreciation of the NGO as a specific kind of ideological actor: one that promotes liberal democracy. This perspective receives its most sophisticated treatment by writers who probe the political novelty and dynamics of NGO-led civil societies that promote new forms of social and often environmental interaction (Clarke 1998; Fisher 1998; Meyer 1999; Silliman and Noble 1998; overview by Mercer 2002).

At the same time, scholars scale up analysis to assess the potential of NGOs to create a global civil society. Some work focuses on niches in which NGOs operate – for example, debt for nature swaps (Jakobeit 1996) and the protection of globally valuable environmental public goods (Meyer 1996). More ambitious still is scholarship exploring how NGOs transform international relations through new global spaces of civil action. Whether seen in the rise of NGOs as global actors (Wapner 1996), the formation of new forms of global citizenship (Desforges 2004), or the creation of NGO-promoted international environmental agreements (Arts 1998; Lipschutz and Conca 1993; Lipschutz and Mayer 1996), there is a sense of a new form of political practice that may serve as a counterweight to interstate relations

and TNC behaviour (Doherty and Doyle 2007; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Khagram et al. 2002).

Critiquing NGO Action

Perhaps it was inevitable that there would be a backlash against research that has tended (on balance) to accentuate the positive about NGOs. True, there has always been critique coming from the political mainstream. Such writing views NGOs as self-serving organisations staffed by misguided and dangerous ideologues. For example, Beckerman (1995) and Lewis (1992) condemn radical environmentalism for its anti-capitalism while highlighting the 'fallacies' of its solutions. Easterbrook (1995) echoes these views stressing how the post-Cold War triumph of capitalism ought to inspire environmental optimism. Lomborg (2001) ignited controversy over the allegedly biased nature of NGO science – suggesting that such data were cynically calculated to advance NGO projects.

By the mid-1990s, it was not only these sorts of mainstream writers who were questioning NGOs. Thus, critical social scientists challenged 'myths' about NGO democratic accountability and transparency, altruism, political efficacy and respect for human rights (Slim 1997; Smillie 1995; Sogge et al. 1996; Tvedt 1998). True, problems facing NGOs were acknowledged. Yet there was 'no magic [NGO] bullet' in the quest for social transformation (Bebbington 2004; Vivian 1994). Such criticism mainly targeted 'development' NGOs, but it often also held true for 'environmental' counterparts (even as it is to be noted that, particularly from the early 1990s, the boundaries between 'environment' and 'development' NGOs were becoming ever more blurred; see Bryant 2005). Based on Malaysian and Indonesian case studies, for example, Eccleston (1996) reflected a wider trend when he described the political contradictions of NGO action that seemed only to lead to intensified resource degradation and human rights abuses by pro-development states (see also Eccleston and Potter 1996; Potter 1996; Silva 1994; Vitug 1993).

Indeed, Northern NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Conservation International became 'eco-imperialists' as their quest to save wilderness reputedly damaged the livelihoods of poor people in the South. Reminiscent of colonial-era conservationism, 'environment first' NGOs seemingly believed that the displacement of people and their livelihoods was a small price to pay for the protection of globally important flora and fauna in the 'biodiversity phase' of some strands of modern environmentalism (Zimmerer 2006, p. 64). 'Coercive conservation' involving 'imposed wilderness' areas harked back to a history of politically repressive action (Kolk 1996; Neumann 1998; Peluso 1993; Princen 1994). Other criticism targeted how some large NGOs were depending on funds provided by transnational corporations accused of perpetrating environmental degradation (Chatterjee and Finger 1994). There was anger too about how international

NGOs were purportedly depriving smaller and less powerful NGOs in the South of funding and personnel as they capitalised on economies of scale and international connections to build global project portfolios (Chatterjee and Finger 1994; Livernash 1992). The political effectiveness of 'global civil society' was even called into question, as power inequalities and value differences among NGOs were seen to hinder cooperation (Rohrschneider and Dalton 2003).

In general, NGOs were condemned as 'too close for comfort' to elites (Hulme and Edwards 1997). Here was a Faustian bargain: NGOs seek funds from and political influence with states and corporations, but leave themselves vulnerable to cooptation and mission drift (Bryant 2002a; Sogge et al. 1996; Tvedt 1998). They become a mere 'protest business' (Jordan and Maloney 1997). Such unease over political and economic trade-offs relates to a trend that scholars describe as the institutionalisation of the environmental movement. This process is most widely analysed in relation to North America and Europe (Bosso 2005; Carter 2007; Dryzek et al. 2003). Institutionalisation – which Van der Heijden (1997) defines as organisational growth; internal professional development plus centralisation; and external reorientation from direct action to political lobbying – varies between NGOs and over time. Furthermore, it is more of a problem for some NGOs ('radical' Greenpeace) than others ('mainstream' WWF) – thereby underscoring the heterogeneous nature of environmental and political assumptions, beliefs and practices among NGOs. Still, even the mainstream Sierra Club suffered an internal split in the 1990s as a group of dissidents calling themselves 'John Muir's Sierrans' broke away claiming that the NGO had lost its way (Doyle and McEachern 2008, p. 151). Elements of institutionalisation have also taken hold in the South, notably as a result of donor demands and with contradictory effects across the 'environment' and 'development' NGO sectors (Fisher 1998; Fowler 2000; Mohan 2002; Wilson and Rigg 2003). This process has prompted anger and disillusionment among activists who believe that hitherto radical NGOs have 'sold out' to businesses and states. Periodic 'political soap operas' – as with Greenpeace and the case of the disputed disposal of the Brent Spar oilrig – seek to counteract this impression, but with ambiguous results (Jordan 2001).

NGOs as 'Normal' Objects of Study

As the place of the NGO in environmental politics has shifted in complex ways, so the place of this organisational phenomenon in academia has changed. As with many of the pioneering members of the NGOs themselves, NGO scholarship has matured in ways that are sometimes predictable. Thus, the latter is institutionalised (e.g. NGO degrees and research centres) and 'normal' in the sense that these organisations are now a standard object of dispassionate inquiry – like other actors such as states

or corporations. Largely gone, for instance, is the tacit 'rule' about having to proclaim in one's work sympathy (however qualified) for the organisation(s) under analysis (e.g. Broad and Cavanagh 1993; Fisher 1993; Korten 1990).

As such, the opportunity has never been greater for research to explore in a dispassionate manner what is distinctive or not about the NGO, as it seeks to change, and is in turn changed by, the wider world. Much interesting work draws on post-structural theories that explain the ambiguities and multifaceted impacts of NGOs as culturally savvy agents and image-making artists, even as it remains sensitive to the ways in which these organisations may also be purveyors of unintended (and potentially undesired) consequences.

Scholars document the sophisticated means by which NGOs communicate messages to the public to frame an issue in a particular way. The potential political potency of media-linked NGO communications is noted (Carter 2007; Doyle and McEachern 2008; Jordan 2001). Yet it is research that often combines insights from the new social movements literature and cultural studies that actually demonstrates how NGO communications strategies function. For example, Lahusen (1996) assesses the rhetorical devices and modes of popular cultural expression that NGOs (including Greenpeace) use to disseminate messages to audiences – including popular music and celebrity endorsements (see also Brockington 2009). Visual stimuli are key here as the 'truthfulness' of pictures and videos – showing the killing of baby seals, slaughter of whales, toxic waste spills or felling of rainforest – orient expectations and provoke responses that lead to action. It was such 'image politics' that DeLuca (1999) explored in his study of how organisations such as Greenpeace and Earth First! Boost campaigns via 'mind bombs' (Adbusters 2001) that modify people's mental worlds.

Writers also describe how mind bombs are embedded in written discourses that equally aim to inform, enrage and activate. For example, Epstein (2008) deconstructs the birth of anti-whaling discourse led by the likes of Greenpeace that transformed international relations surrounding the whaling industry by rendering it problematic. In Taiwan, Wang (2008) charts how one environmental group (the Chilan Alliance) interwove image and text to discredit forestry agency plans for one old growth forest. This and other work (Darier 1999; Elden 2007; Sending and Neumann 2006) is often influenced by Foucault's (2000) theories on bio-politics and governmentality. Such research addresses complexities surrounding NGOs, often relating to states, which produce contentious geographies under liberal governmentality (Dean 1999; Escobar 1995; Goodman et al. 2008; Luke 1999; Whitehead 2008).

Research highlights other ways in which NGOs seek to be culturally savvy influenced by theorists ranging from Bourdieu to Honneth. One focus is how these organisations relate to the issue of morality. Building on an affective turn in the social sciences (Bryant and Jarosz 2004; Smith 2000), scholars probe how NGOs embed themselves in moral discourses

and politics as well as how this process creates opportunities and constraints for them (Bennett and Shapiro 2002). Jasper (1997) explores the strategic dimensions of moral protest in individual biographies, organisational identity building and issue construction, while a subsequent collection (Goodwin et al. 2001) assesses the role of emotion here. Bryant (2005) evaluates how the reputation of an NGO relates to its possible empowerment describing a sector characterised by the competitive quest for distinction based on the accumulation of moral capital. Heins (2008) meanwhile relates NGO action to a critical theory of recognition that posits that NGOs are 'other regarding' but not *a priori* 'good' even as they are distinctive in leading struggles against the harm of others. All this work thus investigates how NGOs may behave in culturally savvy ways, while also exploring ambiguous outcomes – for example, vis-à-vis territorial control, accountability politics, crises of legitimacy and multiscale governance (Hickey and Mohan 2008; Sidaway 2007; Walton 2008).

Finally, there is research probing the 'unintended consequences' that surround NGOs now that their multiscale role in environmental politics has seemingly hardened into place. For example, Bryant (2002b) illustrates how NGOs keen to promote biodiversity conservation and indigenous rights in the Philippines have helped the state transform hitherto peripheral people into centrally defined and controlled 'citizens' through entangling bureaucracies of ancestral claims-making and environmental (re) education: new geographies of green governmentality (Rutherford 2007). That NGOs become disciplining agents in wider power structures inevitably raises questions about their potential to spearhead social transformation – let alone their ability to remain autonomous in a neoliberalising world of audit cultures and 'professional' development (Ebrahim 2003; Fowler 2000; Martens 2006; Themudo 2003). NGOs are thus caught in webs of compromise – pulled by great expectations one way and tugged by requirements of 'respectability' the other (Fisher 1997; Kellow 2000).

This dilemma leads in turn to more unintended consequences as scholars document the purported shifting of radical activism away from 'compromised' NGOs towards 'new' forms of grassroots environmentalism. Direct action involving anti-capitalist and anti-state sentiments is the norm in '21st century dissent' (Curran 2006): poignantly echoing thereby the early days of FoE and Greenpeace. It can be seen in such campaigns as anti-logging conflict in the USA (Rucht 1995), anti-road/airport struggles in the UK (Routledge 2003), the 'blood diamonds' furore (LeBillon 2006), animal rights battles (Hobson 2007), linked anti-racism and toxic waste protests emanating from the environmental justice movement (Schlosberg 1999) and anti-globalisation initiatives (Fisher and Ponniah 2003). These struggles stress alternative forms of organising – flat networks not hierarchies – and use of web-based technology to disrupt and inform via 'dotcauses' that result in complex geographies of local and transnational action (Clark and Themudo 2006; Cumbers et al. 2008; Reitan 2007; Teivainen 2007).

True, the 'new' activism is not necessarily antithetical to the NGO sector – although it does seem to be requiring that the latter adapt (Bomberg and Schlosberg 2008; DeMars 2005; Sandler and Pezzulo 2006). Indeed, in many cases, it is not even that 'new' at all – except with regard to the use of web-based technology, many of the forms and content of 'direct action' have been around for a long time, with activists often working in parallel with NGOs (Juris 2008). And yet, the 'new' activism does appear to capture a sense of youthful energy and grassroots outrage that is today weakly reflected in the actions of aging NGOs – hence question marks in both the 'development' and 'environment' literatures over their role in a changing world (Bebbington et al. 2008; Carter 2007; Escobar 2008; Lewis and Kanji 2009). They simply may not be cool enough for a 'no logo' generation (Klein 2000).

Conclusion: Taming the Wild Ones

This article explored some of the connections between NGOs, politics, and the environment. Inevitably, I was highly selective in coverage – after all, this is a large and complex topic with an equally large and complicated set of literatures. At the risk of over-simplification, therefore, I described how a selection of writers tackled the subject through a process that simultaneously tracked the maturation of the NGO as an actor and marked the emergence of a field of NGO studies.

That scholarship regularly comes back to the motif of the wild: the saving of the 'wild' as a focus of action, NGOs as 'wild cards' (DeMars 2005) in national and international politics, or the behaviour of activists seemingly 'born to be wild' – as per the lyrics of the Steppenwolf song opening this article. Explicitly or implicitly, the cultivation of wildness has long been seen as both a noteworthy feature of NGOs and a basis for (often positive) normative judgement. True, some cultivate the 'wild' more than others, even as NGOs do so in different ways reflecting divergent political, economic and cultural circumstances. Still, there is something of the 'wild' about many who work in the NGO sector – perhaps because to make a difference is sometimes partly about challenging political and economic elites. Yet this is a deceptive image. Just as the wildness of 'pristine' nature was exposed as a bloody myth (Jacoby 2001; Neumann 1998), so the mantra of organisations born to be wild – surmounting all odds to achieve a progressive politics – is increasingly seen as self-serving publicity by aging activists gone 'respectable'. The 'wild' has seemingly gone out of some if not many NGOs – who are victims of image overkill, a soul destroying neoliberal audit culture, or both.

Writers have also tussled with the idea that NGOs 'do good'. For some, the contribution of NGOs is important because they have been standard bearers of a progressive green politics in neoliberal times seemingly hostile to serious environmental action (Bandy and Smith 2005; Keck and Sikkink

1998). It is thus not that they have often failed that is important, but rather that they have sometimes succeeded despite the odds. For others, the pursuit of that politics inevitably ensnarls NGOs in webs of compromise with elites leading to unintended consequences that sour their good name (Holloway 2002; Reitan 2007). But as we saw lastly, there are still others who eschew normative evaluation in favour of dispassionate analysis that often sees NGOs as culturally savvy if ambiguous actors traditionally deprived of conventional sources of political and economic power (DeLuca 1999; Heins 2008).

It is perhaps ironic that, as scholars describe in detail key cultural and creative activities that NGOs undertake in pursuing environmental politics, the conditions that have long been propitious for the success of these organisations may be vanishing (even as they enable 'new' grassroots activism and 'counter movements' to flourish, see Munch 2007). In the end, it may not be the achievement of their goals that 'kills off' NGOs as a distinctive actor, but rather the fact that many of them were simply not seen to be 'wild' enough by a new generation. Dispassionate inquiry may have arrived just in time to write the obituary of this organisational phenomenon. Still, it stands the best chance today of capturing the contested and multifaceted significance of the rise and perhaps fall of an actor that has charmed and enraged people in equal measure.

Acknowledgements

Short Biography

Raymond Bryant is a Professor of Political Ecology at King's College London. He has written widely on political ecology, non-governmental organisations and natural resource conflicts. He has authored numerous papers on these topics for journals that include *Political Geography, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, Geoforum, Political Studies, Society and Natural Resources, Progress in Human Geography, Geographical Journal, Pacific Affairs, Modern Asian Studies, Area* and the *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*. He is the author of *Nongovernmental Organizations in Environmental Struggles: Politics and the Making of Moral Capital in the Philippines* (Yale University Press, 2005), *The Political Ecology of Forestry in Burma, 1824–1994* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997), co-editor of *Environmental Change in South-East Asia: People, Politics and Sustainable Development* (Routledge, 1996, with Michael Parnwell), co-author of *Environmental Management: New Directions for the 21st Century* (UCL Press, 1997, with Geoff Wilson), and co-author of *Third World Political Ecology* (Routledge, 1997, with Sinead Bailey). He is presently writing a book about the political ecology of the rich and famous who reside on the Côte d'Azur in the south of France. He holds

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