

Outdoor, conservation and environmental inequalities

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Policies aimed at the creation of protected natural areas, and notably national parks, are originally related to western and elitist recreational practices towards nature which developed during the 19th century. Since the second half of the 20th century, these protected natural areas have become field of outdoor recreation massification, bringing managers and naturalists to worry about its impacts on ecosystems. This observation originated the development of reflections and methodologies to assess the environmental impact of the frequentation of natural areas protected, such as the research carried out within the MMV network.

Despite the massification of leisure, the populations less well endowed with economic and cultural capital, as well as those belonging to ethno-phenotypic minorities tend to be under-represented among users of protected natural areas. In addition, the post-slavery and/or post-colonial legacy in many territories tends to exacerbate the social inequalities of access to environmental amenities, which can take the form of territorial dispossession processes.

Concerning this double challenge of nature protection versus social equity, this article proposes an analysis in terms of environmental inequalities. The concept of environmental inequalities gathers different forms of unequal access to resources and natural amenities, exposure to risk, environmental impact, ability to participate in and reap the benefits of environmental policies, and contribution to the effort required by these policies.

The framework of environmental inequalities helps to base the analysis on an eco-focused ethical approach breaking the dichotomous stalemate of anthropocentrism versus biocentrism, to analyse social inequalities regarding access to natural environment in all their diversity (socio-economic, cultural, gendered, ethno-phenotypic, etc.), and to understand the process of mutual reinforcement or conversely of compensation. However, can this framework completely address the numerous taxonomic and methodological issues inherent to the measurement of inequalities? And, to what extent is this framework appropriate to address the difficult transition from ethics to practice, questioning the empirical feasibility of complementarity or at least compatibility between social equity of access to nature and protection of ecosystems?

From these questions, this article proposes to test the framework of environmental inequalities through field surveys conducted in mainland and ultramarine France. Selected territories allow a comparison between different environmental and socio-historical contexts: Ranging from West Indies to Réunion, from Côte d'Azur to the Calanques of Marseille, the goal is to understand the formation of inequalities in access and use of these territories. How are regulated the access to protected areas and uses of walkers, climbers, pickers, boaters, fishers, picnickers...? According to which ecological, philosophical principles and belief of justice?

These fieldworks carried out over the past ten years in different research projects show that the creation processes, including concerted ones, and decision-making processes related to nature protection policies tend today to favour the recreational actors from middle and upper classes, who are organized and most “visible” in the public space. Concomitantly, these same processes tend to make invisible, or even to delegitimise, the most popular autochthonous practices. The definition of “good uses” of a protected natural area is based on values and standards, or even economic interests, which reflect the membership of social groups.

Our research shows that the tension between nature conservation and social justice depends largely on the feelings of justice or injustice that the various users and local residents have. Again the question is how to measure and which methods use to capture the dual dimension of environmental inequalities, as an objectivable process and subject of feeling by individuals. This demanding approach requires different methodologies combining quantitative techniques (questionnaires), visual techniques (to observe flows, spatial occupation, distribution of uses, avoidance strategies, etc.) and qualitative techniques (participant observation, semi-structured interviews, etc.).

Work on such a framework implies, finally, to question the limits and scope of the underlying concepts. What define *ultimately* an environmental inequality? Is it lesser when accessibility to outdoor activities limited to an elite is promoted? But, in this case, might this not be a form of class ethnocentrism? Unless reducing environmental inequalities might require also, if not first, recognition of a wider variety of relations to nature and potential forms of conservation?