Abstract and Keywords

This chapter presents an introduction and overview of the book as a whole. It lays out the need to apply recent theories of justice — distributive, recognition-based, participatory, and capabilities — to environmental justice movements. It discusses the gap between the academic accounts of environmental justice (or justice among humans on environmental issues and risks) and ecological justice (or justice to non-human nature).

Keywords: distributive justice, recognition, participation, ecological justice, capabilities

What, exactly, is the ‘justice’ of environmental justice? What do activists and movements mean when they employ the term? And what is the relationship between environmental justice, which addresses environmental risks within human communities, and ecological justice, focused on the relationship between those human communities and the rest...
of the natural world? Do those who speak of environmental justice, and those who call for ecological justice, understand the concept of ‘justice’ in similar ways? Those are my central questions, and the basic task of this book is to explore what is meant by justice in discussions of both environmental and ecological justice.

Activists and academics within the environmental justice movement in the USA and globally have been discussing the meaning of justice for two decades. Likewise, theorists concerned with doing justice to nature have put forth numerous accounts of ecological justice. I certainly do not claim to be the first down this trail. But as someone who has studied both the movements and theories, I have found these discussions inadequate and somewhat frustrating—there has always seemed to be something missing in them. Actually, I see two major gaps that need to be addressed.

First, while the justice literature in political theory has expanded over the past few decades, the innovations there have rarely been applied to the environmental justice movement. For years, justice studies were defined by, and proceeded from, the theories of John Rawls. They focused on a conception of justice defined solely as the distribution of goods in a society, and the best principles by which to distribute those goods. I have no criticism of justice conceived in distributional terms like this; not only does such an approach make sense theoretically, but, importantly, many social movements also defined justice in terms of what their constituents got—and did not get—in a given society. As I describe, many of the defining arguments of the environmental justice movement, for example, were all about distributional patterns that were violations of any number of distributive principles of justice.

The problem that I see is not that distributive theories of justice cannot be applied to environmental justice. Rather, the issue is that justice theory has developed a number of additional ways of understanding the processes of justice and injustice—and these developments have rarely appeared in the literature on the environmental justice movement. Authors such as Iris Young, Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth argue
that while justice must be concerned with classic issues of distribution, it must also address the processes that construct maldistribution; they focus on individual and social recognition as key elements of attaining justice. Central here is not only the psychological component of recognition, but also the status of those less well-off in distributional schemes. In addition, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have developed a theory of justice that focuses on the capacities necessary for individuals to fully function in their chosen lives. The focus is not just on the distribution of goods, but also more particularly on how those goods are transformed into the flourishing of individuals and communities. The approach gives ethical significance to this functioning and flourishing, and finds harm—injustice in fact—in the limiting of them. Capabilities theory examines what is needed to transform primary goods (if they are available) into a fully functioning life—and what it is that interrupts that process. In addition, contemporary theories of justice also often have a component of procedural or participatory justice. For Fraser, participation is the third leg of a triad that also includes distribution and recognition; for both Sen and Nussbaum, participation is a key political capability, necessary for individuals to ensure functioning. In essence, many contemporary theories of justice refer to a standpoint that is broader than just how things are distributed. This standpoint includes our intuitions and theories about recognition, participation, and the way people function—they also relate as much to groups as to individuals.

Yet for all of these developments in justice theory, very little has been applied to the environmental justice movement. Most discussions of environmental justice focus on maldistribution—the fact that poor communities, indigenous communities, and communities of color get fewer environmental goods, more environmental bads, and less environmental protection. Some examiners of the movement and the concept of environmental justice have emphasized the importance of procedural justice and participation (Lake 1996; Shrader-Frechette 2002). And a number have focused on issues of recognition, while not directly referring to the theoretical literature; these examine the cultural and racial barriers to individuals and communities getting a just distribution (see, e.g. Pulido 1996 and most of
Bullard's work). However, there has been no thorough and comprehensive exploration of environmental justice movements with the goal of examining the conceptions and discourses of justice that they use. The argument here is that movements use a wide range of conceptions of justice, and we can find arguments in those movements for distribution, recognition, participation, and capabilities. The environmental justice movement supplies ample evidence that all of these conceptions of justice are used in practice, and that, in fact, a comprehensive understanding of the way that movements define the 'justice' of environmental justice must include all of these discourses.

It should be no surprise that such diverse definitions exist within groups and movements that organize around a conception of environmental justice. Many recent theorists of justice—Young, Fraser, Sen, and Nussbaum, for example—explicitly note the influence of social movements on their own definitions. I argue, however, that movements add more to the justice discourse than many of these theorists account for, and there are two points in particular that justice theorists should pay attention to. For one, groups and movements often employ multiple conceptions of justice simultaneously, and accept both the ambiguity and the plurality that come with such a heterogeneous discourse. Second, and crucially, movements also apply conceptions of justice not only to individuals, but to groups and communities as well. Here, movements have no problem stepping beyond the almost unanimous consensus of justice theorists that definitions of justice apply to individuals alone. Environmental justice movements explore, represent, and demand justice—fair distribution, recognition, capabilities, and functioning—for communities as well as individuals. These movements are most often broad, plural, and inclusive; likewise, their definitions and discourses of justice range from those based on individual distributive complaints to those based on the survival of community functioning.

So the distance—and relationship—between justice theory and environmental justice movements is the first gap I hope to span in this book. I use the first to explore the latter, and use the latter to expand upon the first. My hope is to bring
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empirical evidence and activist definitions to the attention of theorists of justice for their serious consideration, and to offer activists and movements a theoretical overview of the positions and demands they express.

The second gap that I explore in this book is the disconnect between environmental justice on the one hand and ecological justice on the other. The vast majority of work on environmental justice does not concern itself with the natural world outside human impacts, and most work on ecological justice does not pay attention to issues raised by movements for environmental justice. There are, certainly, exceptions. Dobson's work (1998, 1999) and Low and Gleeson (1998) attempt to bridge environmental and ecological justice, and there are interesting collections that broach the topic (e.g. Cooper and Palmer 1995). But the fact is that most of the literature on environmental justice exists independently from the literature on ecological justice—most environmental justice work (e.g. Cole and Foster 2001; Bullard 2005) does not address doing justice to nature, while most ecological justice writing (Baxter 2005; Wenz 1988) focuses on just that. I want to explore the important differences between environmental and ecological justice, but also speak to the potential of using the same language(s) of justice in addressing both sorts of issues and relationships. I pay particular attention to movement groups that bridge this gap in their literature and actions, such as indigenous environmental groups and movements for food security and climate justice. My central question is whether we can apply the same conceptions of justice, and the same broad discourse of justice, to both sets of issues—environmental risks in human populations and the relationship between human communities and nonhuman nature. One major claim of the book is that we can draw parallels between the application of notions of justice as distribution, recognition, capability, and participation in both the human and nonhuman realms. I argue that a broad set of theoretical concerns, notions, and tools can be applied to both environmental and ecological justice.

The point of this second task is really twofold. First, as noted above, it simply seems important to examine the potential of
the same theoretical discourses of justice as they apply to different issues in environmental politics. Academics and activists alike should not be talking past one another on a political discourse as salient and encompassing as justice. But, related, I am also interested in the possibility of illuminating a broad discourse of environmental and ecological justice that can frame arguments in ways that advocates for both can relate to. I fully agree with what Taylor (2000: 562) concluded in her examination of the framing of the concept of environmental justice in the USA. Taylor claims that the concept of environmental justice bridged a number of issues, and linked numerous problems in one frame. As such, it was effective because it did not attempt to create a new discourse from scratch, but instead incorporated highly salient issues into a broader frame that many could identify with. In being a broad, plural, and inclusive discourse, environmental justice as an organizing frame was quite successful. What I am suggesting is that we extend that framework even further, to include the conception of ecological justice as well.

If both environmental and ecological justice concerns can be addressed using the broad language of distribution, recognition, capabilities, and procedural justice, then a larger frame can be established that could link both sets of concerns. The model here, in a way, is Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962); there, Carson was able to bring together these two previously disconnected environmental concerns—that for the natural world and the animals that inhabit it, and the concern for human health and industrial impacts on individuals and communities. Carson helped to inspire a larger and more diverse environmental movement by illustrating the connections between the issues, and so broadening the discourse beyond one or the other concern. I certainly do not claim to approach the talent or eloquence of Carson; my point is only that I am inspired by her accomplishment of expanding an inclusive conception of the ‘environment’. I see the same sort of potential to bring together environmental and ecological justice into a larger, broader, more encompassing discourse.
Now this approach goes against the arguments of other recent academic examiners of environmental justice. Dobson (1998, 2003) saw little overlap between the social justice community and those arguing for environmental sustainability. Dobson, however, only looked at notions of distributive justice in coming to his conclusion; if justice were to be defined much more broadly, then both environmental and ecological justice communities might share a common, expansive, discourse of justice. More problematically, Getches and Pellow (2002) insist on restricting the operational definition of environmental justice, and limiting the types of communities that could make environmental justice claims. While they claim pragmatic reasoning here—keeping the movement agenda manageable—their advice goes against the practice of the movement and against a thorough understanding of what the justice of environmental justice is. Such an approach limits the ability of actors to make connections with other movements and concerns. Similarly, Pellow and Brulle (2005: 16) insist that environmental justice activists ‘must bound and limit the purview of their concerns. If instead they seek to explain every problem at the intersection of development and social inequality (p.8) in terms of environmental injustice, surely their movement will lose its explanatory (and mobilizing) power.’

On the contrary, the following work makes exactly the opposite argument. The proposition here is that a more thorough definition of justice—one that encompasses the expressed concerns of environmental justice groups, the conception of justice to the nonhuman world, and the recent contributions of justice theory—can offer a broadly accessible, plural, and workable frame. I am not arguing for a single, all-inclusive, holistic theory of environmental and ecological justice; rather, the point is to expand the discourse of justice, and legitimize the use of a variety of tools and notions as they apply to various cases. Issues of inequality, recognition, participation, and the larger question of the capabilities and functioning of individuals and communities—human and nonhuman—can come together in a broad and inclusive discourse that can strengthen the explanatory (and mobilizing)
power of the movements that use the language of environmental and ecological justice.

I proceed in four parts. In Part I, in Chapter 2, I explore recent theories of justice, focusing on those that move beyond a sole focus on the traditional distributive paradigm. Particular attention is paid to various theories of recognition, and I defend recognition as a distinct element of justice against theorists who insist that it can be collapsed within a distributive framework. I also explore the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum (including some of the differences between them), and argue how each of these elements of justice can be seen at both the individual and group level. Ultimately the argument is that a thorough understanding and approach to justice requires us to see the linkages between distribution, recognition, capabilities, and participation.

In Part II, I examine how movements for environmental justice define the concept of justice. Chapter 3 looks specifically at the environmental justice movement in the USA, and Chapter 4 examines global movements that use environmental justice as an organizing frame. There are some key differences in the way environmental justice is mobilized in the USA, as compared to global movements. Groups in the USA self-identify as ‘environmental justice’ organizations, while in a number of global environmental movements—on issues such as globalization, food security, indigenous rights, and climate justice—environmental justice is incorporated as one organizing principle or demand among many. Groups in the USA are also less likely than these global movements to make connections between environmental and ecological justice. In both the USA and global movements, however, groups use a wide variety of conceptions of justice; justice is understood in multiple and interlinking ways, and is applied to both individuals and, importantly, to communities.

Part III turns to understandings of ecological justice—justice to the nonhuman part of the natural world. Chapter 5 is an overview, and critique, of many existing distributional theories of ecological justice. After a discussion of some of the key difficulties identified by liberal theorists in applying the
concept of justice to the natural world, I examine a variety of theories that attempt to expand liberal and distributional notions of justice to future generations of humans and to nonhuman nature. Here, I also address the lack of attention in much of this literature to either movements or recent developments in justice theory. I discuss why most academic conceptions of ecological justice based in distribution are crucial, but yet incomplete and inadequate in their definitions and prescriptions. Chapter 6 turns to the potential of developing a theory of ecological justice that moves beyond a sole concern with the distributive paradigm. The central focus is on bringing conceptions of the recognition of nature, and of capabilities for the nonhuman world, into a broad and comprehensive understanding of ecological justice. The point is not to develop a singular holistic and universal theory of ecological justice, but rather to illustrate the potential of various discourses, concepts, and frames as they can be extended to individual animals, communities, and natural systems.

Part IV explores some of the implications of my findings. Chapter 7 addresses the difficult question of how to reconcile the multiple and multifaceted notions of justice that exist simultaneously in environmental and ecological justice. Rather than insisting on a singular, overarching, and static definition of justice, the point is that we really need a plurality of themes to apply to particular cases as the context requires. I argue for a pluralist approach that allows for unity among different concerns and movements while avoiding the uniformity that is so often debilitating in constructing broad discourses and movements. Finally, I conclude on a pragmatic note, with a chapter on how environmental and ecological justice can be applied in both state political practice and the public realm. This conclusion explores practices of ecological reflexivity and political engagement, and suggestions for democratic and institutional transformations, which can help us implement a broad and pluralist notion of environmental and ecological justice.