

Introduction: Is the time nigh for ecological security?

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Abstract

Climate change and the ongoing destruction of the earth's ecosystems have increasingly been depicted as a security issue with the noble but not unproblematic goal engendering an urgent response. These climate and environmental security discourses have been extensively critiqued on both empirical and normative grounds. But is there an ethically defensible and even emancipatory alternative to envisioning the relationship between the environment and security? Matt McDonald in his new book - *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security* - argues that there is and lays out comprehensive normative framework for doing so. To interrogate McDonald's case for what he calls "Ecological Security", this forum brings together four leading researchers from Anthropology, Geography, International Relations, and Peace and Sustainability Studies. While all contributors are broadly positive regarding goals of the book, each identifies weaknesses in the approach that move from suggestions on how refine the framework on the one hand to questioning whether the framework risks proving counter-productive on the other.

Introduction

It is the defining characteristic of the Anthropocene that it is never a good time to talk about the Anthropocene. That is, it never seems opportune to act decisively upon the overwhelming evidence that lest mankind change course the planet will become uninhabitable not only for humans but the majority of species that currently call this planet home. Instead, amidst several ongoing hot conflicts, the prospect of an *unusually* great extinction¹ has seldom consistently placed top on the international or domestic agendas; more immediate crises inevitably force themselves to the front of the queue. Indeed, the temporality of the Anthropocene has long been out of sync with international politics, which renders quick deaths more pressing than slow ones, and elides the question of future deaths entirely. Hence, at the most recent Conference of the Parties (COP27) of the The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the world failed again to reach a formal agreement to reduce the use of fossil fuels, as ostensibly national interests (again) trumped the planet's

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(McGuire, 2022). Unlike the dinosaurs then, humans can see the apocalypse coming but have thus far decided not to prioritize it.

It is against this backdrop that Matt McDonald published *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security*. The task the book, which is the subject of this forum, undertakes is an ambitious one: McDonald sets out to envision a “progressive” or “morally defensible” way of linking the climate to security, thereby building upon and extending the work of those who have sought to reconceptualize security along ecological lines. While acknowledging that one need not link climate change to security, given that this is already happening and that security discourses enjoy special privileges and priority in international and domestic societies, McDonald reasons it is worthwhile and necessary to think through what an ethical climate security discourse would, should, and could look like. McDonald begins with the easy part: a comprehensive critique of the dominant environmental/climate security discourses, and how their normative priorities make them inadequate to meet the challenge of the Anthropocene. However, going beyond critique, McDonald then provides a positive vision of what should replace it: a thoroughgoing and radical normative framework—a “ecological security” approach—for guiding human efforts to prioritize, mitigate and adapt to climate change; one that McDonald argues provides the world offers a superior framework for reckoning with the Anthropocene. At each step, McDonald draws upon an eclectic array of critical scholarship—feminism, political ecology, green state theory, among others—and spends considerable space engaging in good faith with would be skeptics. With this introduction, I will now briefly outline the gist of McDonald’s book, explain why we put together this forum, before introducing the forum’s contributors and contributions.

Ecological Security: why, what, and how

The first of the book’s five substantive chapters conducts a discourse analysis of the Climate Security policy and research agenda. Those familiar with McDonald’s oeuvre, will recognize its basis in his (2013) article “Discourses of Environmental Security.” This chapter is a well-executed, ground-clearing exercise that identifies the ethical shortcomings of the policy-world status quo. Critiquing those climate security discourses that would make the state, international society, or humans the referent in need of securing, McDonald proposes and provides an in-depth normative case for making “ecosystem resilience” the priority. Laying out the ethical rationale in chapters 3–4, the book argues that treating ecosystems as the referent for a security discourses has several interrelated positives. First of all, such an approach would address the *direct* threat of increased temperatures for the “functionality of ecosystems” and the protection of their inhabitants—human and non-human present and future—rather than an indirect threat to humans via conflict or food security (p. 112). Thus, it improves on other environmental security discourses, which treat human societies as “separate from the ecological conditions of their existence” (p. 43–44). Making the ecosystem the referent, argues McDonald, embeds humans within the natural world without falling prey to either ecocentrism or anthropocentrism. Thus, this approach militates against the possibility that measures taken to mitigate or adapt to climate do not harm ecosystems and biodiversity in the process. A second advantage of making the referent ecosystems is that it can better account for and pay heed to vulnerable populations who lack a voice contemporary climate security policy agenda: future generations and non-humans (p. 112).

Third, McDonald contends that making ecosystems resilience the referent for Climate Security can address the issue of scale that has hitherto hindered the securitization of the planet (Von Lucke, et al., 2014). Instead, because ecosystems are interdependent and operating across scales, “agency is located at multiple and interrelated levels too” (p. 147). Hence, global, regional, national, local, as

well as individuals have a part to play in realizing ecological security. Indeed, for McDonald, if one is “able to engage in conscious action that contributes to climate change or its amelioration” they have “least some degree of responsibility for serving as an agent of ecological security” (146) In other words, unless you are an animal or not yet born, you are not off the hook. However, McDonald also insists that ecological security practice must recognize the “differentiation of responsibility related to capability” (p. 147) and thus those with most ability must be assigned highest responsibility.

Attentive to the risk of grand ideological schemas, the McDonald’s ecological security outlines several normative principles to ensure *the process* of implementing ecological security in practice is just. Hence, McDonald insists that any effort at securing ecosystems should not be undertaken without first assessing how it would affect vulnerable populations, whether it be marginalized groups in the present or future, and even non-humans. While McDonald’s ecological security discourse is at its heart consequentialist (p. 140), chapter 4 specifies dialogue, reflexivity, and humility as key ethical principles that should animate any application of ecosystem security in practice. Here, the goal is to avoid the some of the well-documented risks of overzealous green policy (see Benjaminsen’s contribution below). Finally, and perhaps most unusually for critical work, McDonald dedicates an entire chapter to identifying the immanent possibilities for integrating the principles of ecological security into policy practice at the global, national, and local levels, thereby attempting to head off accusations that he was merely articulating a utopian vision, of little practical relevance.

One function of the book’s boldness—at times, it reads like a manifesto for the planet—is that the book’s articulation and defense of the ecological security is bound to provoke an unusually broad spectrum of readers. The embrace of the term security in the first place will strike many critical scholars as problematic given its association with military means and the politics of exception. Moreover, making ecosystem *resilience* the referent of his ecological security approach also goes against the grain of a wealth of critical scholarship, which has long considered to concept prone to over emphasizing agential responsibility for problems at the expense of structural causes. While McDonald contends that critiques of resilience discourses referring to individuals or societies, should not be conflated with efforts to ensure resilience in ecosystems (p. 119), it is an open question whether his readers will agree that this concept’s baggage is worth it. Meanwhile, policy makers will no doubt balk at the premise of prioritizing non-humans and future generation when domestic and international actors can scarcely agree upon measures that adequately take care of today’s humans. Lastly, I could almost hear the howls of green activists when I read McDonald’s reflections around whether and how geoengineering could be reconciled with ecological security: he is skeptical, but not absolutely opposed (p. 134–7). Ultimately, the book’s earnest constructiveness, breadth of ambition and willingness to transgress sacred critical battle lines is what motivated me to put together this book forum.

For my part, I encountered the book at a fortuitous moment in my professional life. I was just transitioning between working on the Lorax project: understanding transboundary ecosystem politics (see [Wilson Rowe, 2021](#); [Beaumont and Wilson Row, 2022](#); [Paes, 2022a, 2022b](#)) and a project that seeking to push forwards the climate security research agenda ([Beaumont and De Coning, 2022](#)). These are both empirical research agendas with latent normative underpinnings that McDonald’s book illuminates. Taking the latter first, McDonald’s book illuminates the moral myopia and that underpins the two-decade long quarrel around whether or not climate change has or will affect the onset of inter and intra-state conflict (see [Von Uexkull and Buhaug, 2021](#)). The policy relevance of this agenda is often premised on the assumption that it will help states and international society allocate sufficient resources to address the “negative security outcomes” of climate change.

Needless to say, this framing pays little heed to future generations and non-humans that ecological security approach would take into account. On the former, the Lorax project explores the political and social effects that unfold when governance is self-consciously anchored in transboundary ecosystems. This research agenda at once supports McDonald's contention that ecological security is not so divorced from policy practice it might at first blush appear: many of these governance arrangements ostensibly recognize the inherent interconnectedness and codependence of humans upon the ecosystems within which they are embedded. Yet, these nascent governance arrangements (which number in the hundreds—see [Maglia and Rowe, forthcoming](#)) also highlight the difficulty of realizing ecological security: the obstacles that stand between going from recognizing in principle the need to secure the earth's ecosystems and the practice of prioritizing it at the expense of other economic, political, and security interests (see Wilson Rowe's contribution below).

These are just a selection of the reflections the book prompted in me—from my nook in academia's giant environmental politics enterprise. Above all the book caused me to ponder how scholars working in other fields would respond. Indeed, the book has so many moving parts, radical ideas, and potential targets for critics, that I was confident that asking four leading scholars to reflect upon the book's agenda and contributing would prove insightful, constructive, and perhaps produce fireworks. As it transpires, I was not wrong.

Our first contribution is from Dr Dahlia Simangan, whose research traverses agenda-setting work into how IR's theoretical can(not) apprehend the Anthropocene ([Simangan, 2020](#)), as well as key interventions in peace and sustainability, and climate security research programs ([Sharifi et al., 2021](#)). Simangan is broadly supportive of the book's agenda, however she suggests framework could and should be further developed in two key ways. First, by not only allocating responsibility according to capability and responsibility, but *cumulative* responsibility for ecological harm. She argues that this form of accounting would more precisely highlight the historical contribution of countries from the global north (especially Europe and America) for the earth's current predicament, and thus help ensure transitional justice in addressing the challenges of the Anthropocene. Second, she proposes borrowing from [Dryzek and Pickering \(2019\)](#) by differentiating between formative agents who shape principles and the primary agents who implement them. This, argues Simangan, would lend ecological security framework more conceptual precision when allocating responsibilities than McDonald's schema of "traditional" and "non-traditional" agents of security.

Professor Elana Wilson Rowe, pioneer of an emerging research agenda into *ecosystemic politics*, uses her 20 years of research on the Arctic governance ([Wilson Rowe, 2005, 2021](#)) to thoughtfully reflect upon the potential of putting ecological security into practice. Indeed, Wilson proposes using the book as a springboard for an empirical research agenda into how the principles of ecosystem security are used, refashioned and/or perhaps abused within the many governance arrangements that are already to some extent established on the premise of protecting ecosystems. Indeed, Wilson Rowe notes, as desirable as ecosystem security maybe, it will necessarily need to be enacted through "the layers of governance already established around ecosystems." Meanwhile, Wilson Rowe account of how Arctic Council cooperation with Russia has collapsed in the wake of the war, provides an unwelcome reminder of how alternative notions of security still dominate contemporary international politics and will be difficult to supplant with ecological security despite its ethical merits.

Dr Dhanasree Jayaram, whose pathbreaking research operates at the nexus of environmental and security politics ([Jayaram, 2021](#); [Jayaram & Brisbois, 2021](#)), evaluates the ecological security framework from the "perspective of the global south," asking directly whether Ecological Security can provide "the much-needed alternative" normative framework to those currently in vogue in the international policy world. She answers in the affirmative but with several caveats. For instance,

noting that McDonald's approach provides an "appealing framework" and "extremely relevant to the Global South contexts," she also draws attention to how the book sometimes reproduces problematic tropes regarding the incapacity of countries and peoples in the global south, and contends that the book could thus have benefited from closer empirical engagement with the global south "realities." Finally, Professor Tor Benjaminsen, a leading Political Ecologist, and long-term skeptic of the environmental and climate security policy agendas (Benjaminsen, 2008, 2021) provides the sharpest critique of our four contributions. While endorsing the intentions behind McDonald's ecological security approach, Tor worries that the sheer breadth and depth of ecological security's normative principles risks providing new legitimation for further harmful and ultimately unjust interventions developing countries: what he terms "green neocolonialism." While Tor's critique likely could be read simply as a clash between empirical anthropology and normative theory's respective research cultures, McDonald concludes the forum by engaging each of Benjaminsen's concerns and ultimately mounting a robust defense, before discussing his other interlocutors' contributions and how they help set the stage for an ecological security-inspired research agenda.

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Note

1. As Turvey and Creese (2019, 985) explain, unlike previous mass extinctions, "the current human-caused extinction crisis is quantitatively and qualitatively different from past 'natural' extinctions in terms of both patterns and drivers. Crucially, it is characterized by extinction *without replacement*, with an operational timeframe of rapid ecological time instead of longer-term evolutionary time."

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