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Finding the right words: Opening a dialogue with the Earth

Research Objectives

Seeking new ways to understand the Anthropocene and reorient personal sensibilities for collective action in response to our environmental challenges.

Detail

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Bio

Edward H Huijbens is a geographer and graduate of Durham University, UK. He chairs Wageningen University's research group in cultural geography. Edward works on spatial theory, issues of regional development, landscape perceptions, the role of transport in tourism, and polar tourism.

Collaborators

Martin G Gren at Linneaus University



References

Huijbens, E, (2021) *Developing earthly attachments in the Anthropocene*. Routledge, London & New York.

Personal Response

Do you feel positive about humanity's chance for wholesale cultural change?

// Yes I do, as I have faith and trust in people's creativity and ways of understanding and framing meaning vis-a-vis their environment. It is all about what we choose to see and how we choose to value what we see. Once new directions have been pointed out it is amazing to see how many can be quick to follow, and my book is hopefully giving a nudge in the direction of a preferred social tipping point.

Can the capitalist model of material growth realistically be challenged before it is too late?

Yes, it can, and this is actually happening every day in so many unrecognised engagements between people around the globe, whose interactions are not at all driven by growth or profit. We need to start seeing and valuing these interactions, and then the market becomes only what it is good for – the potential exchange of goods and services – and not a dominant way of life. //

Finding the right words

Opening a dialogue with the Earth

Consumer culture is driving ever-growing human impacts on Earth systems, including climate change, and without a vocabulary to orient ourselves humanity is struggling to find a solution. In his new book, Professor Edward H Huijbens of Wageningen University in The Netherlands, opposes dogmatic market approaches and instead looks at the stories we tell and their environmental contexts. He believes these are the key to finding new ways of being – allowing us to make earthly attachments through which we can understand the Anthropocene age in which we live. By orienting ourselves in the moment and in a place, Huijbens suggests, we can take personal responsibilities that will collectively make us better custodians for future generations.

Spiralling capital accumulation and exponential socio-economic growth reflect the drive toward a global consumer culture. However, keeping up with the Joneses is, literally, costing the Earth. To date, human carbon emissions amount to ~500gt. As temperatures rise globally, what this means for human civilisation remains unclear. In fact, uncertainty is the only certainty we have, leaving society desperately searching for language to orient ourselves in this time of rapid and uncertain change, when the Earth seems to be trying to tell us something. But the Earth cannot enter into dialogue with humanity: even if it could, ‘humanity’ itself is fluid and speaks with many voices.

EARTHLY ATTACHMENTS

In his new book, *Developing earthly attachments in the Anthropocene*, Professor Edward H Huijbens of Wageningen University in The Netherlands proposes a new, Earth-oriented outlook that will bring societies together and help us achieve global wellbeing in this time of uncertainty and devastating climate change. He emphasises that we should see ‘knowledge paradigms as profoundly emotional’, inextricably linked to our choices about what we attach to, and what is meaningful for us.

Huijbens draws on his own extensive experiences as a geographer to understand the dynamic relationships between the land and life on it in the Anthropocene – the proposed geological era of man-made change. He calls for an approach that challenges the pervasive dogmatic logic of market capitalism, which presents everything – even the climate and environmental change – in commodity form. Instead, he explores the importance of the stories we tell for helping us understand our place in time and space. He draws on a wide range

of examples from The Netherlands and Iceland; countries in which, while they differ in aspects such as population, energy production, and land use, Huijbens finds similarities in ‘the manifold earthly entanglements ... that can make for attachments and ways of being kind to Earth.’

ICELAND’S ARCTIC HENGE

Iceland experiences Earth’s raw power as an everyday matter. Over a millennium, its population has come to terms with cohabiting with these earthly forces by making lasting earthly attachments. Grounding humankind to the Earth can happen in many ways, and in Iceland Huijbens highlights examples that are built around both processes and places.

Perhaps most famously, Iceland is at the forefront of harnessing Earth’s inner processes. The nation uses the power of volcanism to produce electricity and provide hot water for heating. These efforts represent the modernising aspirations of a rapidly industrialising country that has moved from one of Europe’s poorest at the dawn of the 20th century, to one of its social and economic success stories. While not strictly renewable, this functionally unlimited energy source has spawned new industries, from tourism to aluminium production, and fundamentally defines Iceland’s place in the world.

A specific Icelandic place that demonstrates earthly attachment is the Arctic Henge. Following the commodification of fisheries and the resulting decline of the village’s fishing industry in 1980s, Raufarhöfn in the country’s far north-east saw economic hardship. At the turn of the last century, an entrepreneurial newcomer took over the local hotel and set about putting Raufarhöfn back on the map via the construction of a modern-day

Iceland uses the power of volcanism to generate electricity and provide hot water.



Stonehenge. Basaltic stones, quarried from a nearby beach and quite literally the material from which Iceland is made, are arranged to simultaneously reflect local Norse mythology, the Aurora Borealis, points of a compass, and the town’s position on the edge of the Arctic Circle. To Professor Huijbens, the Arctic Henge is a tangible place where stones can talk with a multitude of voices.

THE NETHERLANDS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Stories drawn from the Dutch context differ radically. In one of the most intensively cultivated and populated corners of Europe, they are less about harnessing Earth’s power, and more about the role of knowledge

the government and is built into urban planning. Huijbens argues that the Dutch are not natural cyclists (despite near-flat topography that is perfect for human-propelled transport), but that sustained political support has been the root of changing social attitudes, to the benefit of the environment.

CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF CARE

Once the canvas on which humans painted their inscriptions, the Earth has become a dynamic sculpture, foregrounded and continually carved by forces of humanity. Once, it was the howling wind, running water, and crashing waves that held the power to transform our world, millimetre by millimetre, second by second, millennia

By taking personal responsibility we can transform our relationship with Earth and become better custodians of our home.

determined by collective action and decision-making. One such example is a globally recognised symbol of The Netherlands: bikes.

While Iceland promotes its green energy credentials, it remains a country reliant on fossil fuels for transport. In contrast, The Netherlands relies on fossil fuels for power generation but has become a poster child for cycling. Along with a comprehensive and well-used public transport network, cycle paths sit alongside most roads. Cars are still widely owned, but most households have both. In response to rising oil prices and road fatalities, promoting cycling has long been a specific policy objective of



The Netherlands is a poster child for cycling.



The Arctic Henge in Raufarhöfn, Iceland.

by millennia. Today, the trickle of water has been joined by the hum of machinery. Each car, each ship, each aircraft, is a droplet in a human river, moving incessantly and inexorably adding CO₂ and other substances to our environment. Bit by bit, every hour of every day, we are moving carbon from lithosphere to atmosphere.

Despite knowing our actions have given rise to a climate emergency, we remain largely indifferent. Growing inequality and crises of welfare provision and migration are just the start. Paradoxically, we have created a society in which ruining our environment is cheaper than preserving it – bleach is cheaper than eco-friendly alternatives, for example. But hope is not lost, as Huijbens expands: ‘in the Anthropocene, the Earth is one of our making, but is made anew in every moment.’

TRANSFORMING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH EARTH

Expecting people to do the right thing when it goes against their own material security is a zero-sum game. Instead, we need wholesale change in values and attitudes. Huijbens argues that we must resist our hoarding tendencies and viral indifference to Earth’s social and environmental problems. By sharing and listening to stories we can reorient our values and what we hold dear, and perhaps even stave off an Earth that is uninhabitable for most of humanity. By taking personal responsibility we can transform our collective relationship with Earth and become better custodians of our home. It is only by recognising the fine-grained nuances of the local that we can make sense of the global.



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