



**Vol. 8, Issue 1
January, 2015**

What About the Plants?: Integrating Ecology into Eco-ability

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Keywords: Ecoability, Animals, Disabilities, Plants

WHAT ABOUT THE PLANTS?: INTEGRATING ECOLOGY INTO ECO-ABILITY

Hello, this is Kim Socha. I would like to thank the organizers of the 2nd annual Engaging with Eco-Ability conference and also those presenting and listening in. It is a pleasure to be sharing my work with you today. I have a short piece entitled “What about the Plants: Integrating Ecology into Eco-Ability.” As a contributor to the first book on Eco-Ability and co-editor of the special issue on Eco-ability for the *Journal of Critical Animal Studies*, I have noticed the difficulties some scholars, not all, appear to have when integrating the environment proper, what I will call “green nature,” into their work. The correlations between human and non-human animals with disabilities seem a more natural fit for some, relegating plants, trees, mountains, oceans etc. to the margins of the theoretical perspective.

Indeed, when co-authoring both the book chapter with Dr. Deanna Adams and the journal introduction with Drs. Joe Lesson-Schatz and Judy K.C Bentley, we felt a need to both defend and find the right words to align the environment with human and non-human animal issues. For example, in the book chapter “Shocking into submission: Suppressive practices and use of behavioral modifications on non-human animals, people with disabilities and the environment,”

Adams and I note the following in the first paragraph: “behaviour modification techniques used to train dogs to stop barking, stay and roll-over are the same used in the modification of behavior in students with disability.”

Although these methods may not seem directly applicable to the natural environment, we argue that the same Western-colonial mindset of controlling that which deviates from mainstream expectations and desires underpins the attempt to dominant nature as well. In the *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* special issue introduction, Joe, Judy and I explain that although the environment is generally not seen as a marginalized group in the anthropocentric and even nonhuman-centric sense, considering our current ecological crises, the living world we term nature is certainly a casualty of unbridled technological advances. And we further state this caveat in the introduction; with a few negligible exceptions, environmental issues do not factor highly into the special issue.

To be sure, we are pleased with the variety of essays amassed for the journal issue, but at the same time, we saw a need to look forward to developing discussions in scholarship about eco-ability that *thoughtfully* integrate environmental issues into this growing intersectional field. So that’s really what I’m trying to do with this presentation: to argue that we need to be more thoughtful and deliberate with our integration of ecology into the area of eco-ability. I don’t have all of the answers at this time, but I want to offer some suggestions for how we can do that.

To provide an example of human dominance over green nature, I want to share a passage from the chapter “Shocking into submission” because it demonstrates the ways in which the environment’s supposed unruliness results in human attempts to keep it at bay. Mechanisms are used to control children with disabilities and domesticated animals. For instance, shock collars are used in both cases. Adams and I argue that aside from the obvious environmental devastation that humanity now faces, there are more subtle ways that the natural environment is shocked into submission. However, because supposed non-sentient life does not react with sound or movement that humans can perceive, the correlations between sentient and non-sentient existence are often ignored.

However, industrial society controls nature in other ways by attempting to integrate it into its environs of construction, steel, glass and concrete. (These foundations of industrial society come from nature as well, everything does, but I’m not yet prepared yet to address that paradox, at least not in this presentation.) Thus we have green spaces in urban and metropolitan areas and expertly constructed landscapes within suburban developments, golf courses, resorts and college campuses. But rather than successfully integrating green nature into our mechanized culture, I see such constructs as examples of what I term “symbolic nature” indicating images of an untouched wilderness ironically crafted by human hands as works of art, as opposed to living ecosystems.

In sum, although shocking living beings into submission may seem relegated to animals and non-humans, this happens with green nature too. Consider the green spaces constructed in urban-metropolitan environments, as noted above. Other examples are the weed killers humans use to prevent nature from springing up through cracks in our sidewalks and pesticides that are sprayed

on plants to prevent other organisms from eating human food-sources. These are a couple issues with which I think Eco-ability should become more engaged.

I admit, as an animal activist, it is much harder to feel sympathy and passion for non-animal beings, and perhaps that is why it is more difficult to integrate environmental concerns into Eco-ability with the same fervor one does for non-human animals and human beings with disabilities.

In one way, the reason is quite simple: the environmental is not sentient, although it teems with sentient life, and thus cannot suffer physical pain and psychological torment. *Or can it?*

This brings me to the second part of my talk, one that should be a growing interest to animal and environmental activists: the question of sentience among organisms not of the Animalia Kingdom. Most animal activists have heard tongue-in-cheek questions about plant sentience within their animal advocacy, and while it is tempting to dismiss this red herring question out of hand, I believe we need to give it more serious thought and develop more sophisticated responses to the query, although it is most often asked within indifference by those who are hostile to veganism. But within our responses, we can craft avenues for integrating the seemingly non-sentient environment into a holistic Eco-ability theory that benefits both animals and the planet.

I should begin by stating that I am not of the mind that plants feel pain. However, I absolutely believe that they are alive, of course, respond to stimuli, and have a desire to flourish, among other amazing abilities best left to a botanist to explain. In addition, I am open to exploring any trustworthy material to prove my conclusions on plant sentience incorrect; however, none currently exist that I have come across.

During my vegan outreach, I invariably encounter the plant sentience question and it is almost always asked by one who thinks it is all a big joke or that s/he has found a way to make the vegan seem or feel unethical after all. In other words, they don't really care about plant sentience. They just want to poke fun at and cause the vegan to stumble for answers to their queries.

I, as do others in this position, usually respond with the answer that plants have no central nervous system nor fight or flight response mechanism that most pain feeling organisms have. Indeed, pain and terror, when looked at from a certain perspective, are actually gifts allowing one to flee predators. As such, it would be a foul trick of evolution to develop a group of about 300,000 living species of plant who are subject to the same psychological and physical pain that animals can experience without any ability to flee their environments or empirically respond that they do not want to be so treated.

I usually respond to the diversionary plant question by saying if one is worried about eating plants because they possibly feel pain, stop eating meat because animals unquestionably feel pain. Further, meat-eaters are responsible for more plant deaths in their lifetimes because of the amount of plant-foods fed to "food" animals before slaughter. That response is usually enough to shut someone up, but as activists, we should aim higher than shutting down arguments. Rather, we should be able to engage in real discussion about the ecological world as an entity worthy of our attention and compassion.

Recently, a study was published reporting that plants can hear themselves being eaten. Both this report and others of its kind are usually simplified and result in articles that take such findings and come up with titles such as the most recent I saw: “Nice try vegans, plants can actually hear themselves being eaten.” One such article begins with the admonishment: “Vegetarians get off your high horse.” It is tempting to dismiss such responses as guilty omnivores blowing off steam or standard attacks by those who say vegetarians and vegans are ethically self-righteous, and admittedly some are, but I don’t believe that to be the case for each and every vegan.

However, I argue that we need to develop a more deliberate ethical model surrounding plant life to learn about the lives of plants, to not laugh at or shy away from studies of this kind that arise which argue for or try to prove plant sentience. As I currently see things, plants absolutely do have a desire to flourish, but that doesn’t necessarily indicate the ability to feel emotion or physical distress. Still, as proponents of Eco-ability, it bequeaths us to understand and respect non-animal life as a living embodiment that does not have to be anthropomorphized to be of relevance.

In closing, I do want to ask a few questions that arose from me when considering the content of my presentation. I hope others will consider them, although they certainly do not have to be addressed during this conference.

The first question is based on the premise of my presentation: What is the cause of that disconnect between humans with disabilities, non-human animals and ecology? Why, when I was editing the special issue of *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, did nature receive such scant attention?

The other question I want us to consider is based on the idea that most anything that deviates from the norm in contemporary Western society is often posed as inferior, and I think that applies to nature as well, and it kind of reinforces that binary theory (the binary of nature versus culture, as if the two are not interrelated). Now this is a binary that springs from continental rationalist philosophy which looked at nature as something fascinating but also to be feared and controlled. And to anthropomorphize this issue for a moment, think about Europeans coming to what they termed the New World, what we currently term North America. They looked at Native peoples in much the same way as nature: as inferior but also fascinating, something to be feared and also something to be controlled.

And then the final question is something I also touched on in my presentation, which is how far do we go in framing Eco-ability as a theory or practice? How far we do go integrating the realities of the natural world such as plants, trees, mountains and oceans? Do we acknowledge such ideas? What place do they have in the field of Eco-Ability? I guess the question is: Do we as scholar-activists owe it to Eco-Ability to understand more about the natural world, to go beyond our presumptions of what (who?) is capable and not capable of feeling? Thank you for your time.