

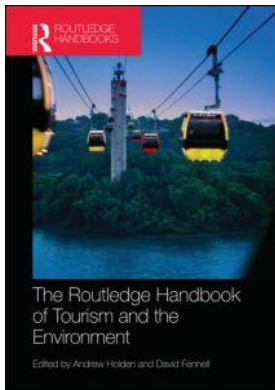
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Social science ontology of environment

Challenges to human exceptionalism

Bryan Grimwood

Introduction

The social science ontology of environment is one point of incision into the heart of theorising society and environment relations. Ontology refers to the branch of metaphysics concerned with the study and description of *being*, the general conditions of existence or the substance of reality. The tendency among social scientists to be concerned with ontology merely because it establishes disciplinary objects, relations or concepts has, in recent years, been complemented by an ontological ‘turn’ that entails incisive probing of everyday and disciplinary assumptions (Escobar 2010; Gregory *et al.* 2009). Such a project has been advanced by critical scholars concerned with environment, and especially those simultaneously burdened and ardent to illustrate the deceptions of dualistic takes on reality. On the one hand, non-dualistic work is reactionary; it opens crucial space for social theory to dissent from excesses of determinism, reductionism, quantification and metanarratives. On the other, there are inventive and inter-disciplinary intentions at play that articulate environmental realities of inclusion, responsibility and emergence.

Philosophical resistance to human exceptionalism encapsulates these anxious, albeit creative, tensions. Following Haraway (2008), human exceptionalism refers to the fantasy that humanity alone is different from and superior to all other entities existing on Earth. It is manifest when we treat the world solely as a resource bounty for human well-being, or through ‘save the world’ campaigns that advocate humanity’s return to an Eden-like nature. Human exceptionalism is also showcased in debates that emphasise objective or subjective extremes, as in naïve realism or strong versions of social construction. The uniting bond here is an ideology of human autonomy rooted in binary logic and an absolute distinction between human society and non-human nature (Haraway 2008).

The objective of this chapter is to explain and analyse seminal constructs and paradigms in the social science ontology of environment. To distil this dense, nuanced, but relevant, theme, the chapter reviews four theoretical ‘moments’ that, in different ways, challenge the binary visions associated with human exceptionalism. Emulating Braun (2004), these moments should not be read as a linear evolution of academic thought, but instead, as inter-woven intellectual threads that intersect,

reinforce, run parallel and diverge. The moments contained herein include critical realism, phenomenology of perception, social nature and ontological multiplicity. The chapter begins with a case study from the central Canadian Arctic, which is subsequently used to ground discussions of the ontological moments with research possibilities for nature-based tourism.

Two notes before proceeding. First, given the inter-disciplinary intentions of this text, I have opted to lean heavily on literatures from outside tourism studies. My objective is to participate in the encouragement of tourism research that explores beyond the field. Second, any author developing a critical synopsis has the challenge of balancing sufficient breadth and depth. The preparation of this chapter has been no exception. In addition to the literature reviewed and representational choices made for each ontological moment, readers will identify certain omissions, including substantial discussion of how complex systems, sociobiological, Marxist, feminist or Aboriginal thinkers have toiled with ontological questions. However, if only because of this chapter's relational emphasis, which has emerged as a prevalent orientation in social science, readers should recognise my attempts to be adequately inclusive and comprehensive.

Case study

The Thelon River is one of 41 rivers celebrated in Canada as a Heritage River for its natural, cultural and recreational values. With headwaters in the Northwest Territories, just east of the height of land that separates the Hudson Bay and Arctic Ocean watersheds, the Thelon stretches 900 km eastward across the central Canadian sub-Arctic and into Nunavut, before draining into Baker Lake west of Hudson Bay. As the river traverses Canadian jurisdictional boundaries, it also meanders among Dene First Nation, Métis and Inuit territories. The recognition of historical and contemporary human activity within the watershed has not altered the Thelon's appeal as northern wilderness. Such accolades are attributable to the watershed's remoteness from human settlements, unique combination of boreal and tundra ecosystems and abundant habitat for large mammals (wolves, grizzly bear, moose, caribou and muskoxen).

Cultural and recreational values associated with the Thelon are intimately tied to wildlife. For generations, Aboriginal hunters and their families have relied on barren-ground caribou as a primary source of food, clothing, shelter and tools. Hunting and trapping of muskoxen, Arctic fox, wolf and grizzly bear have also enabled local Aboriginal peoples to participate in wage economies. Euro-American travel and exploration within the Thelon basin was not prevalent until early in the twentieth century. Since 1962, recreational canoeists have accessed the Thelon by chartered aeroplane, and have travelled the length of the river in self-supported, multi-day expeditions (Morse 1987). Commercial tourism along the Thelon was first established in 1974 (Hall 2003), and a handful of companies currently guide and outfit Thelon expeditions as one component in their overall operation. Independent and commercial canoe, kayak and raft trips along northern Canadian rivers are an important sector in territorial economies. Often it is the lure of the northern wild, and especially the wildlife, that provides impetus for the scores of nature-based tourists visiting the Thelon and surrounding river systems each summer.

However, recent wildlife population estimates, field observations and local knowledge holders indicate drastic reductions to the size of barren-ground caribou herds, and shifting habitats of the other large mammals (BQCMB 2010; Hall 2003). These wildlife dynamics are supported by reports from Thelon canoeists who, in qualitative interviews, indicate that wildlife encounters are much fewer than anticipated based on their reading and research of the area. The wildlife spectacle along

the Thelon River is, so it seems, no longer guaranteed, which is likely to have some bearing on tourism satisfaction rates and changing tourist demands.

Figure 3.1 is a photograph taken along one of the Thelon River's tributaries in June 2009. It shows a group of guided canoeists gazing on the landscape, taking photographs or searching for wildlife through binoculars. This image functions as a prompt for each of the forthcoming sections to bridge the ontological moments with suggestions for nature-based tourism research.

Critical realism

Critical realism is a philosophical position associated with the work of philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar (1978). Its influence in the social sciences has been profound among scholars in Europe, and clear attempts have been made to encourage its use among North American researchers (Frauley and Pearce 2007a).

Applications of critical realism have subtle and sizeable differences (Cruikshank 2004; Frauley and Pearce 2007b). However, its qualifying factor is a prescribed union of ontological realism and epistemological relativism. In other words, critical realists argue that independent reality exists beyond the scope of our knowledge, perceptions or actions, and that although our categories and concepts reflect some aspect of material referents, this knowledge never corresponds exactly to what exists. Knowledge is considered a fallible interpretation of reality and always open to criticism, refinement and further testing (Carolan 2005a; Frauley and Pearce 2007b). Thus, critical realism is set apart from other philosophies of science by the premise that establishes the primacy of ontology over epistemology. Bhaskar (1978: 30) reasons, 'it is not the character of science that imposes a determinate pattern or order on the world; but the order of the world that,



Figure 3.1 Touristic encounters within the Thelon River watershed

under certain determinate conditions, makes possible the cluster of activities we call “science”. For the activities and accomplishments of science to exist as they do, an independent reality of a certain structure must also exist. Epistemology is therefore distinguishable from matters of ontology, and conflating the two – that is, reducing ontology to epistemology, or transposing questions about being into questions about knowing – warrants the charge of an *epistemic fallacy*, which Bhaskar (1978: 36–8) attributes to his empiricist and conventionalist predecessors.

From a critical realist perspective, material and social reality is understood as stratified, rooted and emergent (Sayer 1992; Carolan 2005a, 2005b; Bhaskar 1978). Social scientists concerned with ‘environment’, and its vernacular cousin ‘nature’, have found these concepts helpful for navigating debates between naïve realism and strong social constructivism (Carolan 2005a; Proctor 1998a; Dunlap 2010; Soper 1995). For example, stratification implies hierarchical differentiation between domains of existence, or ontological depth (Pearce 2007), meaning that inorganic nature provides the basis for organic nature, which, in turn, provides the basis for human society (Day 2007; 126). However, because the boundaries between strata are permeable, reality constitutes an open system characterised not by reduction and one-way causality, but by *rootedness* and *emergence* (Carolan 2005b). As these terms suggest, distinct socio-cultural and biophysical realms exert influences on one another (Carolan 2005b). The purpose of research then, is to highlight and understand the tendencies and contingent relations in a given circumstance, rather than determine causality (Gregory *et al.* 2009).

Applied to the case study, tourism researchers could use critical realism to position an investigation of the ecological impacts of tourist behaviour (wildlife photography and viewing), with the aim of identifying and understanding prevalent patterns and tendencies over time. One can imagine the extent to which the visual practices of Thelon tourists (i.e. observing, photographing or the ability to ‘zoom in on’), and associated behaviours (e.g. establishing trails on the tundra to quality vantage points, approaching wildlife, distributing photographs), emerge from and exert influence on other domains. For example, how are viewing behaviours enabled or constrained by the habits and shifting habitats of wildlife? How is wildlife disturbance proliferated by touristic viewing, and can such impacts be offset by any increases to wilderness ambassadorship associated with tourism (Maher *et al.* 2003)? Attending to the specificity of individual species, tourism demographics or motivations, or the influence of local management policies and strategies would help flesh out the contingencies in these tourist–wildlife relationships.

In terms of methodology, critical realism is impartial and thus compatible with a range of strategies, including both quantitative and qualitative methods. Researchers could, therefore, incorporate a mixed methods approach to understand the relations between the picturing practices of tourists and wildlife. Such an approach would carry much relevance in managerial, operator or decision-making contexts.

Yet for all the promise of critical realism as a means for negotiating human exceptionalism, particularly in terms of how it softens the extremes of naïve realism and strong social construction, it seems limited on at least two fronts. First, critical realism tends to rely on analytical abstractions that implicitly detach subjects from embodied encounters that enable dwelling within the world (Ingold 2000). Second, underlining critical realism is the temptation of a unifying, metatheory to traverse disciplines and encompass the diversity of knowledge claims. These two issues are crucial in the moments discussed next.

Phenomenology of perception

Phenomenology is a Western philosophical tradition that prioritises descriptions of the *life-world*, the always-present world that precedes thoughts and knowledge, and is perceived through everyday

actions, movements and encounters with meaningful things (Merleau-Ponty 1962: vii). Early thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, were concerned with how the 'objective facts' of science overshadowed the value of everyday, direct and spontaneous experience. They insisted that the activities of science be grounded in the understanding that all aspects of life happen only through our engagements of the world in which we dwell (Heidegger 2008) In short, our experience in and of the world is the *homeland* to our thoughts (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 24).

By calling attention to the life-world, phenomenology presents a direct and forceful challenge to the ontological assumptions lodged within Western systems of value by the influential philosophical work of Rene Descartes (Dillon 1988; Wylie 2007). Cartesian assumptions, which are closely associated with human exceptionalism, include the separation of reality into the human subject and the observable object, or the rational individual and the empirical world. Such assumptions translate into categories that order our lives – distinctions, for example, between mind and body, thought and reality, culture and nature or human and environment. Phenomenology intervenes in these dichotomies. It suggests that ontological tensions between phenomena as independently real (i.e. reality transcends human perspective) and as dependent on human experience (i.e. reality is equivalent to human cognition) can be negotiated, and indeed supplanted, by examining themes of subjectivity, knowledge and perception (Wylie 2007).

To refine my scope here, I will stay close to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom the life-world was understood as indelibly corporeal, a point that distinguishes his phenomenology of perception from Husserl and others. Merleau-Ponty's specific challenge to Cartesian distinctions occurs by placing mind, body and world in a state of perpetual consciousness. Bodies are not perceived as containers of consciousness, but rather bodies *are* consciousness (Carolan 2008). In Merleau-Ponty's (1962: 82) words, 'I am consciousness of my body *via* the world ... and I am consciousness of the world through the medium of my body'. Thus, the crux of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a shift from a separation of body and soul, of material object and subjective mind (both of which, he argues, distort the reality given to us in experience), to one of corporeal embodiment as the very basis of the perceptual world (Marshall 2008). The *body-subject*, as described by Merleau-Ponty, functions as the conduit of this worldly perception and knowledge (Abram 1996; Merleau-Ponty 2004). As an active, open and indeterminate form, the body-subject is in constant relation with other things and terrains of the world – exchanging, shifting, adapting, improvising and reciprocating. Space, or what we might refer to as environment, is configured through these situated encounters of things, terrains and bodies (Ingold 2000). This animate dance of receptivity and creativity in and of the world constitutes *perception* (Abram 1996), and is 'revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life' (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 31).

Shifting back to the Thelon River case study, phenomenology orients the researcher to a much different set of questions from the critical realist. For example, instead of trying to understand the inter-relationships and contingencies among impacts and tourist behaviour, with phenomenology we would be interested in understanding the meaning or essence of wildlife viewing and landscape photography for this group of travellers. Keeping with Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception, we might seek to describe that which is essential about the inter-subjective process of gazing, how tourists interpret their viewing experience, or how different bodies or entities performing as tourists interact with the world in this way. Moreover, immersion within the riverscape stimulates the senses in certain ways: skin is pricked by black flies, cooled by winds or hardened by the sun; walking up a hill to a lookout provides reprieve from the monotony of paddling, thus stretching the legs but also one's experience within, and awareness of, the landscape. Accordingly, we might also seek to understand the role that these sensations play in the meanings tourists' attribute to their lived-experience.

Given that the subject matter of phenomenology is what people experience and how they interpret the world, the most suitable methodologies are those that enable researchers to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible (Patton 2002). Qualitative research methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviewing are particularly appropriate and frequently employed. The rich and descriptive data gathered are often analysed and reported using thematic and narrative approaches (van Manen 2002).

Social nature

A third moment that contributes arguments against human exceptionalism includes a suite of orientations broadly referred to as the ‘social construction of nature’, or in geography circles as ‘social nature’ (Castree and Braun 2001; Demeritt 2002). For consistency, I use the latter term, and begin with general comments before moving to a refined focus on *discourse*.

According to Castree (2001), social nature constitutes a critical approach to society–nature relations that asserts ‘nature’ to be inescapably social. The argument here is that rather than an external or self-evident reality ‘what counts as nature cannot preexist its construction; when we take nature to be self-evident, we simply mistake our discursive practices for the things they seek to describe’ (Braun 2002: 17). In other words, nature is always an outcome of the conceptual and material activities of different societies.

The volume edited by William Cronon (1995a), has been influential to this line of thinking. Cronon’s (1995b) essay, for example, has engendered extensive debate because of its assertion that wilderness, the archetype of an ontologically pure non-social environment, is a profound creation of particular human cultures at particular moments in time. Critics fear that Cronon’s reasoning grants humans an unruly capacity to transform nature, undermining preservation and conservation efforts (Soulé and Lease 1995). In contrast, supporters identify the analytical and political possibilities for a radical environmentalism. They find social nature useful because it implies that humans have the capacity to improve current environmental circumstances by understanding, producing and practicing nature in more responsible and socially just ways (Castree and Braun 2001; Cronon 1995a).

As a general rule, adherents of social nature distance themselves from phenomenology’s reification of human emotion, perception and embodiment. According to Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist thinkers, phenomenology ignores the ways in which the notion of the free, autonomous individual is shaped by social, economic, historical and political contexts (Wylie 2007). The humanistic hue of phenomenology is criticised by social nature theorists for holding out for an unmediated and essential experience of the world, one that implicitly values pre-modern environmental practices and relationships, and too easily conflates contemporary non-Western cultures with romanticised views of the past (Wylie 2007).

Social nature theorists are also united by an apprehension with universal categories and absolute distinctions, such as the one made by critical realists between ontology and epistemology. Braun (2002) asserts that ‘nature’ and ‘environment’ are as much epistemological conditions as they are ontological. Where critical realists allege an epistemic fallacy, social nature alleges ‘our images and ideas of nature do not simply reflect a pre-existing reality, but, in important ways, constitute that reality for us’ (Braun 2002: 14). Indeed, poststructuralism tends to treat language not as a reflection of reality, but as constitutive of it. In other words, the ontology of environment is viewed as an *effect* of culture. Accordingly, the nature of nature-based tourism along the Thelon River is (re)produced through various cultural texts (e.g. books, travel guides, websites containing canoe travel journals, territorial guiding license regulations) and culturally informed practices (e.g. proper canoe paddling techniques, manufacturing and marketing of outdoor equipment, aeroplane charter industry).

Much of the work in social nature is indebted to Michel Foucault and, in particular, his theoretical articulation of *discourse* (Foucault 1972, 1980). Although Foucault and others use the term in multiple and interchangeable ways (see, e.g., Castree 2005: 135–53), it is helpful here to understand discourse as ‘a specific, collective series of representations, practices, and performances through which meanings give the world its particular shapes—their forms and norms. This implies that discourse is inherently productive, generative, and “object-constituting”’ (Gregory 2001: 86). Discourses have rules and protocols about what is properly regarded as knowledge. They circulate through texts and are inscribed and naturalised through networks of individuals and institutions (Gregory 2001). Discourses are powerful precisely because they are productive: they produce subject-positions, bodies and objects. Here, it is important to recognise that, for Foucault, power is more than a repressive, hierarchical force possessed by a State, class or individual. Rather, in Foucault’s (1980: 59) words, power ‘produces effects ... at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it’. Power is thus ‘positive’ in that it influences and enables the formation of identities (Darier 1999).

Thus, unlike phenomenologists or critical realists who resort to some pre-given or essential reality (i.e. the body or an independent, external reality), Foucault and his followers argue that knowledge and truth are constituted by multiple, overlapping and conflicting discourses. And whereas Foucault’s attention to environmental concerns was scant, others, such as Darier (1999), Braun (2002) and Haraway (1991), have extended his work into this sphere.

Social nature compels us to question the variety of self-evident categories we use to understand the world (e.g. ‘tourism’ or ‘environment’). One way to do this is by investigating how power operates through discourse to normalise such categories. For example, in the Thelon River case we could explore how commercial discourses of wilderness tourism, which rely on touristic desires for untouched nature, contribute to the creation of the Arctic as a last remaining wilderness. Individuals, businesses and government agencies make money by selling the Thelon as wilderness, so to what extent is the practice of wildlife and landscape photography an effect produced by these wider political economies of tourism? A social nature approach might also consider how nature is framed in certain ways by tourists, which could relate to a desire to consume and collect the spaces represented elsewhere, or be intended to showcase to different audiences on the return home (Jenkins 2003). What becomes normalised through touristic photographs and what would be considered out-of-place? Important then from a social nature perspective, to expose how the touristic framing of nature silences, or makes absent, certain other ideas, practices or histories within the landscape (Rose 2007).

Given the breadth of social nature, a variety of methodological approaches are possible and appropriate. These include various qualitative methods oriented by semiotics, historical materialism, discourse analysis or actor-network theory (Castree and Braun 2001). However, an important feature distinguishing social nature research, especially from phenomenology, is its attention to the historical, cultural and political conditions that enable objects (e.g. the Thelon River) or identities (e.g. a canoeist) to attain legibility (Braun 2002). To reveal these kinds of conditions, researchers will often rely on textual analyses of archival and policy documents, photographs and popular magazines, or travel brochures, postcards and field guides (Waite 2005).

Ontological multiplicity

Positive outcomes may result from ignoring social nature’s theoretical challenge and insisting on the immutability of nature or environment, but as Quigley (1999) observes, these would be achieved through the use of authority rather than sound argument. This final section touches on ontological multiplicity, a perspective that draws on features of social nature to return to a more sophisticated

realism. This relational understanding of ontology is gaining acceptance in a variety of intellectual spheres including the sociology of science, human geography, anthropology, political ecology and tourism studies (Braun 2009; Carolan 2004; Escobar 2010; Jóhannesson 2005).

A point of departure for thinking in terms of multiplicity is the notion that the world is constantly being made and remade. Although reality might seem to precede our occupation, Clark *et al.* (2008) remind us that the actions and inactions of individuals, cultures, nation-states, multinational institutions and non-human entities are always influencing the way the world is. Like it or not, we are all implicated in socio-material relations of the world, with all activities causing greater or lesser degrees of real-world effects (Clark *et al.* 2008). Certainly this is not meant to suggest that the world is a ‘blank-slate’ that imposes no demands upon us. Rather, as a multiplicity of space, reality is created through the co-existence of historical, changing and moving objects, stories or other socio-material phenomena (Massey 2005).

A principal concern for people thinking through multiplicity, such as those positioned around the theme of ontological politics, is to bring the materiality and agency of things back into consideration (Hincliffe 2007; Law 2004; Mol 1999). The reasoning here builds on the seminal work of Latour (1993), who argued that research and theory prioritising discourse remains entrenched in the ‘modern constitution’ by presuming pure distinctions between nature and culture. This is inaccurate according to Latour because it leaves the ‘things’ of the world passive and mute, and to exist ultimately as epistemological terms (Hincliffe 2007; Whatmore 2002). As such, ontological multiplicity relies on metaphors like intervention, performance and enactment, which speak to the many realities of an object crafted by various tools and practices that co-exist in the present (Mol 1999):

reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices. So the term *politics* works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested.

(Mol 1999: 75)

There are then options between multiple versions of reality, and the grounds for enacting a certain version of an object are debatable (Law 2004). Thus, as one derivative of multiplicity, ontological politics is concerned with understanding which options of a particular phenomenon are to be performed, where options are situated and what is at stake when a decision between alternative options is made (Mol 1999).

In terms of environment, an object like the Thelon River can be understood as simultaneously enacted through different material, conceptual or discursive practices. Such practices vary in time and space but overlap in many ways, so the reality of the river is open to negotiation. When it comes to the politics of the Thelon, the argument is that there is not just one reality to secure or protect against all other possible versions (Hincliffe 2007). Instead, there are many possible rivers that may be enacted differently and with different implications.

Brief illustrations based on circumstances related to human–wildlife interactions within the Thelon River basin offer some grounding to these discussions.

The nature-based tourists in Figure 3.1 attempt to make wildlife present through practices associated with photography and gazing. Prior to the journey, these travellers would have studied the natural and human history of the area, purchased cameras and binoculars, and rehearsed how to use these technologies. On location, the travellers beached their canoes, climbed a hill to access a certain vantage point, and spread out for unobstructed views. The wildlife images they captured were brought home as symbols of their journey. It is the collection of these kinds of practices that perform the Thelon as a wilderness space and enact tourist identities.

Among the Inuit living in Baker Lake, Nunavut, shifting cultural practices have enabled hunters to make wildlife (particularly caribou) present to sustain livelihoods. Oral traditions and place names are passed between generations and used as navigational aids; elders share skills and knowledge about harvesting techniques, food preparation or the making of tools and clothing; technological changes, such as the use of snowmobiles, are accommodated when practical. These kinds of practices enable some Inuit to maintain subsistence lifestyles while shifting towards a wage economy. They perform the Thelon as cultural space, or homeland, and contribute to the enactment of Inuit identity.

The additional claim of multiplicity – that these different practices overlap in unpredictable ways and interfere with reality (Law 2004) – is equally apparent. For example, the canoe guide/outfitter has supported his livelihood by travelling within the watershed for over 35 years. His guiding practices have made the Thelon into what can be referred to as his own backyard (Hall 2003). Moreover, a summer-long canoe expedition in 1999 involved Inuit, Dene First Nations and Germans travelling the length of the Thelon River (Gleeson 1999). The event emphasised cross-cultural learning, wilderness travel and living off the land, and was recorded in a feature-length documentary. The celebratory journey further troubles the distinction between wilderness and homeland. And, as a third example, many authors suggest that during an Inuit hunt, the animal offers its presence to a skilled hunter for his or her taking (Bennett and Rowley 2004; Mannick 1998). The agency of prey implies that human livelihoods and identities are crafted in part through the practices of another species.

An implication of ontological multiplicity is that what counts as ‘environment’ can be a kind of active experimentation (Braun 2009) where bodily senses and affective registers are prioritised, what counts as a research subject is extended, and knowledge and expertise is redistributed beyond the academy (Whatmore 2006). Accordingly, the options for tourism research methodology might best be left unbound, but also open to debate so that their effectiveness and positive contributions to the making of our world might be evaluated (Law 2004).

Conclusion

In a volume that considers new visions of nature, Proctor (2009) argues that persistent environmental problems result, in part, because we have not yet taken the risk to think deeply. When we do, it becomes clear that the notion of environment is astray, as are many of the sources of authority used to justify environmental concerns. Proctor speaks to the relevance of the social science ontology of environment. This chapter has provided another cut into this rich terrain. Specifically, I have drawn attention to various ontological positions that present possible alternatives to human exceptionalism, and, through this, attempted to identify possibilities for applying different ontologies in tourism research. A case study from a Canadian Arctic riverscape provided grounding for these discussions.

Three implications merit final comment. First, taking into account the issue of ontology might compel tourism and environment researchers towards consistency and precision in their methodological choices. Certainly some research methods are better suited to critical realists than phenomenologists. However, given the potential messiness of environmental ontologies, methods must also be engaged playfully, speculatively and reflexively so that innovative and inter-disciplinary approaches in tourism studies can thrive.

Second, tourism and environmental managers are tasked with making decisions in contexts of different, negotiable and fluid ideas about realities. Clarity and precision can be achieved by basing decisions in philosophical understandings of ontology, although care must be taken to avoid surrendering open philosophical discussion to uncompromising philosophical rigidity. The

promises of adaptive co-management (see Chapter 48) seem ripe for addressing these kinds of challenges.

Finally, the social science ontology of environment and attempts to displace human exceptionalism call attention to ethics, a theme not lost on tourism researchers (Fennell 2006; Holden 2003; Smith and Duffy 2003). What we consider real and true about environment relates to how we act towards those things we consider part of the environment. Thus, different ontologies of environment provide different foundations for ethical consideration. For instance, when the self-evident category of nature is punctured from a social nature perspective, notions of intrinsic value, which laden environmental ethics, become tricky business (Proctor 1998b). Moreover, the metaphors of enactment and intervention that characterise multiplicity demands an ethics – towards environment, humans or non-humans, in research, or in tourism – that recoils from teleology (Haraway 2008; Latour 2004). When reality is understood as multiple, so too must be ethics. The political and environmental possibilities that result from this observation demand our best theoretical reflection and research practice.

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