

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY NEWS

 Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's
 Section on Environmental Sociology

Fall 2023

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PUBLICATION COMMITTEE CHAIR'S MESSAGE



Greetings to the membership of the ASA Section on Environmental Sociology! Welcome to the Fall 2023 issue of the section newsletter.

The three feature essays that section members have contributed to this issue spotlight the cutting-edge research and teaching of environmental sociologists. In the first essay, Austin Luzbatek (Colorado State University) discusses her research about the effects of extreme heat events on incarcerated persons. Drawing from correspondence with inmates in Mississippi prisons and on a critical policy analysis, she notes that the state has largely failed to adapt its prisons to the changing climate.

Next, Alissa Corder (Whitman College) and Phil Brown (Northeastern University) introduce key

public datasets and tools developed by the PFAS Project lab. As they put it, these resources offer “cartographic justice pathways” for environmental health social science researchers and impacted communities.

Finally, Paul Stock (University of Kansas) reports on Kansas Abroad, an innovative “study away” program that enables KU students to develop new perspectives on the state that 75% of them call home. He emphasizes the importance of personal relationships in developing the program, particularly in the context of austerity and increasing political scrutiny of public higher education.

As always, the newsletter also provides information about section members’ professional accomplishments and about current opportunities, as well as about the nomination process for Section awards.

Michael Haedicke, Publications Committee Chair

FEATURE ESSAYS

Extreme Heat in Mississippi Prisons: A Case of Environmental Injustice

Austin Luzbatek

Colorado State University

Despite the fact that record-breaking temperatures are increasingly common, many prisons across the country do not have comprehensive air conditioning, even in extremely hot and humid regions like the American South. Research shows that extreme heat events can increase the likelihood of interpersonal violence, self-harm, and debilitating symptoms from physical disabilities (Anderson 1989; Anderson 2001; Burke et al. 2018; Vasquez 2021). These are all particularly pressing issues for incarcerated people, who are roughly 2.5x more likely to report a disability than the general population, and often experience violence behind bars (Lahm 2008). In fact, in Texas prisons, increased temperatures are associated with increased mortality (Skarha et al. 2022).

Last year, I decided I wanted to investigate how people who are incarcerated experience and describe this heat, and if states are prepared to deal with these impacts. As an educator who currently teaches courses in multiple prisons in the Twin Cities, I have heard many students describe firsthand the horror of summer months without A/C – even as far north as Minnesota. These anecdotes, along with growing alarm from community organizers who work in solidarity with people in prisons, prompted my current research.

To better understand this issue, I began to exchange letters with people in prison in Mississippi to hear directly about their experiences of extreme heat. I have concurrently been conducting critical policy analysis to assess the state's preparedness to address the heat crisis in prisons and jails. Mississippi is an important case because only some prisons in the state have air conditioning, despite widespread air conditioning in other public buildings and homes. Even the widely-praised addition of A/C to the brutal Mississippi State Penitentiary – commonly known as 'Parchman' – is incomplete, with at least one housing unit being left out of infrastructure changes. Temperatures inside Parchman have reached over 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

My preliminary findings suggest that heat *does* significantly impact incarcerated people's lives and well-being. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many participants have described the health impacts of repeated unbearably hot days. A number of them directly connect their disabilities to their incarceration, and the majority of those who described disabilities to me at all suggested the heat makes their symptoms worse. This is in and of itself a form of environmental injustice: that some of the most marginalized members of our society are experiencing potentially compounding disabilities from prison and environmental conditions. But soaring temperatures don't just take a physical toll on those living behind bars.

One emerging theme in my research – which aligns with existing literature that identifies incarceration as a form of “social death” – is the myriad of ways in which heat waves impact incarcerated peoples’ social lives and relationships. In their letters, some participants described choosing not to make phone calls in summertime, because waiting in line would put them closer to other bodies that emanate heat. Others said they cease to write letters at all during hot months because they sweat so much that pieces of paper become soaked and their writing illegible. Extreme heat doesn’t only disconnect people from their families on the outside, however; it also strains relationships between people living in prison together. My research confirms what other scholars have demonstrated is true of the general population: violence increases when the temperature rises. Yet beyond increased risk of assault from other incarcerated people, which my participants described extensively, extreme heat can also prevent people from caring for one another behind bars. Multiple participants described being unable to muster the energy to spend time with their friends in prison because the heat depletes them. Participants described typically sharing food and resources with their peers and friends in prison, noting that heat disrupts this too, as they are required to spend more money on personal fans to keep their living space even slightly cooler. As such, they are forced to sacrifice support they can provide to others. In this way, the prison within the context of climate change *especially* erodes prisoners’ social ties and becomes both alienating and anti-solidaristic.

Unfortunately, and likely unsurprisingly to fellow environmental justice scholars, I have found that the state is wholly unprepared to manage or mitigate any of the impacts of extreme heat on prisons and those who live within them. Mississippi decides on a case-by-case basis if new facilities will have air conditioning or not, a bleak plan in an era of climate crisis and mass incarceration. This leaves thousands of disabled incarcerated people at heightened risk in the state. Moreover, Mississippi statutes actively work to break relationships between incarcerated people and their communities, so the isolating experiences of heat waves simply exacerbate existing state policy and planning.

Beyond internal infrastructure conditions, a sizable number people living in prison in the state work outdoors. At Parchman, infamous for its former status as slave plantation, many incarcerated people do manual labor on the farm. Yet the state has no policy outlining requirements for working conditions, including those outdoors. This is particularly alarming given that incarcerated workers are explicitly excluded from most other universal workplace protections, despite being incentivized to engage in work to receive earlier release. It is unclear, then, how the state will deal with the increased risks associated with living and working in blistering hot temperatures beyond simply leaving the imprisoned to fend for themselves and suffer the consequences.

As environmental justice research has shown for decades, the state regularly fails to manage or mitigate environmental hazards, and people of color and the poor disproportionately bear the consequences. My preliminary findings lie at the heart of an issue that many environmental justice researchers and organizers are now grappling with: if the state won’t meet the needs of the vulnerable and the marginalized in the face of environmental catastrophe, who will? Regardless of our answer to that question, it is essential that we continue to center incarcerated people’s voices by asking them directly how they experience these harms. This will help us better advocate for them by understanding their

needs. And, crucially, we must continue to critically examine the state's ability or desire to protect those who are disenfranchised.

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Data Tools for Environmental Health Social Science Research from the PFAS Project Lab

Alissa Cordner, Whitman College

Phil Brown, Northeastern University

Accessible and public-facing data tools that track and interrogate environmental issues of interest to communities are of significant value to environmental advocates and researchers alike. As environmental sociologists know all too well, high-quality environmental data – especially on the issues that impacted communities care about and scholars want to study – are too often incomplete, hard to access and use, or missing entirely. Here we describe efforts by our multi-disciplinary research group, the PFAS Project Lab (www.pfasproject.com), to develop and make accessible various datasets and tools related to chemical pollution and environmental inequalities.

This type of work has lengthy roots in sociology, tracing back to Du Bois's place-based study of race-based inequality in Philadelphia (Du Bois 1996 [1899]). In particular, cartographic representations of environmental inequalities have played a particularly powerful role in activism and research. Environmental justice research and activism has relied on mapping from its earliest origins. As an example, Robert Bullard mapped locations of hazardous waste facilities and found them overly concentrated in Black neighborhoods, regardless of income level (Bullard 1990; Bryant and Mohai 1992). From high-profile "lay mapping" of pollution and illness cases in Love Canal, NY to the "death maps" that identified patterns of heart attacks among farmers downwind of the Hanford, WA, nuclear weapons site,

the mapping of environmental hazards has also been central to the modern environmental health movement (Brown 1992). More recently, groups such as the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative (EDGI) have developed “environmental data justice” tools that lower access barriers to complex coding of web monitoring and pollution data (EDGI 2023; Vera et al. 2019).

As we presented at ASA this past August, we conceive of these public-facing mapping tools as *cartographic justice pathways* aimed at generating awareness and knowledge-sharing, supporting advocacy efforts, and motivating new research, regulation, remediation, and source reduction of environmental contaminants. Cartographic justice approaches are increasingly accessible through increasingly user-friendly GIS software programs, and many environmental justice and other activist groups use mapping software, both on their own and in community-scientist partnerships.

Our research group, the [PFAS Project Lab](#), studies social and scientific issues related to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, a class of thousands of persistent, toxic, and bioaccumulative chemicals that are widely used in consumer and industrial processes. We produce rigorous, accessible research about the PFAS contamination crisis through collaborations with impacted communities, leading interdisciplinary researchers, and nonprofits. Central to our group’s mission is collaboration with community and advocacy groups, especially in the development of new datasets and accessible tools that are useful to those communities.

We have developed several publicly available data tools, hosted on our website (www.pfasproject.com):

- The **PFAS Contamination Site Tracker** is the only publicly available systematic tracking of nearly 2,000 known locations of contamination in all 50 states as well as US territories and commonwealth nations. This dataset is publicly viewable, and we also have a downloadable version that we share with researchers, community groups, regulatory agencies, and businesses who agree to a user agreement.
- The **Presumptive PFAS Contamination Dataset** is a publicly available database of over 57,000 locations in the United States where PFAS contamination should be assumed in the absence of high-quality testing data. It is supported by a peer-reviewed publication in *Environmental Science & Technology Letters* outlining its conceptual and methodological development (Salvatore et al. 2022).
- Both the known and presumptive PFAS contamination datasets feed into an ArcGIS Experience Map, the **PFAS Sites and Community Resources** map. This map also includes data on PFAS testing, regulation, and biomonitoring, as well as clickable layers for Tribal Nation boundaries.

Most recently, we have developed the **PFAS Governance Tracker** (<https://governance.pfasproject.com>), a database of United States policy and governance actions related to PFAS. Our team of faculty, post-doctoral researchers, graduate students, and undergraduate students spent two years gathering and organizing information about PFAS governance activities from all fifty states, Congress, and multiple federal agencies. The database contains over 900 actions dating back to 1999. This past summer, we worked with a computer science professor and three students at Whitman College to turn this dataset into a searchable online database.

The PFAS Governance Tracker provides a more accurate and transparent view of PFAS action, especially since government involvement and authority varies greatly between states. The website is easy to use,

with a search bar where users can enter terms of interest, and multiple filters that allow users to query governance actions by type, date, outcome, and topic. The website filters are tailored to how many different types of users might want to use the PFAS governance data, providing a vast improvement over searching a spreadsheet. Each action in the database contains a detailed summary and list of key players, as well as designations for action type, topics covered, date of introduction, PFAS definition, and legislative outcome. The full dataset or filtered results are downloadable as a CSV file, allowing interested residents, regulators, researchers, and other users to download their search results for further analysis and access primary and secondary source links for each action. We plan to continue to add new actions to the database, with the website being updated regularly to reflect the most up-to-date PFAS policy and governance actions. Website users can also suggest corrections and new actions for the team to investigate via a Google Form (in the [“About this tool”](#) tab).

Our work is possible because of ongoing collaborations with impacted residents, activist leaders, and other social and environmental health science researchers whose expertise ensures that our work will be useful to various constituencies. We are supported both externally by federal grants as well as internally by our institutions, and we deliberately leverage this funding to support students – particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds – and advocacy organizations who are subcontracted in our grants for their expertise. Accessible technology has also been critical to our work. GIS software is now widely accessible, including free and user-friendly platforms. Activists and scientists need to keep pressing for more complete, transparent, and easily accessible data to allow for the documentation, investigation, and challenging of environmental harm.

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Hitting the Road to Learn about Environmental Challenges

Paul Stock

University of Kansas

In June 2023, the inaugural Kansas Abroad road trip (<https://studyabroad.ku.edu/kansas-abroad>) took place. The Kansas Abroad program, based in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Kansas, utilizes the state of Kansas as a living laboratory in the spirit of the Chicago School of Sociology and asks the question, what will Kansas' environmental future look like? To that end, I travelled the state with six students and a co-leader visiting farmers, policy makers, city managers, cotton gin operators, ranchers, and museums to hear their answers. Other faculty joined us on the trip for a few days at a time, too. You can see the trip on Instagram at kansasabroad (one word) or as a work-in-progress StoryMap here: <https://storymap.knightlab.com/edit/?id=kansas-abroad>

This fall, those same students will offer their answers to that overarching question on a topic of their choosing in a semester-long research seminar. For instance, one student is focused on food deserts and the loss of rural grocery stores, another on the importance of environmental education, and so on.

As an example of study away, rather than study abroad, Kansas Abroad applies the same principles of a study abroad program – exploring different places, learning about different cultures, eating different foods, and talking to people where they live and applies them to the state level where over 75% of the students come from the metro Kansas City or Wichita areas or from out of state.

To ground the students before their trip, they read Sarah Smarsh's (2018) memoir, *Heartland*, to help make sense of what the rural/urban divide, what growing up rurally is actually like, and some ideas on how to open up dialogue. The very same things that make Kansas a typical flyover state also contribute to its unique politics and nuanced differences. For instance, Kansas experiences very place-specific water politics that are influenced by the differential level of rainfall – that is as one moves west in Kansas and moves up in altitude the annual precipitation levels plummet. This influences everything from the ability to grow vegetables, enforce HOA lawn regulations, and how many cattle can be raised. It also affects the regional relationships to water. In southwest Kansas, around the areas of Dodge City and Garden City, their location over the High Plains Ogallala Aquifer means that, for now, businesses like National Beef and a new dairy factory can rely on consistent sources of large amounts of groundwater. However, the same policies that mine this water without much regulation mean that the aquifer is depleting and fast (Bessire, 2021). Later in the trip we talked with officials from Hays, Kansas that occupies a distinct place in the state's geography – it does not sit above the aquifer, nor does it have a river to draw from. They described their solution to buy a ranch in a different part of the state and build a reservoir to supply municipal drinking water while also restoring 7,000 acres of prairie (Dome, 2023). Other visits focused on rural development, the impact of industry on social and ecosystems, and politics.

One of the most memorable visits was to Nicodemus, Kansas – known as the first free African-American settlements west of the Mississippi after the Civil War (National Park Service, 2023). Our host was one of the descendants of some of the original homesteaders who gave us a tour of the historical township, but also shared with us Nicodemus' role in helping shape the future of African-American agriculture. Her uncle was involved in the Pigford v USDA case that found the USDA negligent and responsible for years of discrimination against African-American farmers. Other visits included regenerative farms, prairie restoration projects, stops related to extractive mining, and museums. These were just a few of the

wonderful visits that helped shape the students understanding of the complexity and importance of environmental decisions making facing the state as a microcosm of planetary challenges.

How did we do it? Kansas is a red state with a red legislature and, like many places, experiences the long *durée* of austerity in higher education. But there is a real pragmatic streak in Kansas as well. Thus, this program, evolved out of my own work on farmers in Kansas (see Stock, Hossler and Darby, 2019), but also a collaborative effort by faculty across disciplines to connect through personal relationships to those shaping Kansas' environmental future.

The future of the program will depend on either continued support of donors or a recognition by the college and the university to invest in us and our colleagues. Either way, as a proof of concept, Kansas Abroad, shows that we can do much with a little and take advantage of the places we are to teach – the global in the local. In Kansas, this meant a real time look at a pretty much failing wheat crop while shipments of grain were tied up or denied passage in the Ukraine, the specter of climate change as Kansas's largest cotton gin anticipates growth of cotton in production in the state because of higher temperatures, and the very real contradictions of different forms of water politics playing out across the state, among many others. While these are very real challenges, it has been exciting to learn from those, who by accident or choice, are the one making everyday decisions about all of our futures.

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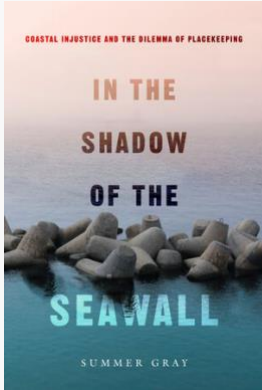
PUBLICATIONS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Books

[*In the Shadow of the Seawall: Coastal Injustice and the Dilemma of Placekeeping*](#)

Summer Gray

University of California Press

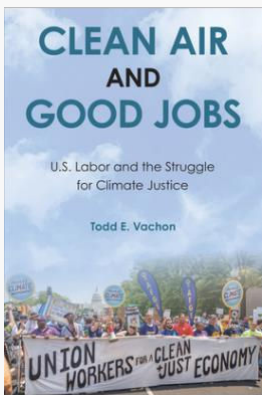


In the Shadow of the Seawall journeys to the low-lying lands of Guyana and the Maldives to grapple with the existential dilemma of seawalls alongside struggles to resist displacement. With the gathering momentum of ocean instability wrought by centuries of injustice, seawalls have become objects of conflict and negotiation, around which human struggles for power and resistance collide. Through stories of colonial ruination and green seawalls, the concept of *placekeeping* emerges—a justice-oriented framework for addressing adaptation and the global dangers of coastal disruption at the front lines of climate change. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews, Gray shows how seawalls are entrenched in relationships of power and entangled in processes of making and keeping place.

[*Clean Air and Good Jobs: U.S. Labor and the Struggle for Climate Justice*](#)

Todd E. Vachon

Temple University Press



The labor–climate movement in the U.S. laid the groundwork for the Green New Deal by building a base within labor for supporting climate protection as a vehicle for good jobs. But as we confront the climate crisis and seek environmental justice, a “jobs vs. environment” discourse often pits workers against climate activists. How can we make a “just transition” moving away from fossil fuels, while also compensating for the human cost when jobs are lost or displaced? In his timely book, *Clean Air and Good Jobs*, Todd Vachon examines the labor–climate movement and demonstrates what can be envisioned and accomplished when climate justice is on labor’s agenda and unions work together with other social movements to formulate bold solutions to the climate crisis. Vachon profiles the workers and union leaders who have been waging a slow, but steadily growing revolution within their unions to

make labor as a whole an active and progressive champion for both workers and the environment. *Clean Air and Good Jobs* examines the “movement within the movement” offering useful solutions to the dual crises of climate and inequality.

[Critical Campus Sustainabilities: Bridging Social Justice and the Environment in Higher Education](#)

Flora Lu and Emily Murai, eds.
Springer

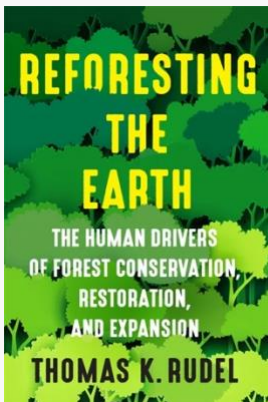


In response to student demands reflecting the urgency of societal and ecological problems, universities are making a burgeoning effort to infuse environmental sustainability efforts with social justice. In this edited volume, we extend calls for higher education leaders to revamp programming, pedagogy, and research that problematically reproduce dominant techno-scientific and managerial conceptualizations of sustainability. Students, staff and community partners, especially those from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups, are at the forefront of calls for critical sustainabilities programming, education and collaborations. Their work centers themes of power relations, (in)equity, accessibility, and social (in)justice to study the interrelationships between humans, non-humans, and the environment. Their voices, perspectives and lived

experiences are provocations for institutions to think and act more expansively. This book amplifies some of these voices and bottom up efforts toward a more critical approach to sustainability on campus. We ground our recommendations on findings from campus-wide surveys that were taken by over 8,000 undergraduates in 2016, 2019, and 2022. Furthermore, we share the design principles and lessons learned from several innovative, award-winning initiatives designed to foster critical sustainabilities at UC Santa Cruz.

[Reforesting the Earth: The Human Drivers of Forest Conservation, Reforestation, and Expansion](#)

Thomas K. Rudel
Columbia University Press



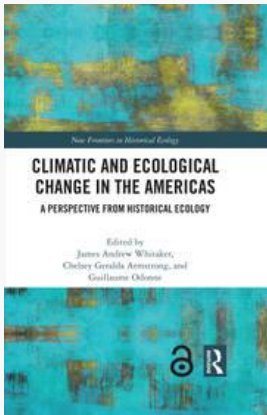
Forests offer a natural solution to the climate crisis. Conserving them and restoring them not only removes carbon from the atmosphere but it also protects and fosters biodiversity. Unfortunately, recent elite-driven reforestation initiatives have fostered few forests. Climate change induced wildfires have torched many forests, and deforestation through agricultural expansion has continued relentlessly in many regions of the world. Against this grim backdrop, observers like Bill McKibben have called for military-like mobilizations to reduce concentrations of greenhouse gases. *Reforesting the Earth* describes how people in the forest sector have begun to mobilize across a wide range of settings. Coalitions of diverse actors, organized through corporatist political processes, have emerged within landscape sectors. Alliances of wealthy donors, indigenous peoples, small farmers, NGO

personnel, and government officials have concerted their efforts to protect, restore, and expand forests in varied ways. Farmers have limited the extent of lands under cultivation and permitted trees to repopulate pastures. Government officials have strengthened forest-protecting land tenure among smallholders. Wealthy donors have made payments to protect forests. Through a series of case studies, *Reforesting the Earth* offers a guide to scaling up these efforts to sequester carbon. In so doing, it makes a powerful case for a global reforestation movement.

[Climactic and Ecological Change in the Americas: A Perspective from Historical Ecology](#)

James Andrew Whitaker, Chelsey Geralda Armstrong, and Guillaume Odonne, eds.

Routledge



This book offers a comparative analysis of the experiences, responses, and adaptations of people to climate variability and environmental change across the Americas. It foregrounds historical ecology as a structural framework for understanding the climate change crisis throughout the region and throughout time. In recent years, Indigenous and local populations in particular have experienced climate change effects such as altered weather patterns, seasonal irregularities, flooding and drought, and difficulties relating to subsistence practices. Understanding and dealing with these challenges has drawn on peoples' longstanding experience with climate variability and in some cases includes models of mitigation and responses that are millennia old. With contributions from specialists across the Americas, this volume will be of interest to scholars from fields including anthropology, archaeology, geography, environmental studies, and Indigenous studies.

Journal Articles and Book Chapters

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TRANSITIONS & HONORS

Soraya Boudia, Angela Creager, Scott Frickel, Emmanuel Henry, Nathalie Jas, Carsten

Reinhardt, and Jody A. Roberts have received the 2023 Merton Award from the Science, Knowledge, and Technology Section of the American Sociological Association for their book [Residues: Thinking Through Chemical Environments](#).

Lauren C. Heberle has been appointed Chair of the University of Louisville's Department of Sociology, home to one of few explicitly Applied PhD programs in the U.S. and the UofL Center for Environmental Policy and Management.

Loredana Loy earned her PhD in sociology from Cornell University in May. She is now a Postdoctoral Associate at the University of Miami, where she works on disinformation, animal agriculture, and climate change.

Norah MacKendrick has been named co-editor of Rutgers University Press's award-winning "Nature, Culture, and Society" book series.

Brian F. O'Neill joined the University of Washington's Evans Schools of Public Policy and Governance this Fall as a Postdoctoral Scholar.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

(1) Environmental Data Innovation and Inclusion Lab Request for Proposals

The National Science Foundation's newest environmental synthesis center, the Environmental Data Innovation and Inclusion Lab at UC Boulder (<https://esiil.org/>), seeks proposals for interdisciplinary working groups blending diverse forms of environmental and social data to advance basic scientific understanding and enable informed environmental decision and policy making. A description of the ESIIL working group program can be found here: <https://esiil.org/working-groups>. The request for proposals can be found here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oz_wH91V7HsuCTTJdsDh6MbIm5cbArCH/view.

Working groups are funded to meet in Boulder, CO, and virtually for several years, and are provided with world-class logistical and computational and analytic support. Proposals are short - 5 pages or fewer. The deadline is Nov 1, 2023.

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Marvin Olsen Student Paper Award
Nikhil Deb

Fred Buttel Distinguished Contribution

Norah MacKendrick

Teaching and Mentorship Award Practice and Outreach Award

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