



ACADEMY OF  
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# Justice, Equity and Fairness in Natural Resource Management

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ACADEMY PAPER

# **Justice, Equity and Fairness in Natural Resource Management**

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# Justice, Equity and Fairness in Natural Resource Management

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This Academy Paper is the outcome of a Workshop supported by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia in conjunction with the Fenner School for Environment and Society, Australian National University (ANU), Canberra. The Workshop was held on 12 and 13 October 2015.

## Conveners

Dr Anna Lukasiewicz (ANU), Professor Stephen Dovers FASSA (ANU) and Associate Professor Claudia Baldwin (University of the Sunshine Coast).

## Introduction

Justice research in environmental management and natural resource management (EM/NRM) is fragmented, interdisciplinary and scattered throughout the social sciences and humanities. In addition, justice researchers are isolated within their institutional and interdisciplinary settings, and have no accessible platform to communicate with their peers.

This workshop was a first-of-its-kind opportunity for leading justice researchers to share their research, broaden their networks and strengthen opportunities for collaboration. Participants ranged from professors with decades of experience, through to mid-career academics, six early-career researchers, PhD candidates and a few practitioners. The 21 participants represented 11 different institutions, with some attending as individual researchers and others belonging to interdisciplinary research centres.

The realisation that justice research needs consolidation, synthesis and a coordinated future research agenda, provided the main motivation for the workshop. This was captured in three workshop objectives:

1. What NRM justice research is being undertaken and what motivates such research?
2. How is justice research in NRM conducted?
3. Is current justice research meeting the needs of practitioners?

The agenda was divided between group discussions and individual presentations. The discussions dealt with justice in EM/NRM as a field of research, starting at the level of the individual (why and how do researchers do justice research?), followed by how successful the research field is (perceived impact and outcomes), and naturally flowing to how to improve this research field in academia and real life (networking and strategies to ensure research uptake).

## Characteristics of and motivations for current justice research

Discussions of researcher motivations revealed that most do the research they do in order to give a voice to the disadvantaged (such as marginalised communities and the environment), in order to

effect real change, or to make a difference. Justice research is thus a moral issue in which researchers are personally invested, and for some it is regarded as political action or advocacy. The presentations reflected this view, representing a range of interests, and covering the most topical and conflict-ridden natural resources: water, mining, energy, fishing and forestry.

Connected to motivation is the question of how people define themselves and whether justice is a core element of their research. Prior to the workshop, participants were specifically asked what kind of justice researcher they consider themselves to be. Of the 26 people who responded, a spectrum of involvement in justice emerged:

Level of involvement	Description	No of people
Interested	Those who find justice research relevant to their work but do not engage in it, for example public policy researchers.	4
Incidental	Those who do not set out to research justice but find it crops up in their results as an important topic.	6
Affiliated	Those who do not see themselves as working on 'justice' but work in a similar field, such as public participation or conflict resolution.	8
Core	Those who set out to directly engage with justice issues.	8

These results demonstrate another reason why justice research is such a fragmented and disconnected field, abounding in individual case studies; much of the research is done incidentally or indirectly. Conversely these results show that the relevance of justice research extends well beyond the relative few who make it the core of their work.

### Methods used in justice research

The methods and approaches used in justice research are reflective of the disciplinary backgrounds of individual researchers, ranging from quantitative economic simulations through to participatory action research. Yet despite this methodological diversity, qualitative methods outnumbered quantitative ones and were used by the majority of researchers, with interviews being the most popular data collection method by far. The necessity to refine methodological approaches for justice research was recognised by all, and discussions revealed many as-yet unanswered questions, such as the perceived validity of some approaches over others. This topic will be considered further in future collaborative activities.

Approaches to justice research and the conceptualisation of justice varied among participants. The first workshop session was designed to set the scene with generalised talks from different disciplinary perspectives. The remaining sessions were either case-study-based, with a focus on a particular conflict, or various analytical frameworks applied to a range of similar cases. Most presentations followed the familiar social-psychology-based breakdown of 'justice' into distributive, procedural and interactive dimensions, however a few conceptualised justice using deliberative democracy, philosophical and human rights approaches.

The diversity of EM/NRM justice was evident not only in the multiple conceptualisations of justice, but also in the diverse conceptualisations of the natural resources to which justice was applied. Most presentations focused on a conflict between groups of stakeholders and a government entity about a specific natural resource and were analysed at a regional or national spatial scale. However, a few conceptualised the environment and natural resources somewhat differently, as sustainability or access to green spaces at a local scale. These centered on public engagement and education rather than on analysis of stakeholder interactions. The majority of research was analytical, rather than action-oriented; and researchers were mostly observers of a process or

doing a post-event analysis, with only a few directly involved as part of an ongoing process.

### How can justice research have an impact as a research field, as well as in practice?

Discussions of impact and outcomes revealed two goals: to increase the validity of justice research within the broader academic world; and to ensure that it makes a difference on the ground. Justice researchers thus aim to reach the full spectrum of research end-users, including other researchers (such as research partners and funding agencies) NRM and environmental practitioners, stakeholders and public policymakers as well as the wider civil society. While individual researchers were able to recount specific successes (as well as failures) in individual projects, there was a general view that ensuring impact also requires collective action.

Discussions about strategies, to ensure impact in both academia and the wider world, revolved mostly around collective action and the need for the workshop participants to form a group. The fragmented nature of justice research means that, while it is relevant to many NRM conferences and journals, it is easy to marginalise individual justice contributions as not central to the topic. Strategies to increase the relevance and prominence of justice research within academia include running themes and panels at conferences and proposing special issues for journals, in preference to submitting individual contributions which can be easily dismissed as not 'fitting in'.

Discussions about networking revealed a number of existing groups, networks and organisations that work in the area of environmental justice, both in Australia and internationally. However, these are centered on specific issues (such as water justice), academic institutions or disciplines, meaning that collectively the workshop participants could not easily fit into any of these established entities, reinforcing the need for a collective network of our own.

The final discussion session outlined the advantages of justice as a research field: it is a systemic endeavour that creates standards and produces evidence-based results that can be used in public policy and advocacy. The main challenge for justice researchers is to move research efforts away from isolated individualised case studies to comprehensive, large-scale, transdisciplinary research projects using consistent methodological approaches.

### Conclusion

What did the workshop achieve? It acted as a catalyst for disparate EM/NRM justice researchers from around Australia to see themselves as part of a collective; it is thus the first step to forming an ongoing network for justice researchers in Australia (the Australian Environmental Justice Research Network).

An ongoing topic of the network will be the organisation of a major collaborative research project. It was decided that the network's establishment should be gradual and impose minimal organisational work. To this end, an email list was established as a basis for future collaborative work<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the research presentations, alongside discussions of methodological approaches, will be synthesised and published next year by CSIRO Publishing.

For the first time in Australia, justice researchers are actively creating a 'space' in academia where EM/NRM justice sits at the centre of research and is not relegated to the periphery of academic enquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Those interested in the Australian Environmental Justice Research Network should contact Dr Anna Lukasiewicz ([anna.lukasiewicz@anu.edu.au](mailto:anna.lukasiewicz@anu.edu.au)).