**CHAPTER FOUR**

**The Social Construction of Environmental Issues and Problems**

Environmental problems are similar in many ways to social problems in general. There are, however, a few notable differences. While social problems derive much of their rhetorical power from moral rather than factual argument, environmental problems such as global warming are tied more directly to scientific findings and claims.

**5.1. Construction of Social Problems**

Spector and Kitsuse (1973) argued that social problems are not static conditions but rather ‘sequences of events’ that develop on the basis of collective definitions. Form social constructionist perspective, a social problem is ‘generated and sustained by the activities of complaining groups and institutional responses to them. Here, the concept complaining group refers to groups making assertions of grievances and claims to organizations, agencies and institutions about some presumed conditions. In similar vein, environmental issues and problems do not rise and fall according to some fixed social and self-evident set of criteria. Rather, their progress varies in direct response to successful ‘claims-making’ by a cast of social actors that includes scientists, industrialists, politicians, civil servants, journalists and environmental activists. Therefore, it is **claims-making** **by** **a complaining group (i.e. a cast of social actors)** which transfers scientific facts and evidences in to environmental issues and problems. As a result, from this point of view, the process of claims-making is treated as more important than the task of assessing whether these claims are truly valid or not.

**5.2. Constructionism as an Analytical Tool**

Best (1989: 250) has noted that Constructionism is not only helpful as a theoretical stance but also that it can be useful as an analytic tool. In this regard, he suggests three primary foci for studying social problems from a social constructionist perspective: the claims themselves; the claims-makers; and the claims-making process.

***5.2.1.* Nature of claims**

As initially conceptualized by Spector and Kitsuse, claims were complaints about social conditions which members of a group perceived to be offensive and undesirable. According to Best (1989: 250), there are several key questions to be considered when analyzing the content of a claim: What is being said about the problem? How is the problem being typified? What is the rhetoric of claims-making? How are claims presented so as to persuade their audiences? Of these, it is the third question that has generated the most interest among contemporary social problems analysts. Rhetoric involves the deliberate use of language in order to persuade. Rhetorical statements contain three principal components or categories of statements: grounds, warrants and conclusions.

* ***Grounds***
* *Definitions: give a guide to how interpret the problem*
* *Examples*
* *Numeric estimates: by estimating the magnitude of the problem, claims makers establish its importance, or its potential for growth or its range.*
* ***Warrants:*** *it refers to the justification for demanding that action to be taken. This can include presenting the victim as blameless or innocent; emphasizing links with the historical past; or linking the claims to basic rights and freedoms. Example, in demanding a collection action against ‘elder abuse’, the primary warrants include: primary warrants: (1) the elderly are dependent; (2) the elderly are vulnerable; (3) abuse is life-threatening; (4) the elderly are incompetent; (5) ageing stresses families; (6) elder abuse often indicates other family problems.*
* ***Conclusions:*** *spell out the action that is needed to alleviate or eradicate a social problem. This frequently entails the formulation of new social control policies by existing bureaucratic institutions or the creation of new agencies to carry out these policies.*

***Note:* rhetorical themes or tactics vary according to the nature of the target audience.**

***5.2.2. Claims-makers***

In looking at the identity of claims-makers, Best (1989b: 250) advises that we pose anumber of questions. Are claims-makers affiliated to specific organizations, social movements,professions or interest groups? Do they represent their own interests or those ofthird parties? Are they experienced or novices? Many studies that have been undertaken in the social constructionist mode have pointed to the important role played by medical professionals and scientists in constructing social problems claims. Sometimes they may be composed of politicians, public interest law firms, civil servants. Claims-makers may also reside in the mass media, especially since the manufacture of news depends upon journalists, editors and producers constantly finding new trends, fashions and issues. However, it is also important to keep in mind that not all claims-makers are to be found among the grassroots or civil society. For example, it has been suggested that the contemporary ‘obesity crisis’ has been captained by ‘a relatively small group of scientists and doctors, many directly funded by the weight-loss industry, [who] have created an arbitrary and unscientific definition of overweight and obesity’.

**5.2.3. *Claims-making process***

Best (1989b: 251) poses a number of useful questions about the claims-making process. Whom did the claims-makers address? Were other claims-makers presenting rival claims? What concerns and interests did the claims-makers’ audience bring to the issue, and how did these come to shape the audience’s responses to the claims? How did the nature of the claims the identity of the claims-makers affect the audience’s response?

**5.3. Key tasks/processes in the social construction of environmental problems**

In defining environmental problems, bringing them to society’s attention and provoking action, claims-makers must engage in a variety of activities. Some of these are centrally concerned with the collective definition of potential problems, others with the collective action necessary to ameliorate them.

In considering the social construction of environmental problems, it is possible to identify three key tasks: assembling, presenting and contesting claims.

***5.3.1. Assembling environmental claims***

The task of assembling environmental claims concerns the initial discovery and elaboration of an incipient problem. At this stage, it is necessary to engage in a variety of specific activities: naming the problem, distinguishing it from other similar or more encompassing problems, determining the scientific, technical, moral or legal basis of the claim, and gauging who is responsible for taking ameliorative action.

Environmental problems frequently originate in the realm of science. One reason for this is that ordinary people have neither the expertise nor the resources to find new problems. For example, knowledge about the ozone layer is not tied to our everyday experience; it is available only through the use of high technology probes into the atmosphere above the Polar Regions.

Some problems, however, do relate more closely to our life experiences. Here, ‘indigenous knowledge’[[1]](#footnote-1) Concern over toxic wastes frequently begins with local citizens who come to draw a causal link between seeping dump sites and a perceived increase in the neighborhoods incidence of leukemia, miscarriages, birth defects and other health problems. Those whose jobs or recreational pursuits bring them into close contact with nature on a daily basis (farmers, anglers, wildlife officers) may also be the initial source of claims because they pick up early environmental warning signals such as reproductive problems in livestock or mutations in fish. Acid rain was first launched as a contemporary environmental problem when a fisheries inspector in a remote area of Sweden telephoned researcher Svante Oden with the observation that there appeared to be a link between a rising incidence of fish deaths and an elevation in the acidity of lakes and rivers in the area.

In researching the origins of environmental claims, it is important for the researcher to ask where a claim comes from, who owns or manages it, what economic and political interests claims-makers represent and what type of resources they bring to the claims making process. For instance, present day environmental claims-makers are more likely to take the form of professional social movements with paid administrative and research staffs, sophisticated fund-raising programmes and strong, institutionalized links both to legislators and the mass media.

The process of assembling an environmental claim often involves a rough division of labor. While there are notable exceptions, research scientists are normally handicapped by a combination of scholarly caution, excessive use of technical jargon and inexperience in handling the media. As a result, an important finding may lie fallow for decades until proactively transformed into a claim by entrepreneurial organizations.

In assembling an environmental problem, not all explanations are created equally. Claims that hinge on difficult to understand concepts such as ‘entropy’ are far less likely to stick than those that have at their nucleus more readily comprehensible constructs, for example, ‘extinction’ or ‘overpopulation’. Sometimes, the basic outline of a claim only becomes clear in the context of a political, economic or geographic ‘crisis’. This was the case in 1973 when concerted action by OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), the oil producers’ cartel, triggered an energy crisis in industrial nations in the West. Similarly, the abnormally hot US summer of 1988 gave the problem of global warming a visible, experiential focus.

5.3.2. ***Presenting environmental claims***

In presenting an environmental claim, issue entrepreneurs have a dual mandate: they need both to command attention and to legitimate their claim (Solesbury 1976). While not unrelated, these constitute two quite separate tasks.

As Hilgartner and Bosk’s (1988) model emphasizes, the arenas through which social problems become defined and conveyed to the public are highly competitive. To command attention, a potential environmental problem must be seen to be novel, important and understandable – the same values which characterize news selection in general. One effective way of commanding attention is through the claimants’ use of evocative verbal and visual imagery. Thus the extreme thinning of the ozone layer became much more saleable as an environmental problem when depicted as an expanding ‘hole’. Visual language can, therefore, be especially powerful in carrying out this task. Environmental issues may be forced into prominence when exemplified by particular incidents or events, for example, the nuclear accidents at Chernobyl, Three Mile Island and Fukushima. Dramatic events like these are important because they assist political identification of the nature of an issue, the situations out of which it arises, the causes and effects, the identity of the groups in the community which are involved with the issue.

In presenting environmental claims, movement leaders engage in what Snow *et al.* (1986) call the process of ‘frame alignment’; i.e. environmental groups tap into and manipulate existing public concerns and perceptions in order to broaden their appeal. E.g. choosing topics and organizing campaigns in areas that can lend to the widest public resonance while avoiding those which are more divisive.

Commanding attention is not, however, sufficient to get a new issue on the agenda for public debate. Rather, emergent environmental problems must be legitimated in multiple arenas – the media, government, science and the public.

One way to achieve this legitimacy is through the use of the rhetorical tactics and strategies such as ‘rhetoric of rectitude’ which justifies consideration of environmental problems on strictly moral grounds and rhetoric of rationality (i.e. values or morality require that a problem receive attention) and rhetoric of rationality which justifies the consideration of environmental problems on the basis that ratifying a claim will earn the audience some type of concrete benefits). The later had been used by environmental pragmatists, who advocate sundry versions of the ‘sustainable development’ paradigm; tend towards rhetoric of rationality. Green business, for example, is based on the premise that environmentalism can be both socially useful and profitable. This cleavage can be illustrated with reference to the loss of tropical rainforests in Brazil, Malaysia and Indonesia. Pragmatists argue that the loss of these rainforests is a serious problem because it leads to the extinction of rare indigenous insects, plants and animals that are invaluable to pharmaceutical companies as sources of new wonder drugs. Environmental purists, on the other hand, base their claims on a rhetoric that stresses the inherent spiritual value of these endangered habitats.

Environmental claims can also be legitimated when their sponsors become legitimate and authoritative sources of information.

Scientific findings and testimony by themselves are not always sufficient to push an environmental problem past the break point of legitimacy. To get wide coverage or concern, there should be a significant shift in media practices and public attention.

**5.3.3. *Contesting environmental claims***

Even if an emergent environmental claim manages to transcend the threshold of legitimacy,this does not automatically ensure that an ameliorative action will be taken. AsGould *et al*. (1993: 229) have noted, one can interpret environmental protection historyfrom the position that environmental movements have been far more successful in gettinglisted on the broad political agenda than in getting their policies within this agenda, especiallywhere these policies might require the reallocation of resources away from large scalecapital interests and state bureaucratic actors.

Solesbury (1976: 392–5) has noted a number of factors that can contribute to an issue being lost at the point of decision or action. Major external constraints such as the onset of a national economic crisis may lead to a problem being postponed, then altogether abandoned. A problem may be transformed into a less threatening political issue. Opponents within government bureaucracies may use a number of tactics – postponing discussion, referring an item back for further research or amendment – which ensure that a problem will not immediately be acted upon.

As a consequence, invoking action on an environmental claim requires an ongoing contestation by claims-makers seeking to effect legal and political change. While scientific support and media attention continue to constitute an important part of the claim package, the problem is principally contested within the arena of politics. Contesting an environmental problem within the political policy stream is a fine art, given the cross pressures which legislators face.

Environmental entrepreneurs must skillfully guide their proposals through a log jam of vested and often conflicting political interest groups, each of which is capable of stalling or sinking the proposals. As Walker has noted:

Public [environmental] policies seldom result from a rational process in which problems are precisely identified and then carefully matched with optimal solutions. Most policies emerge haltingly and piecemeal from a complicated series of bargains and compromises that reflect the biases, goals and enhancement needs of established agencies, professional communities and ambitious political entrepreneurs.

Kingdon (1984) observes that policy proposals that survive in this political jungle usually satisfy several basic criteria.

First, legislators must be convinced that a proposal is technically feasible; that is, if enacted, the idea will work. On top of that, a proposal must at least initially appear to be scientifically sound and politically administrable.

Second, a proposal that survives in the political community must be compatible with the values of policy-makers. Since most bureaucrats and politicians do not hold ecocentric views, this means that solutions which reflect the New Ecological Paradigm are not likely to get very far unless there is a generally perceived crisis. Instead, environmental solutions that appear, on the surface, to be neutral stand a better chance of being accepted than those that seem ideologically tinged. Furthermore, problems that are framed in utilitarian terms often go further than those that are not. This means that arguments made with financial expediency in mind – figures and statistics translated into ‘bottom-line’ dollars (pounds/ euros) – are more likely to resonate than those that are presented solely on the basis of moral justifications.

Thus successfully contesting an environmental claim in the political arena requires a unique blend of knowledge, timing and luck. This process is often event-driven with a disaster such as the Three Mile Island nuclear accident opening up ‘political windows’ that would otherwise remain closed. This is not to say that agenda setting and legislative action are totally random but that the process is highly contingent upon a number of internal and external factors, many of which are not linked to the obvious merits of the case.

*Table 2* Key tasks in constructing environmental problems

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Tasks | | |
| *Assembling Presenting Contesting* | | |
| *Primary activities* | - discovering the problem  - naming the problem  - determining the basis of  the claim   * establishing parameters | * commanding attention * legitimating the claim | - invoking action  - mobilising support |
| Central forum | Science | Media | Politics |
| Predominant layer of proof | Scientefic | Moral | Legal |
| *Predominant*  *scientific role(s)* | trend spotter | communicator | applied policy analyst |
| *Potential pitfalls* | * lack of clarity * ambiguity * conflicting scientific evidence | * low visibility * declining novelty | * co-optation * issue fatigue * countervailing claims |
| *Strategies for success* | * creating an experiential focus * streamlining knowledge claims * scientific division of labour | * linkage to popular issues and causes * use of dramatic verbal and visual imagery * rhetorical tactics and strategies | * networking * developing technical   expertise   * opening policy windows |

* 1. **Audiences for environmental claims**

In addition to the **skills of claims-makers** and the **severity of the underlying condition (the claim itself)** ,the success of a putative environmental claim may also be tied to **the magnitude of audiences** that are mobilised around that claim. That is, a groundswell of support by audience notonly **marks the rising of a problem** but also can constitute a **valuable resource in the effort to capture political attention.** The tide of public opinion can push a claim upwards on to the policy agenda, sometimes in a dramatic fashion. Of course, not all environmental claims succeed in raising the red flag for concerned audiences. Some claims are perceived as being too extreme, too misanthropic or too complex. Some fail because the requisite preventive or mitigative response mandates too great a lifestyle sacrifice.

In considering why some environmental claims capture the public eye and others do not, it may be helpful to look to the field of advertising research. In a large-scale comparative study in the 1990s which examined the attitudes of 30,000 consumers in 21 countries, the New York advertising agency Young & Rubicon came up with a **marketing model, the ‘Brand Asset Valuator’,** which isolates four key factors that predict **how well a specific product will do in the marketplace**: uniqueness, relevance, stature and familiarity (Scotland1994).

In the case of environmental claims, **uniqueness** or ***distinctiveness***refers to the extent to which the public perceives a problem as separate from others of a similar nature. For example, acid rain claims-makers were successful in distinguishing this condition from the more inclusive category of air pollution. Rhetorical strategies are important here in **creating distinctive labels for emerging problems** as well as devising symbolic codes that can be attached to a claim in order to confer a **distinctive identity**.

***Relevance***refers to the degree to which a particular environmental problem matters to the ordinary citizen. This is not always easy to demonstrate, even when the problem is occurring in people’s own backyards. It is especially difficult in the case of global environmental problems which have their origins far away in distant parts of the world. Thus extended drought conditions in the poor African nations are of little relevance in the Southwestern United States, yet regional water shortages which require that local citizen’s stop watering their lawns and filling their swimming pools are quite meaningful.

***Stature*** denotes how highly a consumer thinks and feels about a particular brand. In the case of the environment, this refers to the attitudes of the public towards the place or people or species under threat. It is no accident that the wildlife protection movement first mobilised in the nineteenth century over the danger posed to our much-loved songbirds by hunters and by the millinery trade. Similarly, national parks and monuments – Yellowstone Park in the United States, the Lake District in Britain, Great Barrier Reef in Australia – have considerable symbolic stature which comes into play if these places are imperilled. By contrast, low-income black and Hispanic communities in the American South that face serious threats from toxic polluters have long been accorded low stature, especially by middle-class audiences.

Finally, ***familiarity*** refers to how well-known a particular problem is to an audience. The media play an especially important role here in educating us about environments, species or places that may have been beyond our realm of personal experience. For example, in 1992 it was announced that scientists in Central Vietnam had discovered the *sao la*, a goat-like mammal previously unknown to the outside world. Almost overnight, the *sao la* became a media superstar as a result of a media frenzy whipped up by scientists, environmentalists and the press. Celebrated on the pages of *National Geographic* and *People* magazines, it became ‘the zoological equivalent of finding a new planet’ (Shenon 1994). In some cases, environmental activists may undertake collective action in order to familiarise audiences with a claim. For example, the clear-cutting practices in the old growth forests in British Columbi became widely known in Europe and America, in part because of the extensive media coverage of protests by environmental activists on the logging roads and on the steps of the provincial legislature. Rather than enhancing the stature of a claim, however, familiarity may ultimately produce **issue fatigue** on the part of the general public, especially if new developments are not forthcoming. This is the case even if a problem is both distinctive and relevant. Indeed, audiences have an inherent sense of fair play that dictates that activities such as unrelenting ‘polluter bashing’ are unacceptable, even if the criticism is well deserved.

Successful environmental claims, then, must possess elements of **vitality and stature** that ensure that they will not perish in a sea of disinterest or irrelevance.

* 1. **Necessary factors for the successful construction of an environmental problem**

It is possible to identify six factors that are necessary for the successful construction of an environmental problem. These are as follows.

First, an environmental problem must have **scientific authority for and validation of its claims.** Science may well be an ‘unreliable friend’ to the environmental movement as Yearley (1992) has suggested, but nevertheless it is virtually impossible for an environmental condition to be successfully transformed into a problem without a confirming body of data which comes from the physical or life sciences. This is especially so with the newer global environmental problems, whose very existence hinges on a novel scientific construction.

Second, it is crucial to have one or more **scientific ‘popularisers’** who can transform what would otherwise remain a fascinating but esoteric piece of research into a proactive environmental claim. In some cases, the popularisers may themselves be employed as scientists; in others they are activist authors whose knowledge of science comes secondhand. Whatever their background, these popularisers assume the role of entrepreneurs, reframing and packaging claims so that they appeal to editors, journalists, political leaders and other opinion-makers.

Third, a prospective environmental problem must receive **media attention** in which the relevant claim is ‘framed’ as both real and important. This has been the case for most contemporary problems, for example, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, rainforest destruction, global warming. By contrast, other significant environmental problems fail to make the public agenda because they are not considered **especially newsworthy**.

Fourth, a potential environmental problem must be **dramatised in highly symbolic and visual terms.** Ozone depletion was not a candidate for widespread public concern until the decline in concentration was graphically depicted as a hole over the Antarctic. The wanton practices of the major forestry companies only became a matter for international outrage when Greenpeace and other environmental groups began to exhibit dramatic photographs of the ‘clear-cuts’ on Vancouver Island while labelling the area the ‘Brazil of the North’. Images such as this provide a kind of cognitive short cut compressing a complex argument into one that is easily comprehensible and ethically stimulating.

Fifth, there must be **visible economic incentives for taking action** on an environmental problem. For example, the case for acting boldly to stop biodiversity loss was levered on the argument that the tropical rainforests contained an untapped wealth of pharmaceuticals that would disappear forever if nothing was done. At the same time, environmental claims that carry positive, economic incentives for one group may also involve costs for others, thus provoking sharp opposition.

Finally, for a prospective environmental problem to be fully and successfully contested, there should be an **institutional sponsor who can ensure both legitimacy and continuity**. This is especially important once a problem has made the policy agenda and legislation is sought. Internationally, this can be seen in the important role played by agencies and NGOs associated with the United Nations.

***Necessary factors for the successful construction of an***

***environmental problem***

• Scientific authority for and validation of claims

• Existence of ‘popularisers’ who can bridge environmentalism and science

• Media attention in which the problem is ‘framed’ as novel and important

• Dramatisation of the problem in symbolic and visual terms

• Economic incentives for taking positive action

• Recruitment of an institutional sponsor who can ensure both legitimacy and

continuity

1. Knowledge that depends more on keen observation and common sense than on professional techniques. It is accumulated within local grassroots networks by breathing air, drinking water, tilling soil, harvesting forest produce and fishing rivers, lakes and oceans. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)