Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-018-0484-7

Environmental engagement in troubled times: a manifesto

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Abstract
These are troubled times: our scholarly efforts in environmental studies and sciences seem under assault on all fronts. Yet we argue not just for environmental action, but for greater emphasis on environmental engagement as a foundation for effective action. The etymology of engagement suggests connection, commitment, and communication—a risky yet indispensable ingredient of effective action. We exemplify this approach to environmental engagement in four contexts of increasing scope: within our environmental studies and sciences community, across the college campus, among our fellow Americans, and at the global scale. In all such contexts, engagement is no end-run around conflict; it is political just like any form of action. Yet by engaging, we can be the environmental leadership that is so plainly missing and desperately needed to produce meaningful change.

Keywords Engagement · Activism · Politics · Environmental studies and sciences · Higher education · United States · Globalism

Beyond activism alone

For scholars in environmental studies and sciences (ESS), there may never have been more troubled times. Our research-based efforts connecting human and nonhuman flourishing seem under assault on all fronts—certainly in the current US and global political climate.

What is to be done? The answer is, certainly, action; but what sort of action shall we take? What policies shall we fight to enhance, preserve, prevent, or overturn? We appreciate the activist desire to fight in these troubled times, but we worry that, on its own, this approach to action may disconnect us from the very world we wish to heal. Our manifesto recommends an alternative to activism alone.

We support *engagement* as a framework for action in these times. Without a spirit of engagement, action is incomplete and arguably ineffective, as it may ignore a larger circle of needs and feed the flames of resentment burning all around us. Environmental activism may feel good but alienate those we need to bring on board, accomplishing exactly the opposite of what activists intend. Action with engagement is action with others in mind, not just those with whom we agree.

Let us remember that many people share our broad love of environment but have decidedly different priorities. Some will support political leaders whose views we do not hold, or continue to distrust scientific consensus around issues such as climate change. The very identity some in the ESS community cherish as environmentalists may strike others as alien, even toxic. Without engaging across these differences, we may not appreciate that others are as confused and angry as we are, and we may fail to envision a scope of action that includes, not excludes, them.

Indeed, approaching action as "us vs. them" ignores our internal diversity in the ESS community as well. We are by no means of one mind in these times: as one of many examples, public intellectuals vary widely in their recommendations for climate change action (Nisbet 2014). Some urge immediate, radical actions to solve environmental problems, while others offer cautionary, pragmatic alternatives. Some call ourselves environmentalists; others feel on the margins of environmentalism, at least as practiced by major

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Published online: 19 March 2018

environmental organizations. These differences are real, and avoiding them may convey similarly shortsighted consequences. Engaging across difference begins with our own ESS community—mindful that "our own community" may be shorthand for a set of shared assumptions constantly under challenge, as they should be—then reaches out to those with whom we share this world.

Defining engagement

Engagement often means little more than taking action—see, for instance, how civic engagement is typically defined. Yet the etymology of engagement, dating from the early seventeenth century, suggests a much richer meaning. We all know its common use in the context of intimate relationships: here, engagement is "The fact of being engaged to be married; betrothal" (OED Online 2017). Engagement is etymologically associated with a variety of notions, not all romantic: attachment, entanglement, even the clashing of swords.

One way to summarize this rich history involves three Cs: connection, commitment, and communication. *Connection* is key to engagement, as one always engages *with* someone or something else. *Commitment* is key to many historical uses of engagement (including but not limited to marital engagement), and may be especially important in the troubled times we face today. In this sense, engagement is never a one-off action; it is always an enduring process of attachment. Finally, *communication*, in the broadest sense, conveys the give-and-take in committed connections, such that engagement means to listen as well as to speak.

Environmental action via connection/commitment/communication is potentially riskier, yet more rewarding, than action without engagement. It reaches out across the boundaries that divide us, promises to do so as long as it can, and while there it listens as well as speaks. Engaged action is relationship work, focusing as much on process as outcome, yet ultimately supporting more lasting results. It may at times achieve agreement, though typically not; indeed, its larger hope may be in civil *disagreement*—a vast gain over the level of incivility we see around us today.

Given the current political moment, where a siege mentality claims resistance to be the highest priority, our call for engagement across difference may strike readers as pedestrian or insufficient. Quite the contrary, engagement as defined above requires difficult, disciplined conversations and no small measure of strategic imagination. In essence, we see power as the ability to act in concert with others—via dynamic engagement vs. static consensus (Arendt 1970; cf. Partzsch 2017)—rather than the capacity to resist the will of our opponents so often assumed in activism.

Four expanding circles

How shall we, as scholars in environmental studies and sciences, practice engagement? We offer four examples, ordered by increasing scope.

Engagement among ourselves in the ESS community

We all participate in, and care deeply about, the field of environmental studies and sciences (ESS). This does not mean that we assume the ESS community is of one mind: the ESS academic community has always been characterized by epistemological, theoretical, and practical diversity (Chapman 2007; Clark et al. 2011a, b; Proctor et al. 2015). ESS scholars have struggled to define the core concepts and competencies of our field, and have been forthcoming with critical self-assessments of the state of ESS (Soulé and Press 1998; Cooke and Vermaire 2015; Kennedy and Ho 2015; Vincent et al. 2015). While ESS scholars have presented compelling ideas for theoretical grounding of ESS (Chapman 2007; Vincent and Focht 2010; Maniates 2013; Proctor et al. 2013; Proctor 2015b; Robbins and Moore 2015), the ESS community has not thus far agreed on a comprehensive set of program characteristics. On the contrary, ESS programs have responded to these challenges with a diverse array of programmatic designs that utilize unique combinations of resources and strategies (Maniates and Whissel 2000; Romero and Silveri 2006).

We have also observed these differences in action on the Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences email list.[1] For example, post-election 2016, members of the ESS community were divided on the very question of whether engagement should be a primary strategy to advance a broadly pro-environmental agenda. Some tended toward appearing impartial in our work, and others wanted to set ourselves strongly in opposition to the Trump administration. As the group is officially non-partisan, they have grappled with how to present political controversy in a minimally biased, non-offputting way, while at the same time acknowledging that the current administration is particularly hostile towards environmental protection. Some list members even argued that ESS scholars should stay out of politics entirely. Truly, our political leanings are a contentious part of our identity, and the ESS email list's internal conversations suggest that engagement within our relatively homogenous community may be more challenging than previously thought.

If there is a need for us to model engagement across difference, perhaps our first step is to do it among ourselves. And where we do discover points of agreement, we can strive to

[1] See aessonline.org/aess-listserv. Please contact the authors for further information on this analysis.

imagine other points of view not necessarily represented among those in our small circle. This could involve discussions around ideological self-assessments, connecting demographic, attitudinal, and other similarities or differences among ourselves to implications for environmental policy and action. The Ecotypes online assessment (Proctor 2017) is one tool that can help us explore these differences in the ESS classroom.[2] The Ecotypes survey allows users to assess themselves on various dimensions of environmental thought, which can produce more nuanced understanding of environmental perspectives. These conversations ideally will scale up beyond our classrooms, but practicing this discourse in our own community is a critical step towards engaging the wider community.

Engagement on the college campus

The imperative for environmental engagement across difference mirrors a larger challenge we have experienced on our campuses. As evidenced in coverage among major news sources, higher education institutions have struggled in recent years with charges that they are bastions of privilege and exclusivity, failing to accommodate ideological and socioeconomic diversity. Conservatives mount increasingly strident attacks on higher education for its alleged liberal bias, as shown in anger over the shutting down of conservative speakers on campuses and in the introduction of legislation to force colleges to hire equal numbers of liberal and conservative faculty. Our efforts to value diversity across a range of difference are admirable, but if done without attention to civil engagement, they may reproduce what others deride as a fractious identity politics and may miss entire sectors of the US society.

Although higher education institutions tend to be liberal, insular, and self-selecting for shared values, they possess features that make them promising laboratories for experiments in productive engagement across differences. They are centered around learning and discussion, are populated by students discovering who they are and what they think, and have a general mission to work for the betterment of the broader community. In the wake of the 2016 election, institutions as diverse as Cal State-Monterey Bay and Hampshire College have experimented with new ways of promoting civil engagement across differences, as detailed in the spring/summer 2017 issue of *Diversity and Democracy* devoted to the challenge of promoting free and civil discourse. Higher education leaders across the country are realizing that we must better prepare students for democratic citizenship that centers on dialog (Weinberg 2017). Service learning and community-based research can be a particularly fruitful area for promoting collaboration, if done properly. Recent efforts to get students get out of the "bubble" and engage with community members to find solutions of mutual benefit are promising (New 2016).

The ESS community can and should play a role in promoting engagement across political and socioeconomic divides on college campuses. The focus in ESS on diverse problems that cross traditional boundaries opens up a wide array of opportunities for engagement. Deliberative forums and dialogs in which participants agree to certain ground rules can enable students to discover points of common ground while maintaining sharp differences. A dialog on climate change, for example, can be designed and conducted in ways that appeal to conservatives (Moeller 2017). Environmental justice (EJ) frameworks have proven appealing to many students while offering opportunities for new encounters between ESS students and students working on questions of diversity and race; like all approaches, however, the EJ frame can shut down engagement if it approaches justice, blame, and remedies in a manner that is not open. Fossil fuel divestment movements have become prominent on college campuses, but the ESS community needs to think carefully about how divestment may impact college affordability, while exploring how to include business students in the conversation about investments. Our challenge as ESS scholars is to examine how ESS can model for the rest of the institution what robust, respectful, and productive engagement—listening as well as speaking—looks like.

Engagement with our fellow Americans

In recent years, public attitudes about environment have become remarkably polarized and politicized, a disturbing departure from a long history of largely bipartisan support for environmental goals. Perhaps the most telling indicator of our current predicament is that the best predictor of one's views on climate change is political party affiliation (Kahan 2014; Cruz 2017). The challenge of engagement will be to find ways to break through the tribalism that characterizes public life in the modern era.

Engaging with our fellow citizens will mean more than "reaching out" to un-mobilized constituencies, in attempts to convert the unconverted. There is—and should always be—lively debate about our environmental objectives and how to achieve them. The challenge of engagement is how to understand environmental problems as opportunities to continue reweaving the social fabric and solve problems along the way. While the ideological underpinnings of these engagements are inescapable, they need not necessarily be the basis of departure. Opportunities are myriad to engage in ways that are not inherently confrontational. We can look for volunteer opportunities that shape emergent policies rather than protesting ones already formulated. We can get involved early in civic processes by volunteering for planning commissions, land trusts, and neighborhood associations. In these contexts, we

[2] See ds.lclark.edu/ecotypes.

may learn that our green sensibilities make deep engagement challenging. We often use our connection to scientific authority as a trump card, alienating those with different visions of what constitutes the common good. Armed with the facts, a strong sense of moral purpose, and profound urgency, we tend to be better preachers than listeners, empathic negotiators, and pragmatic problem-solvers (Chaloupka 2002).

A place to see the promise of an engagement approach might be our experience with natural resource collaborative groups (Brick et al. 2001; Weber 2003; Charnley et al. 2014). These groups are inherently local and idiosyncratic, sometimes organized by communities of place (e.g., watersheds), others by communities of interest. A defining feature of these groups is that they bring together opposing factions to seek common ground and establish a process of trust that addresses long-term management problems (Sheridan et al. 2014). There are hundreds of such groups, each with their unique successes and failures, but nonetheless, clear patterns and lessons emerge. First, engaging in these "coalitions of the unalike" is difficult and time-consuming work, yielding uncertain results. Yet collaborations can be quite successful when they focus on well-defined projects, starting small and doing more as trust deepens. Another pattern is that these groups often arrive not at compromises, but rather "third-way" solutions previously obscured by polarized positions.

A key challenge for many groups is to scale up local projects to the landscape level so that solutions match the scale of the problem. While consensus might be achieved on smaller projects, larger projects tend to attract a wider community of entrenched interests. At larger scales, it becomes harder to set aside the larger ideological implications of group decisions. This is where visionary leadership is essential, constantly pushing against what is widely accepted as possible.

Engagement toward a global cosmopolitics

Political polarization and ideological entrenchment are by no means unique to the USA in today's world, where inequality, nationalism, and discontent with democratic institutions are on the rise across a wide swath of countries (Foa and Mounk 2016; Rodrik 2017). These trends do not bode well for our collective ability to confront environmental problems with causes and implications that cross national borders—climate change and biodiversity most salient among them. Further, despite recognition of the global nature of our environmental condition since the emergence of the environmental movement in the late 1960s, American environmentalism and ESS programs may continue to overvalue the local and the recovery of a "sense of place" at the expense of attention to the global and to networks and processes of connection (Heise 2008; Proctor 2015a). Given that navigation of the complex planetary issues that stand before us will require broader engagement across time and space—within a wider circle of communities, institutions, and actors (human and nonhuman) and with greater appreciation for dynamism and change—what possibilities exist for engagement beyond the here and now?

One useful direction has long been provided by philosopher Peter Singer, who offers both conceptual justification and practical advice for engagement at the global scale (1972, 2002). Not only does moral obligation extend beyond the proximate, Singer has argued, but modern communication technologies enable us to better engage across distance and difference. Ursula Heise (2008) similarly endorses digital databases and imaging resources like Google Earth for the widely accessible view into distant locales and global connectivity that they provide. Ultimately, scholars who have remarked on the global environmental situation draw on what some call cosmopolitanism, a recognition of difference coupled with efforts toward securing our interdependence (Beck 2006, 2010), or what Isabelle Stengers (2010, 2011) and Bruno Latour call a cosmopolitics, by which the ultimate order of the universe connecting humans and nonhumans is "… something we will have to build, tooth and nail, together" (Latour 2004, 455; see also Latour 2015).

We and our students may engage in this global cosmopolitics in a variety of ways: there are already good opportunities on many campuses via study abroad programs and international scholarly exchange. Complementing these existing opportunities, digital media tools can help facilitate appreciation and engagement across space. Many dialogic platforms, for instance, model and foster connection and communication at a distance: take Narrative 4's remote story exchange,[3] developed in an effort to build "radical empathy" among communities around the world (Lovell 2014). Digital publications such as the open-access *Public Philosophy Journal* and Latour's AIME (An Inquiry into Modes of Existence) prioritize public-facing scholarship and collaboration, building more inclusive and empathetic forms of scholarly engagement.[4] Digital mapping technologies, GIS-based scenario planning, and interactive databases (sponsored by iNaturalist and the IUCN's #NatureForAll movement, for instance) allow users to connect with people, places, and species beyond their local environments and to envision alternative futures in the process (Villotti and Brethauer 2013).[5] Such tools and technologies bridge distance and difference without eliding them, providing geographically diverse students and public ongoing opportunities for the digitally mediated insight, exchange, and collaboration needed to build a more vibrant and equitable environmental future.

[3] See narrative4.com

[4] See publicphilosophyjournal.org; modesofexistence.org

[5] See www.inaturalist.org; www.natureforall.global

The challenge and the opportunity

The authors of this manifesto are not naive: if anything, the gritty reality as well as global necessity of a cosmopolitics propagates downward to engagement with our fellow Americans, on college campuses, and among ourselves in the ESS community. Engagement is not an end-run around conflict; engagement is a political act, just as all forms of action are political. Yet environmental engagement in these troubled times would remind us to connect, commit, and communicate as we take action. These are skills, and virtues, many of us ultimately support, and they are essential now perhaps more than ever, when this Earth we love needs us as much as we clearly need a vibrant, healthy Earth.

Engagement is needed in other contexts just now as well. At the time of this writing in early 2018, people of the USA are grappling again with how to come together to develop effective responses to school shootings, and are mired again in polarized debate and outbreaks of protests and shouting matches. Yes, battle-oriented activism may be necessary and useful; yet as one commentator on this latest tragedy of gun violence observed (Brooks 2018), "[t]here has to be trust and respect first" to sustain conversation toward solutions.

And the safety of American schools is but one of many flashpoints generating far more heat than light at present. This larger landscape of conflict leads another commentator to recommend that we not only "…hear our own voices, or the voices of those with whom we already agree [but] what other people, with other views, often anathema to ours, have to say" (Stephens 2018). Engagement, whether in the context of environmental well-being or a host of other current issues, may well be both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity of our times.

Let us, then, start by engaging with each other in the ESS community, then let us reach out on our campuses, across the country, and beyond. Engaging across these expanding and interconnected circles, we can be the environmental leadership that is so plainly missing and desperately needed to produce meaningful change.

Acknowledgements We wish to honor input and inspiration provided by our colleagues as part of ongoing face to face and digital conversations on engagement, and via a set of environmental engagement workshops and presentation panels held at the Association for Environmental Studies & Sciences Annual Conference, June 2017, University of Arizona. We also appreciate the helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers.

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