

Are social and environmental rights compatible? Young Researchers Debate - Arne Næss Symposium 2019

The following is the adapted debate transcript from the [2019 Arne Naess Symposium](#) Young Researchers Challenge. Inspired by the theme of the symposium: Have we lost the battle for social and environmental rights?, the [Arne Naess stipend](#) recipients developed a form of polemic on the compatibility of social and environmental rights. They debated in two teams, Erica Colman-Denstad and Kylie Wrigley for the motion. Guisela Camacho-Mejia and Cristiana Voinov against it. The debate was moderated by Nina Witoszek, the coordinator of the Arne Næss Programme on Global Justice and the Environment.



Erica Colman-Denstad, Cristiana Voinov, Guisela Carolina Camacho Mejia and Kylie Wrigley

Nina Witoszek:

It has been a tradition at the Arne Naess Symposium to invite young scholars to somehow address the theme of our event - and in this way to train them in the art of persuasion, polemics, and debate - without assassinating their opponent. You know as is the tradition or common practice in a huge country with which Norway has the northern border. We've chosen a novel format to debate our question today. The question: Is our social rights compatible with environmental rights? Are social rights compatible with environmental rights? That is the main question our debaters are going to address.

Now what is our inspiration? Our inspiration is novel because we decided to steal it from our British journalists. As we know the UK is the country of things splendid and not so splendid and they often start with a 'B'. For example, the Beatles, Brexit, Boris Johnson - Bonaparte as The Economist calls him - and the BBC. Now the BBC is the key, my dear friends. We've decided to use the BBC debate and/or Doha debate to pit against one another two teams. One is going to claim that social and environmental rights are *not* compatible with one another and this team is represented by the Peruvian Canadian Romanian party. The other team is going to

argue the opposite, that social and environmental rights *are* compatible. I would like to give the floor to you and good luck.

Guisela Camacho-Mejia:

I am here to argue that environmental rights and social rights are not compatible neither in practice nor theory. I am aware that such a premise might not be enthusiastically received by all of you. I even risk being called “an enemy of the people”. Nonetheless, the constraints of our legal, economic and social systems are too hard to ignore.

To begin with, the concept of environmental rights is, to say the least, misleading. Let me ask you. Who decides who has rights and to what extent? We do. In fact, the whole international rights system - which includes social and environmental rights - has as its very core the protection of human beings. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world is the recognition of the equal rights of all members of the human family.

In a normative system where people are the distributors and enforcers of rights, environmental rights are just an extension of social rights. They are the last normative tool designed to protect social interests and values. Such an anthropocentric system does not protect nature from human intervention. Moreover, the United Nations has not yet recognized the human right to a healthy environment at the global level. I challenge my opponents to find this right in the Stockholm Declaration, the Kyoto Protocol or the Paris Agreement. They can not.

Let me convince you with more examples. Starting with Norway, a country that leads the Human Development Index in almost every aspect: health, education and employment. However, this flourishing of social rights has kept pace with the growth of the oil and gas industry. Ask yourselves, would we be here without the support of the oil industry? I do not think so. This incompatibility is shown clearly in the existence of the Government Pension Fund.

Through the Oil Fund, the wellbeing and financial wealth of future Norwegian generations are not in the protection of nature, but in exploitation of nature. Although Norway’s trillion dollars fund aims to cut oil and gas investments, the Finance Minister has stated that oil will still be central to Norway’s economy. Thus, the satisfaction of social rights rests on an industry whose environmental impacts are mainly negative. So, even in Norway, social rights are prioritized over environmental rights.

Even in cases when environmental rights are prioritized, they come at the expense of social rights. Let us take a look at the international endeavour of creating natural protected areas. According to the UN, in 2018, there were more than 200,000 protected areas covering almost 15 percent of the land. However, since the 80s, scholars have questioned the paradigm of protecting nature as a pristine entity, because it has led to massive displacement of indigenous peoples, native peoples and peasant communities all around the globe.

In fact, multiple international agencies came to the conclusion that people living in natural protected areas in countries such as India, China and Nigeria are materially worse off and impoverished by the introduction of conservation projects. This is because conservation projects restrict their entitlements and faculties for the disposition of natural resources with survival purposes. Furthermore, reports on 225 protected areas found that participation, decision making, transparency and mechanisms for dispute resolution scored particularly low in most of them.

In conclusion, environmental rights are mostly overrun by social rights, and even when environmental rights seem to be prioritized, they have negative impacts on the satisfaction of socio and economic rights of the most vulnerable groups. We have to face the truth - pursuing one set of rights always comes at the expense of the other.

Nina Witoszek

Thank you Guisela. Now arguing for the yes side - that is, yes social rights are compatible with environmental rights - we have Erica. Over to you Erica.

Erica Colman-Denstad

I will argue that social and environmental rights are compatible. They are compatible, but they are difficult to attain and uphold within a system that favors unsustainable progress and profit over justice. But this is also why they are necessary. I will demonstrate that social and environmental rights are contrasted not against each other, but against the mutual opponent of oppressive structures that force us to weigh short term gains for the few heavier than the long term interests of us all.

In a UN report on human rights and the environment, is stated that: “The full enjoyment of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food and water, depends on the services provided by ecosystems”, and that “the degradation and loss of biodiversity undermines the ability of human beings to enjoy their human rights”. Mass extinction and displacement resulting from climate change are obvious examples.

Guisela, your argument that communities within protected areas are worse off is misleading. While some parts of society might benefit from unsustainable extractive practices, degradation of ecosystems is likely to reinforce existing patterns of discrimination of the most vulnerable sectors of society. Development does not depend on this form of extraction. An example is “buen vivir”, “the good life movement” that started in South America. This movement is concerned with consuming less and developing a sense of the collective. It suggests a form of development that sees social, cultural, environmental and economic values as working together, as opposed to separately or in opposition to one another.

Arne Næss built his environmental philosophy on the foundation that all living beings have long-term interests in common. This is not merely a philosophical argument. People all over the world are recognizing not only the compatibility, but the dependence of humans on the rest of nature. A powerful example is the global phenomenon of climate change lawsuits initiated by people who recognize that the rights of future generations are being threatened by governments and businesses who are failing to protect them from climate change. Similarly, we are seeing an international movement of students participating in school strikes demanding action to prevent further global warming and climate change. The dependence of human communities on nature is by no means a new discovery, but it is a truth that is becoming increasingly important to explicitly acknowledge in the face of our current environmental crisis.

Humanity has progressed to the point where we have the power to determine not only how we live, but what lives. Philosopher Hans Jonas argues that because of this power, humans have obligations towards future generations and the biosphere. Don't forget Guisela, In many arenas, we have bestowed rights to both social and environmental systems and this demonstrates that there is a broad acceptance of these obligations. Our challenge is to enforce them against competing agendas. Although the needs of humans and those of the environment are one and the same, we live in a time where they are pitted against each other. Not for the benefit of

human flourishing, not for the benefit of nature's conservation, but for the benefit of the predatory systems we have heard about today.

In sum, social and environmental rights face common enemies: unless we challenge these enemies and pursue both sets of rights together, we will fail to achieve them both.

Nina Witoszek

Compelling arguments from both sides. Now speaking against the motion, against compatibility - how will Crissy win us over.

Cristiana Voinov

There is no such thing as compatibility between environmental and social rights. Erika acknowledges that the neoliberal growth system drives a wedge between social rights and any potential environmental right, but that doesn't neglect the fact that social rights are prioritized - at the expense of the environment. And there's no time left for that to change. Guisela addressed the legal and structural difficulties of social and environmental compatibility, and I am here to address the elephant in the room - us. Our biggest hurdle is human nature: we are selfish, inconsistent, competitive, and burnt-out -- That is why the tragedy of the commons is such an apt metaphor for our destroying the environment. Ibsen said it well: "when a man has interests of his own to protect, he cannot think of everything." This is not some dramatization of a general truth about ourselves - we are confronted daily with examples to support it. Take the Paris Agreement. The fate of the climate crisis relies on curbing the consumption of the world's biggest GHG emitters - China and the US - and yet they are too busy participating in a game of economic and political chicken to adhere to any climate agreement. Lest we forget, "TRUMP DIGS COAL". Europe isn't free from critique either. With the focus largely on an indefinite Brexit, and Boris Johnson's intention of turning the UK into a tax haven, it becomes hard to envision a UK that's anything more than, at best, apathetic about the environment.

Of course, we can't only blame our governments - we citizens know better, we agree that climate change is real. As long as we don't have to build the windmill in our own backyard. I get it, making changes is hard, especially changes that require reconfiguring deeply anchored cultural values. But a hypocrisy exists in this room of well-meaning people: What a privilege it is to have the option to skip school that provided to you for free, to have the option to justify each plane ride you've taken this year; yet most of us continue to talk about climate change solutions steeped in the familiar rhetoric technological innovation & growth.

In fact just last week I got back from Canada, the country I was raised in, where my home-province, Ontario, is debating changing its slogan from "Yours To Discover" to "Open for Business". At its current pace, it will take Canada two centuries to meet its Paris Agreement goal of a 30 percent reduction in emissions. This doesn't even factor in that oil and gas emissions are going up by [2 percent yearly](#). We are in a system where most of us have to make a profit to survive, and in doing so we are urged to ignore all the side-effects. We are not going to change in time because *this* is the value set we're working with - it's taken centuries to shape these values, and will take centuries more to reimagine them.

Even when we've, as Erika says, broadly accepted environmental rights through lawmaking, impact has been abysmal. In fact, [in a UN](#) report, released this year on worldwide environmental policy, 176 countries have environmental framework laws, 150 have a "right to a healthy environment" enshrined in their constitutions. Yet these laws are often *defied* for some other gain. In other words, there is little incentive, and no enforcement to adhere to so-

called rights of the environment. In 2017 Brazil's environmental ministers signed a "letter for the rights of nature" - it would seem like that hasn't worked out for them. The fact that the non-profit, ocean-policing Sea Shepherd exists is indicative of this paltry state of environmental protectionism. It's all fun and games until they sink your illegal fishing vessel; at least they're listening. Are we? Not really. The IPCC says we have 11 years to drastically lower emissions and prevent a climate catastrophe. In the words of #MeToo, time's up.

Nina Witoszek

Very convincing points but now the final word goes to the affirmative side. Hopefully they can give us something more optimistic.

Kylie Wrigley

Thankfully Crissy your time is up because the catastrophe I would like to overtake today is the depressing number of stories you and Guisela have told about failure and doom. Erica and I will have none of that. We are here to argue that there are cases where rights that defend the dignity of *both* humans and of nature are successfully being pursued together. And these demand your attention.

First of all: **#NotAllBusiness**.

There is a trend of corporations with a conscience working with civil society, self-enforcing rules and metrics to protect the environment and the well being of people at work. One particular form of this is the Benefit Corporation. Bcorps are required to change their legal statutes. They make it a legal requirement that managers, workers and suppliers work together to prioritise people and planet as well as - dare I say it - profit.

Another example is Mondragon in Spain, the world's biggest workers cooperative which is a highly successful example of *a caring* form of capitalism. By adopting a humanist business philosophy they ensure that people at work are empowered and have good and fairly distributed wages. They lead in adopting sustainable practices and are more competitive because of it, as they comply with international environmental certifications.

Yes, of course, while many CEOs may want to do the right thing - we all know they have competitors who do not. For some, 'the business of business will always be business'. Does this mean we are doomed - no! IT means there is work to do. If the rules of our financial and legal systems are not being respected then we should take after those who are changing the rules of the game. These systems are tools that *we* design to achieve the priorities of *our* choosing. They do not determine whether we win or lose the game. Only we can do that.

Yet my opponents have stressed the limitations of *any* idea that tries to make rights of the environment and people compatible. But they have offered us no hope and no way of 'thinking beautifully and no acting dutifully'.

So let me ask you - are *you* paying attention to what's working in your town? In my home state Western Australia, there is a just transition movement. It helps people in communities with a shrinking coal industry to learn new skills, with dignity, so that no one is left behind in the green jobs transition. There are Working on Country programs that empower Indigenous rangers to combine traditional knowledge with modern techniques to protect and care for the land and sea. These are delivering outstanding social, economic, cultural, and environmental outcomes.

Yes, these actions are small and local - and arguably that is why they work. Cumulatively they offer us scalable and far-reaching action towards environmental protection and social justice; partial solutions solve whole problems.

I argue this not as a starry-eyed optimist but as someone paying attention to the evidence. Let me bring some psychology into the room. The dominant framing of doomism that fosters a climate of anxiety and inaction, is a problem. Sure Crissy creates a sense of urgency, but it's one leads us down a road of insecurity and apathy, which she admits, perpetuates the problems we're talking about today. She also neglects the many examples where change can happen exponentially. Take the Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894, where it was predicted that London and New York would be nine feet deep in horse shit. But they solved that problem in 20 years. If we only have decade - game on.

To conclude, I argue that we study and support the stories that do work towards the achievement of social and environmental rights as one, we will get somewhere. These reinforce the *best* of human nature, including our universal values of dignity, collaboration, fairness and ambition. And it is these that will connect the dots that Eva speaks about. And it will make the seemingly incompatible become compatible.

Nina Witoszek

The debaters requested me to assure the audience that their arguments do not necessarily represent their own views. But now my dear friends we are almost at the finale of our symposium today but let me test the mood in the audience. Who is for the pessimist party? - Please raise your hands - the social and environmental rights are not compatible. They are in a minority. And who is for compatibility? The majority - oh you're so disgustingly politically correct! Okay since I am from Poland and I side with heroic losers I'm going to give a prize, the Arne Næss mini prize to the heroic losers. The very Arne Næss hat that was given to me by Kit-Fai Næss. This is the hat Arne wore in the film the Loop. I don't know if you have seen the film but it's worth seeing, definitely. I hope to see you next year at an even more splendid and provocative event. Thank you.