

LINDA HESS  
SYLVIA MAYER  
KATJA SARKOWSKY  
CHRISTOPH STRAUB  
Editors

# Environmental Citizenship

Politics, Practices,  
Representations

VOLUME 26



PUBLICATIONS OF THE BAVARIAN ACADEMY

Universitätsverlag  
WINTER  
Heidelberg



PUBLIKATIONEN  
DER BAYERISCHEN AMERIKA-AKADEMIE  
Band 26

PUBLICATIONS  
OF THE BAVARIAN AMERICAN ACADEMY  
Volume 26

---

SERIES EDITOR  
Bavarian American Academy



#### NOTE ON THE EDITORS

Linda Hess is senior lecturer in American Studies  
at the University of Augsburg and a member of the Bavarian American Academy.

Sylvia Mayer is professor and chair of American Studies/  
Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bayreuth  
and a member of the Bavarian American Academy.

Katja Sarkowsky is professor and chair of American Studies  
at the University of Augsburg and deputy director of the Bavarian American Academy.

Christoph Straub is managing director of the Bavarian American Academy.

# Environmental Citizenship

Politics, Practices, Representations

Edited by

LINDA HESS

SYLVIA MAYER

KATJA SARKOWSKY

CHRISTOPH STRAUB

Universitätsverlag  
WINTER  
Heidelberg

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation  
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;  
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet  
über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Cover picture:

©NASA Earth Observatory, astronaut photograph ISS067-E-175591, July 4, 2022

The photo depicts the Colorado River, which has obtained “legal personhood”  
status by the Colorado River Indian Tribes in November 2025.

ISBN (Hardcover) 978-3-8253-9659-6

Der Verlag behält sich das Text- und Data-Mining nach § 44b UrhG vor,  
was hiermit Dritten ohne Zustimmung des Verlages untersagt ist.

Dieses Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede  
Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne  
Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Das gilt insbesondere für  
Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung  
und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

© 2026 Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg

Imprimé en Allemagne · Printed in Germany

Umschlaggestaltung: Klaus Brecht GmbH, Heidelberg

Gesamtherstellung: Memminger MedienCentrum, 87700 Memmingen

Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem  
und alterungsbeständigem Papier

Den Verlag erreichen Sie unter:

Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg

Dossenheimer Landstraße 13, D-69121 Heidelberg

[www.winter-verlag.de](http://www.winter-verlag.de)

[gpsr@winter-verlag.de](mailto:gpsr@winter-verlag.de)

ISBN (PDF): 978-3-8253-8733-4

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33675/2026-82538733>



Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer

Creative-Commons-Lizenz Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitungen

4.0 International Lizenz. Die Bedingungen der Creative-Commons-Lizenz gelten nur für  
Originalmaterial. Die Wiederverwendung von Material aus anderen Quellen  
(gekennzeichnet mit Quellenangabe) wie z.B. Schaubilder, Abbildungen, Fotos und  
Textauszüge erfordert ggf. weitere Nutzungsgenehmigungen durch den jeweiligen  
Rechteinhaber.

# Table of Contents

## Introduction

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Linda Hess, Sylvia Mayer, Katja Sarkowsky, and Christoph Straub</i><br>Environmental Citizenship: Politics, Practices, Representations .....                                                                     | 1   |
| <i>Rebecca Tsosie</i><br>Rethinking Reconciliation: Land-Based Citizenship and Indigenous Futures ....                                                                                                              | 15  |
| <i>Joshua Trey Barnett</i><br>Thinking Like and Caring for a Land Community .....                                                                                                                                   | 43  |
| <i>Jens Soentgen</i><br>Civil Liberties – Not Just for People: A Dialogue between the Political<br>Concepts of the Romantic Thinker Adam Müller (1809) and Ideas of<br>Legal Scholar Christopher Stone (1972) ..... | 57  |
| <i>Andrew Wildermuth</i><br>Foraging, Forging, Forgoing – or, Thoreau as Settler Disaster in the Age of<br>Walker and Apess.....                                                                                    | 69  |
| <i>Axelle Germanaz and Sarah Marak</i><br>Bad Environmental Citizens? Tracing the Limits of (State-Sanctioned)<br>Environmental Citizenship .....                                                                   | 85  |
| <i>Simone M. Müller</i><br>Global Environmental Citizenship and its Limits: On US Hazardous Waste<br>and the Universalists’ Struggle of Framing Environmental Protection,<br>1988-1992.....                         | 113 |
| <i>Linda Hess</i><br>Satirizing the Eco-Citizen: <i>My Days of Dark Green Euphoria</i> .....                                                                                                                        | 131 |
| <i>Isabel Kalous</i><br>“Stop Having Kids”!? Climate Change, Reproductive Decisions, and the<br>Resurgence of Antinatalism .....                                                                                    | 149 |

|                                                     |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Judith Rauscher</i>                              |     |
| Affective Practices of Ecological Citizenship ..... | 167 |
| <i>Jouni Häkli</i>                                  |     |
| Environmental Citizenship Beyond Posthumanism ..... | 175 |
| <i>Heike Paul</i>                                   |     |
| Resisting the Romance of Extraction .....           | 183 |
| Notes on Contributors .....                         | 189 |

# Environmental Citizenship Beyond Posthumanism

*Jouni Häkli*

The major environmental crises of our time, including climate change and biodiversity loss, have created a growing demand for responsible agency and thus placed environmental citizenship firmly on the political agenda (Wood and Kallio). While there has been a tendency in policy circles to ‘overinvest’ in the potential of civic environmentalism, a growing body of posthumanist scholarship is pessimistic about the possibilities for human agency to bring about change toward a more sustainable future (e.g., Latta; Pellegrino). In this position paper, I critically assess both tendencies, with a particular focus on the issues raised by attempts to imagine posthumanist alternatives to citizenship as human agency. I understand environmental citizenship as a form of human political engagement with the rest of nature, aimed at overcoming or mitigating the many serious problems that humans have caused to ecosystems globally. I conclude by arguing that rather than seeking to move beyond the human as the ground of responsible agency, we should continue to work toward a full understanding of the particularity of the human relationship to the environment that being human entails. Drawing on Helmuth Plessner’s philosophical anthropology, I further argue that this relationship is profoundly ethical and moral precisely because of how humans are positioned as part of nature.

In the context of policymaking, environmental citizenship is a concept that encompasses a range of human attributes such as skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and beliefs that are needed to address environmental problems, as well as all the competencies needed for civic engagement and active participation in societies. The way the term is typically defined and used reflects the high expectations policy makers in many countries have of environmental citizenship in solving and preventing environmental problems, achieving sustainability, and restoring relationships with nature (Hadjichambis et al.). Understood in this way, environmental citizenship is based on the idea that people are capable of learning and acquiring skills that will enable them to act in a pro-environmental manner as ‘agents of change,’ to understand the urgency of current socio-environmental issues, and to recognize the need to participate actively in the civic and social arena as responsible consumers and political actors (Gabrielson).

Given the complexity of contemporary environmental problems, achieving these goals may seem unrealistic. It is not surprising, therefore, that several critical observations have been made as to why expectations of environmental citizenship may be excessive. A key question in this regard is the role that individual agency, such as informed consumption, should play in solving environmental problems. While individual actions and choices can certainly contribute to environmental

sustainability, the impact of individual actions alone is limited in addressing complex, large-scale environmental problems (Wood and Kallio). Environmental problems are often deeply rooted in social, economic, and political structures and therefore require systemic changes, such as policy reforms, technological advances, and corporate accountability. If environmental citizenship focuses primarily on individual action and behavior change, it will not adequately address the systemic challenges and structural inequalities that contribute to environmental degradation (Pallett). Without addressing these underlying factors through systemic change and collective efforts to bring about significant environmental transformations, the impact of individual actions may be severely limited.

Another critical issue is the multifaceted, multiscalar, and interconnected nature of environmental problems. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss, among others, are interlinked challenges that call for comprehensive strategies that bring together multiple stakeholders, including governments, businesses, and civil society (Gabrielsson). In this context, the practice of environmental citizenship is challenged by existing social and spatial inequalities that condition individual and collective opportunities to engage in environmental initiatives. Not everyone has equal access to resources, information, or the ability to make sustainable choices. In addition, marginalized communities bear a disproportionate burden of environmental problems, but may have limited capacity or resources to actively engage in environmental citizenship practices (Dobson).

In light of these critical observations, it is clear that environmental citizenship is a highly contested concept, encompassing a wide range of interpretations and meanings that intersect with multiple social, economic, and political concerns (Pallett). Not only are there different interpretations of what it means, but it is also a battleground for competing priorities (e.g., growth vs. conservation), power dynamics (e.g., Global North vs. Global South perspectives), and culturally and historically embedded norms (e.g., western vs. indigenous value systems) (Swaffield and Bell; Castro; Bell). Overall, the contested nature of environmental citizenship reflects the complexity and multidimensionality of environmental issues, as well as the diverse perspectives, interests, and values involved in shaping environmental policies and practices. As such, the existing critique that policymakers are 'overinvesting' in environmental citizenship seems well founded (Viherälä).

However, for scholars interested in exploring alternative ethical and philosophical perspectives, most notably posthumanism, this critique does not go far enough. Posthumanist thought has emerged as a broad philosophical framework that challenges traditional human-centered perspectives and aims to decenter humans from their privileged position in the world (Häkli). It encourages a shift toward recognizing the interconnectedness and equal value of all forms of life, including non-human entities and the environment. To this end, new materialist posthumanism argues that humans are not the only agents in shaping the environment, and that non-human entities such as animals, ecosystems, technology, and even material objects play a significant role (e.g., Bennett; Braidotti). Therefore, humans should not see

themselves as the central or superior beings in the world (Büscher). Instead, humans need to recognize and respect the intrinsic value and agency of non-human entities, including animals, plants, ecosystems, and even artificial intelligence.

In addition, posthumanist thought critiques the anthropocentric perspective that prioritizes human interests and well-being over the environment and non-human beings. It calls for moving beyond a human-centered view and recognizing the intrinsic value of non-human entities. This shift in perspective challenges traditional notions of environmental citizenship and raises moral and ethical questions about the treatment of non-human entities and the responsibilities humans have toward them (Cudworth and Hobden). By challenging hierarchical and exploitative relationships between humans and the environment, posthumanism advocates more equitable and sustainable approaches and a more inclusive consideration of non-human interests and flourishing.

Posthumanism also recognizes the complexity and uncertainty of environmental systems, acknowledging the multiple interactions and feedback loops that shape environmental processes. By questioning the boundaries between humans and the environment, posthumanist thought highlights the complex and interdependent relationships between humans and ecological systems. A key element it questions is agency, which posthumanism suggests is not solely attributed to humans, but is distributed across different human and non-human actors, such as technology, networks, and institutions (Grusin). This challenges the conventional understanding of human agency as the primary driver of environmental citizenship. Instead, it calls for recognition of the agency of non-human actors and their influence on environmental outcomes.

By introducing these ideas, posthumanist thinking has sought ways to rethink and reconceptualize environmental citizenship in new ways. It has promoted a shift toward holistic and collaborative approaches that consider the agency of both human and non-human actors in shaping environmental futures. However, in moving beyond the human to emphasize the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities, posthumanist thought encounters difficulties as a philosophical basis for environmental citizenship (Schmidt 2017).

One reason for this is that by moving away from the notion of intentional human agency, new materialist posthumanism compromises the idea of human responsibility and key role in addressing environmental problems. While the idea of distributed agency and the interconnectedness of beings can highlight the collective nature of environmental problems, it does not provide a clear framework for human accountability and responsibility (Häkli). Acts of environmental citizenship often involve understanding one's impact on the environment and taking individual or collective action, which is difficult to reconcile with posthumanist notions of distributed agency (Malm).

The blurring of boundaries between humans and non-human entities also makes it difficult to define who or what can be considered an environmental citizen. Posthumanism advocates the granting of agency and rights to non-human entities,

but it cannot account for how these entities might genuinely participate in political deliberations about environmental citizenship. Thus, moving beyond human exceptionalism in understanding and addressing environmental issues fails to translate into ethical and practical guidelines for environmental citizenship as the enactment of rights and responsibilities (Rekret).

While new materialist posthumanism offers valuable insights for rethinking our relationship to the environment, it has not offered a plausible understanding of moral responsibility that can reconcile the interconnectedness and distributed nature of agency. Instead, the posthumanist notion of distributed agency risks diluting or even undermining the idea of moral responsibility (Boysen). When agency is distributed among multiple actors, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who should be held accountable for particular actions or their consequences. The diffusion of agency leads to the diffusion of responsibility, making it difficult to establish a stable notion of accountability (Häkli). Diffused among different entities, the responsibility and ethical significance of outcomes can no longer be attributed to human choices.

Moreover, when agency is no longer limited to human beings alone, questions arise about the moral standing and rights of non-human entities. Determining the moral obligations and responsibilities of these entities becomes complex because there is no conceivable framework or basis for moral judgment. This downplays the role of intentionality in moral responsibility and conscious intentions in evaluating moral actions (Malm). When agency is distributed among various actors, the question of intentionality becomes convoluted because it is difficult to attribute intentions to non-human entities and to assess their moral culpability accordingly.

Overall, while the posthumanist notion of distributed agency offers important insights into the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, it poses significant challenges to moral responsibility. It risks diluting individual responsibility, diminishing human agency, and complicating the attribution of moral rights and duties (Schmidt 2013). From the perspective of environmental citizenship, posthumanism risks divesting individuals of their ethical obligations to the environment and their motivation to act on that basis.

It is important to recognize that the posthumanist critique contributes to an ongoing discussion about our relationship with the environment. However, while new materialist posthumanism opens valuable perspectives for expanding our understanding of the environment, it offers limited practical guidance for addressing concrete environmental problems. Human agency remains crucial for implementing practical solutions, such as policy changes, technological advances, and behavioral changes. Therefore, dismissing human agency and environmental citizenship as unproductive oversimplifies the complex dynamics involved and may hinder effective responses to environmental challenges (Boysen). A more productive approach may be to refrain from presenting posthumanism as a one-off ontological position and instead integrate some of its insights into existing frameworks (Büscher). Taking the limitations of posthumanist thought seriously could help

broaden our understanding of environmental citizenship, while still acknowledging the importance of human responsibility and action.

In this spirit, I conclude by discussing how the philosophical anthropology of German philosopher Helmuth Plessner addresses the place of humans in the rest of nature, and what potential his thought has for understanding environmental citizenship that is at once responsible and non-anthropocentric. Plessner was a trained zoologist and philosopher who worked to develop an account of human life grounded in the material world of nature. For him humans are unique beings who are both part of and distinct from the natural world. Plessner describes humans as “eccentric” beings, meaning that they are not only part of nature, but also destined to reflect on their own existence and the world around them. His concept of “eccentric positionality” refers to the idea that humans are positioned not only within their bodies, but also in relation to their environment.

Existing at the intersection of nature and culture, humans are part of both natural and cultural systems with profound implications for the ecosystems we inhabit. First, the human body is inextricably linked to the environment, and therefore human well-being is fully dependent on the natural world. Second, unlike animals, humans are “naturally artificial,” meaning that, in the absence of an ecological niche, humans are constitutively homeless (*konstitutiv heimatlos*) and therefore naturally inclined to create artificial environments (Plessner). These are the natural environments of humans.

Because of their uniquely eccentric position, humans have a responsibility to engage ethically with their environment (Plessner). As both natural and reflective beings, humans have the capacity to become aware of the impacts of human-made systems on the natural world and the limits of the Earth’s capacity to absorb human impacts. Understanding and respecting these limits is essential for fostering responsible practices and a sustainable relationship with the environment.

I argue that the philosophical insights of Helmuth Plessner provide a foundation for understanding the nuanced and complex relationship between humans and their environment. In Plessner’s view, humans have a responsibility to care for the environment, and this responsibility is rooted in our unique position as both natural and reflective beings (Plessner). Applying these insights to the concept of environmental citizenship can help us move beyond the impasse of both individualistic consumerism and the posthuman dilution of human moral agency. Instead, it can cultivate a more robust sense of responsibility, ethical engagement, and a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of human well-being and the health of the planet.

## Works Cited

- Bell, Derek. "Environmental Citizenship: De-Politicizing or Re-Politicizing Environmental Politics?" *Routledge Handbook of Global Environmental Politics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Ed. Paul Harris. Routledge, 2022. 389-401.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Boysen, Benjamin. "The Embarrassment of Being Human: A Critique of New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology." *Orbis Litterarum* 73.3 (2018): 225-42.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
- Büscher, Bram. "The Nonhuman Turn: Critical Reflections on Alienation, Entanglement and Nature Under Capitalism." *Dialogues in Human Geography* 12.1 (2022): 54-73.
- Castro, Fabio de. "Multi-Scale Environmental Citizenship." *Environment and Citizenship in Latin America: Natures, Subjects and Struggles*. Ed. Alex Latta and Hannah Wittman. Berghahn Books, 2012. 39-58.
- Cudworth, Erika, and Stephen Hobden. "Complexity, Ecologism, and Posthuman Politics." *Review of International Studies* 39.3 (2013): 643-64.
- Dobson, Andrew. *Citizenship and the Environment*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Gabrielson, Teena. "Green Citizenship: a Review and Critique." *Citizenship Studies* 12.4 (2008): 429-46.
- Grusin, Richard. *The Nonhuman Turn*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Hadjichambis, Andreas Ch., Demetra Paraskeva-Hadjichambi, Eleni Sinakou, Anastasia Adamou, and Yiannis Georgiou. "Green Cities for Environmental Citizenship: A Systematic Literature Review of Empirical Research from 31 Green Cities of the World." *Sustainability* 14.23 (2022): 16223. <doi.org/10.3390/su142316223>.
- Häkli, Jouni. "The Subject of Citizenship: Can there be a Posthuman Civil Society?" *Political Geography* 67 (2018): 166-75.
- Latta, Alex. "Matter, Politics and the Sacred: Insurgent Ecologies of Citizenship." *Cultural Geographies* 21.3 (2014): 323-41.
- Malm, Andreas. *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*. Verso, 2018.
- Pallett, Helen. "Environmental Citizenship." *International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology*. Ed. Douglas Richardson, Noel Castree, Michael Goodchild, Audrey Kobayashi, Weidong Liu, and Richard Marston. Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. 1-10.
- Pellegrino, Gianfranco. "Politics in the Anthropocene: Non-Human Citizenship and the Grand Domestication." *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia Politica* 3 (2022): 131-60.
- Plessner, Helmuth. *Levels of Organic Life and the Human: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*. Fordham University Press, 2019 [1928].

- Rekret, Paul. "A Critique of New Materialism: Ethics and Ontology." *Subjectivity* 9.3 (2016): 225-45.
- Schmidt, Jessica. "The Empirical Falsity of the Human Subject: New Materialism, Climate Change and the Shared Critique of Artifice." *Resilience* 1.3 (2013): 174-92.
- . "The Excesses of Posthumanism: Some Reflections on 'Thinking' as Capacity." *Posthuman Dialogues in International Relations*. Ed. Erika Cudworth, Stephen Hobden, and Emilian Kavalski. Routledge, 2017. 255-76.
- Swaffield, Joanne, and Derek Bell. "Can 'Climate Champions' Save the Planet? A Critical Reflection on Neoliberal Social Change." *Environmental Politics* 21.2 (2012): 248-67.
- Vihersalo, Mirja. "Climate Citizenship in the European Union: Environmental Citizenship as an Analytical Concept." *Environmental Politics* 26.2 (2017): 343-60.
- Wood, Bronwyn Elisabeth, and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio. "Green Citizenship: Towards Spatial and Lived Perspectives." *Routledge Companion to Environmental Planning*. Ed. Simin Davoudi, Iain White, Hilda Blanco, and Richard Cowell. Routledge, 2020. 171-80.