Embracing the chaos: by transcending disciplinary boundaries researchers can reconceptualise human-nature relations

Issues of the scale of mass species extinctions or climate change are never going to be solved by a single discipline acting alone. ***Cecily Maller*** *argues that what is needed is greater dialogue, conversation, and collaboration across the social and natural sciences, as they currently exist in their traditional, divided modes. In order to shift the binary, at times reductionist categories that characterise western thinking, research, and policymaking, existing disciplinary boundaries must be challenged and reworked. This may occasionally get a little messy. But we shouldn't be afraid of a little chaos.*

Globally, species extinctions and habitat loss are occurring on an unprecedented scale due to the now irreversible onslaught of climate change, urbanisation and a growing human population. The struggle to come to grips with the causes and at times deadly consequences of these changes, such as the emergence of new pathogens, inescapably invokes a desire to want to "do" something, and do it urgently.

However, in her recent lecture "How can the social sciences and humanities respond to the Trumpocene?", Lesley Head argues that in the face of "profound and unwanted" challenges arising from climate change, we must overcome the overwhelming desire to "do something". Instead, now more than ever, there is an urgent need to think.

There is, no doubt, a potentially endless list of the many things we must think about regarding these challenges; however, what is argued by Head (and many others, including Donna Haraway and Andrew Pickering) is that above all we must recast and reconceptualise human-nature relations as currently conceived in the majority of westernised thought. In the words of late ecofeminist and philosopher, Val Plumwood (2009, p. 128) thinking differently about humans and nature is nothing short of "a basic survival project". I couldn't agree more.

Sometimes things might get messy. But we shouldn't be afraid of a little chaos. In order to shift the binary, at times reductionist categories characterising western thinking, research, and policymaking, existing disciplinary boundaries must be challenged, provoked, and reworked.

Reflecting on the growing interest in inter- and cross-disciplinarity, Head observes the "natural" sciences are turning their attention towards people, while the social sciences are more thoroughly and consistently exploring "nature". In other words, disciplines like ecology and conservation science have recognised that people and communities are essential to species and habitat protection, while in the social sciences there has been a resurgent (re)turn to the sociality of matter and non-humans such as animals, plants, and microbes. Because crossing disciplinary boundaries is relatively new, "scholars are still groping with the implications of these findings and new perspectives" (Head 2016, p. 70).

Issues of the scale of mass species extinctions or climate change are never going to be solved by a single discipline acting alone. Rather, what is needed is greater dialogue, conversation, and collaboration across, amongst, and between the social and natural sciences, as they currently exist in their traditional, divided modes. Although much valuable knowledge has been produced by the academy through intense, detailed, disciplinary-specific research, it is time to step back from intense scrutiny of the parts to view, and think about, the wider whole. What is required is nothing short of a paradigm shift.

Part of the rationale for zooming out from single disciplinary foci is the increasing recognition that "unprecedented things" (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 4) are happening to the bodies of humans and other species. Think of stem cell research, the increasing pervasiveness of artificial intelligence and automation, or pandemics such as H1N1 influenza caused by viruses crossing species divides.

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One starting point might be to reframe problems using thinking from a range of disciplines, and experiment with new methods and approaches that decentre or unsettle traditional scientific knowledge. For example, new research could clearly and deliberately be situated at the interface of the social and ecological sciences, such as the Australian Government's Clean Air and Urban Landscapes Hub.

Funded under the National Environmental Science Programme, the mission of the CAUL Hub consortium is to take an interdisciplinary view of the sustainability and liveability of urban environments and connect scientists, policymakers, industry, and citizens. A diverse team across four universities (the University of Melbourne, RMIT University, University of Wollongong, and the University of Western Australia) includes experts on air quality, urban ecology, planning, design, public health, and social science. These researchers are working together on a series of applied research projects to share thinking, skills, and knowledge in an integrated way. For example, studying the Social and Biodiversity Benefits of Urban Greening. A key part of the Hub is the Indigenous Engagement Program and researchers work closely with an Indigenous Advisory Group as well as research knowledge-translation experts to share the outcomes of their research with policymakers and the broader community. The idea of the Hub and related projects is to reframe problems and break down silos that often hold back or thwart innovative thinking and to emphasise knowledge brokering and sharing with diverse stakeholders, through policies such as open access publishing.

These types of initiatives are urgently needed to help shift current disciplinary-bounded thinking about human-nature relations towards more transformative, or even revolutionary, paradigms. Haraway argues in her lecture titled "Capitalocene, Anthropocene, Chthulucene" that such "intellectual revolutions" are already happening.

In this context, *People and Nature*, a new open access journal published by the British Ecological Society, has arisen from recognition of the pressing need for research that is not only innovative and brings together thinking from different disciplines to understand human-nature relations in light of current global challenges, but also boldly experiments with cutting-edge ideas that transcend disciplinary and policy boundaries. This may, for example, involve contributions from work that brings together ecology with the arts and humanities, as is illustrated by a new lecture series by the Australian Museum, or the innovative collaborations being encouraged by the Centre for Humans and Nature.

Supporting a paradigm shift across multiple disciplines simultaneously and facilitating the dissemination, sharing, and transfer of new knowledge more systematically to those within and outside of the academy will be of immense value in addressing some of the urgent issues facing our planet.

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People and Nature is a new, broad-scope, open access journal, published by the British Ecological Society, featuring work from across research areas exploring relationships between humans and nature.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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