



ACCESS

Environmental Social Science

What is it &
why do we need it?

Reference

This slide deck is based on the following ACCESS report:

- Gatersleben, B., Warren, G. W., Marselle, M., Marshall, H., Brockett, B.F. T., O'Brien, L., Seymour, V., Jones, C.R., Gilbert, N., Exadaktylos, T., Hadfield, A., Christie, I., Torres Contreras, G.A., Sovacool, B., Williams, S., Cardinal, I., Mitchell, C., Williams, C. & Lorentzon, A. (2024). *Environmental Social Science: What is it and why do we need it?* University of Surrey, doi.org/10.15126/901271.

ACCESS aims to champion and coordinate environmental social science in the UK in interdisciplinary research, training and policy and practice to help address key environmental challenges spanning biodiversity, sustainability and decarbonisation.

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Who these slides are for and why



Who is this slide deck for?

These slides are for anyone with an interest in understanding and tackling people-environment relationships and environmental problems.

This includes those working as, or with, environmental social scientists in academia, policy and practice and scientists, knowledge brokers and policy makers and practitioners wishing to explicitly consider people-environment relationships in their work.

The slide deck can be used by anyone wishing to explore, explain and champion the value of ESS in interdisciplinary research, policy and practice.

Why these slides may be useful

Environmental problems are deeply rooted in social structures, but the importance of ESS is not always clearly valued or understood.

- It is sometimes dismissed as common sense.
- It can be carried out by those without proper training and is often under resourced.
- It is often limited to studying how end users respond after the problems are defined or solutions have been designed.
- It can be based on outdated models such as the knowledge-deficit model, which assumes that people (simply) lack the knowledge to “do the right thing”.
- There can be limited understanding of the array of methods and knowledge critical to understand environmental issues and support successful delivery of policy and practice.

Contents

These slides addresses four questions and point to further resources on why, when and how to engage ESS in interdisciplinary research and policy & practice.



What is environmental social science?



Who does environmental social science?



Why engage with environmental social science?



When to engage with environmental social science?

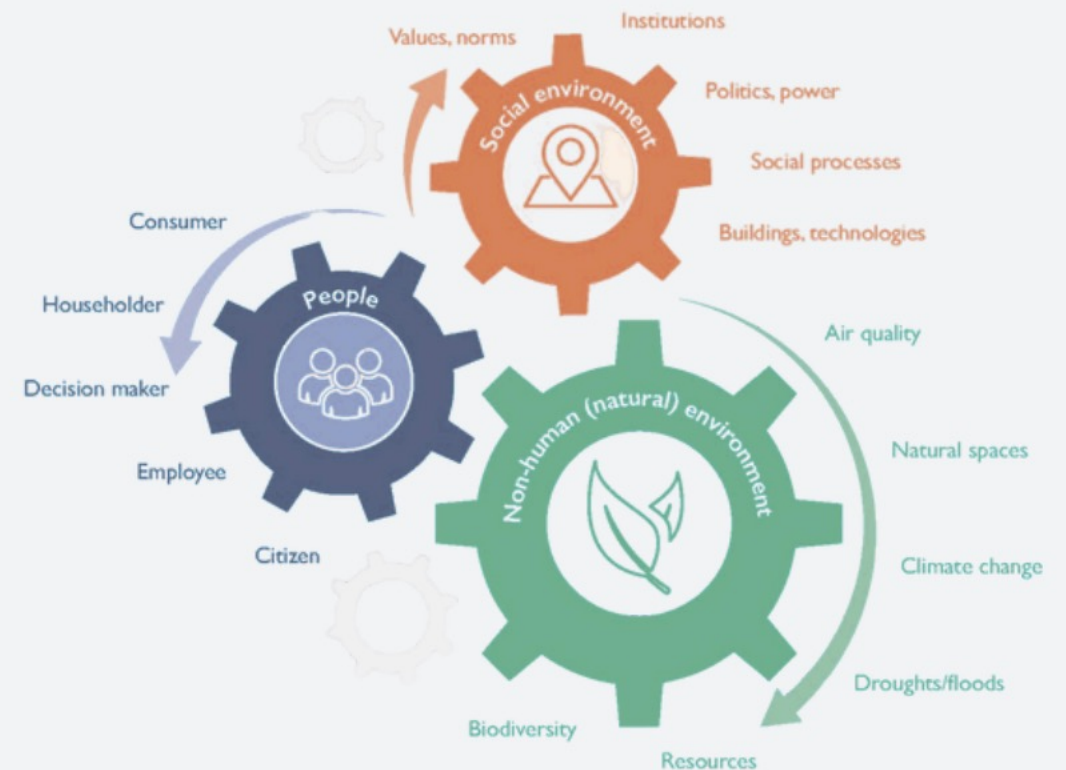
I. What is environmental social science?



What is environmental social science?

Environmental Social Science (ESS) is the (systematic) study of the interrelationship between three dynamic components:

- **1. People** – their actions, thoughts and experiences as householders, employees, decision makers, consumers, citizens, etc.
- **2. The social environment** – including social norms, values, cultures, institutions, political systems, social processes, structures and technologies.
- **3. The natural (non-human) environment** – including natural resources (e.g., energy, water), climate, biodiversity, environmental processes and problems (e.g., air pollution, floods, droughts).



2. Who does environmental social science?



Who does environmental social science?

Environmental social scientists can be found in a range of classic and applied social science disciplines as well as consultancy, policy and practice

- They can be trained in a range of classic social science disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics), applied disciplines (e.g., education, marketing) and interdisciplinary fields (e.g., human ecology).
- In policy and practice researchers may describe themselves as social scientist, social researcher, behavioural scientist or social data analyst, rather than a subdiscipline.
- Applied, interdisciplinary working and knowledge exchange are key.



3. Why engage with ESS?



Why engage with environmental social science?

ESS produces a wide range of methods and knowledge to help solve problems, understand human-environment interactions and provide novel innovative solutions.

Practical insights

Provide practical science-based answers to specific problems

- Develop and test co-production, public engagement methods,
- communication or behaviour change interventions,
- evaluation methods or tools to assess social impacts.
- Provide bespoke social science research training.

Diagnosis & evaluation

Study past, present relationships to forecast and advise

- Analyse the (social) processes that drive human behaviour and decisions,
- where change is most needed, acceptable, likely, and effective,
- social barriers, power relations, bottlenecks and opportunities for change in social systems.

Critique & innovation

Novel, critical perspective for fair and sustainable futures

- Challenge existing ways of working and thinking, highlight issues around fairness, equality, political pressure, norms, and cultures.
- Design collaborative, reflective research processes to stimulate novel ideas and make different voices heard.

Examples of practical instrumental insights

- **The power of social norms**

- A large number of (field) experimental studies has shown that providing people with information about what other people do (normative feedback) can have a greater impact on the uptake of behaviours such as [towel reuse in hotels](#), [home electricity use](#), [uptake of heat pumps](#), and [littering](#) than explaining to people why this is a good thing to do.

- **Complexity evaluation**

- The social world is a complex system and the potential impact of policies can be difficult to evaluate. [The Complexity Evaluation Framework](#) (CEF) developed for the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) by The Centre for the Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus ([CECAN](#)) enables policy makers and analysts to navigate this complexity through iterative policy design, application and evaluation.

Examples of diagnosis and evaluation

- **Climate and Social Transformation**

- The Centre for Climate and Social Transformation ([CAST](#)) conducted extensive research into the social dimensions of climate change in the UK, concluding that people are generally supportive of significant lifestyle changes. However, low carbon choices must be practical, convenient, cheap and socially acceptable. A set of key recommendations for policy and businesses outline how to deliver effective climate policy and change consumer behaviour.

- **Nature and wellbeing**

- Growing evidence shows that contact with natural environments support greater wellbeing and care for nature (e.g., [ECEHH](#)). Such work has informed the management and protection of natural features and landscapes for wellbeing ([NatureScot](#); [The Wildlife Trusts](#); [National Parks England](#)).



Examples of critical and innovative knowledge

- **Prosperity without growth**

- Critical analyses of dominant models of economic prosperity show that these models are not sustainable. Alternative perspectives that benefit people and the planet, have been provided by scholars such as Kate Raworth ([Doughnut Economics](#)) and [Tim Jackson \(Prosperity without growth\)](#).

- **Environmental justice**

- Environmental justice research highlights the unequal distribution of environmental costs across the globe. Environmental disasters and implementation of (often essential) renewable energy technologies can have disproportionately negative impacts on those most vulnerable. Taking justice considerations into account changes perspectives on [safe and just planetary boundaries](#).

4. When to engage with ESS?



When to engage with environmental social scientists?

Social scientist have knowledge and skills that can benefit projects at all stages.

Example ESS contributions	Programme stage
Recognise and describe social actors and processes relevant to all aspects of the problem and stages of program, even if it is not initially defined as a social issue.	Framing goals & setting targets
Assess the quantity and quality of relevant existing social science evidence.	Propose evidence-based questions or solutions
Design appropriate methods and materials to capture reliable social science data in an ethically appropriate way and ensure that the right voices are being heard.	Design new research
Tailor and translate findings and recommendations to different audiences and groups. Engage with audiences to understand perceptions and support.	Communicate ideas and finding
Support critical reflection of social, normative and cultural biases affecting engagement processes and decisions made along the way.	<i>Throughout the process</i>

Conclusion

Environmental social sciences are central to understand the origins and potential solutions of environmental problems and support the transition to a more sustainable future.

Involving environmental social scientists at different stages in environmental research, policy and practice is essential to ensure that:

- the right questions are asked
- the right people are involved
- in right way

when developing, testing and implementing potential solutions and the pathways to reach them.





Further information and resources

- This work is based on the following ACCESS report (please use to cite the slide show):
 - Gatersleben, B, et al. (2024). *Environmental Social Science:What is it and why do we need it?* ACCESS, University of Surrey, doi.org/10.15126/901271.
- Other relevant ACCESS reports
 - Gatersleben, B., Warren, G. W., Seymour, V., Marshall, H., & Contreras, G. A. T. (2024). What is Environmental Social Science? ACCESS Interview Report, University of Surrey, doi.org/10.15126/900949.
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 - Warren, G. W., Marshall, H., Seymour, V., & Gatersleben, B. (2024). Working with other disciplines and stakeholders: Annotated Bibliography, ACCESS, University of Surrey.
- More information about ACCESS: www.accessnetwork.uk