

Unpacking Representations of ‘The Environment’ in Local Government Environmental Discourses

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Exploring Environmental Discourses

Discourses of ‘nature’ enable and constrain opportunities for people, groups, non-human entities, ecosystems, and relationships through their meanings, associated practices and structural manifestations. While considerable academic and practical attention has been directed towards the role of local government in environmental governance (Dunn, 2010; Thomas, 2010), relatively limited attention has been directed towards how nature is represented in local government planning. Our research explores environmental discourses of local councils situated in the Merri Creek catchment in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia, a settler-colonial country.

Discourses Shape Relationships

Discourses involve ways of understanding and communicating about the world, and include their own ‘argumentative rationality’ (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005, p. 176). They generate meanings that shape social and physical phenomena, relations and practices; and are reinforced in social structures (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). Discourse analysis considers the entities that are acknowledged and those that are absent, how entities are characterised and understood, and the relationships between things. Discourses are dynamic, imbued with cultural and social assumptions that reflect power and accepted ways of knowing (Buijs *et al.*, 2012). It is useful to appreciate the diversity of environmental discourses because they are enlisted in ways that frame environmental issues and either promote or marginalise perspectives and environmental concerns, and influence action. |

Local Government has Increasing Environmental Responsibilities

Many different actors have authority over spaces in the local context. Local governments, established through Acts of Parliament by state governments, deliver services at the local scale (Harding, Hendriks and Faruqi, 2009). Local government is the lowest tier of government (Henderson, 2018a). Since the 1980s, local government has increasing responsibilities and expectations regarding environmental management and sustainable development (Thomas, 2010).

Central to literature on local government in Australia are tensions in: meeting legislative and policy directions of higher tiers of government; responding to local community needs; allocating limited resources; being reliant on higher levels of government for service provision; being dependent on the aspirations and capabilities of council and the bureaucracy as the representative and administrative

arms of local government; and responding to local environmental and socio-economic conditions (Thomas, 2010; Henderson, 2018a, 2018b).

Environmental governance involves a range of environmental discourses and approaches. Each shift in governing the 'urban environment' brings tensions such as preferences over land use, the inequitable distribution of healthy and safe environments, the species and systems that are recognised or denied in process, the knowledges that are legitimised and foregrounded, and the need for democratic decision-making (Cooke, 2020).

Exploring Environmental Discourses in Council Plans

Newly elected Victorian local governments are required to develop a four-year strategic Council Plan under the *Local Government Act (2020)*. These plans are the highest-level and broadest strategic council document, with which all other council policies, strategies and plans align. These plans provide an opportunity to explore environmental discourses in context. We ask - situated in the Merri Creek catchment - what are the distinct and overlapping characteristics of environmental discourses within Council Plans, and what opportunities do they present towards more ecologically centred and democratic representations?

We analysed the plans using Dryzek's (2013) approach focussing on: basic entities, assumptions about natural relationships, agents and their motives and key metaphors and other rhetorical devices. Key classifications are shown in Figure 1. We identified the dominant environmental discourses in each plan and their internal tensions, and the alignments and divergences across the plans.

	Reformist	Radical
Prosaic	Problem solving	Limits and survival
Imaginative	Sustainability	Green radicalism

Figure 1. Classifying environmental discourses (Dryzek 2013)

Dominant Discourses and Openings Towards More Progressive Statements

The dominant environmental discourses represented in the plans are 'reformist'. They include a commitment to growth and represent the environment as separate, segmented and subordinate to people. The most prominent environmental discourse is 'sustainable development', which is expressed through narratives linking to global issues, progressive approaches to city management, concern for social justice, and a humanistic consideration of a diverse population.

There are divergences that indicate opportunities for more ecologically-centred and democratic representations and relationships including:

- Recognition of Country and First Nations Peoples
- Appreciation of the fundamental importance and capacities of communities
- More inclusive, comprehensive and responsible relationships with nature

Extending representations of the environment to involve additional entities and approaches of care, custodianship and protection need to be met with a commensurate response including aligning laws, policies, strategies, programs, services, funding and review mechanisms. Councils can take innovative action within the context of their responsibilities, skills, networks and resources.

Further, structural change is required if councils embrace their more progressive statements in relation to recognition of the environment, First Nations Peoples and Country, and communities. Creating structural change, within a system that perpetuates dominant discourses, presents significant challenges.

Insight into Underlying Assumptions about Relationships in Nature

In our research we analyse the Council Plans of six local councils in greater Melbourne, Victoria. Using discourse analysis, we identify the dominant environmental discourses that are inherent in each plan, and the stable core across the plans. The discourses presented are largely reformist. However, there are distinctions including framings of relationships with the environment, First Nations Peoples and Country, and communities. We argue that interrogating policy discourses provides critical insights into representations of underlying assumptions about relationships between people and with nature.

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