

Caring for Climate Change: Reconfiguring Human-Nature Relations in Light of the Australian Black Summer

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Climate Change, biodiversity loss, and pandemics – in the light of global environmental crises, a shift toward more sustainable forms of social organisation seems more urgent than ever. In spite of mounting disasters, however, fundamental societal transformation is slow to materialise, and climate action is increasingly subject to the culture wars. Traditionally, climate political delays were attributed primarily to lack of information. However, with the expansion of scientific knowledge, demonstrated, for instance, by the comprehensive assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, resistance is growing, as well. Climate denial is thereby becoming more subtle: rather than denying the facts or rejecting climate protections outright, information is often downplayed and measures delayed. Climate action can therefore no longer be viewed as a purely technical and scientific problem, but must take into account the societal barriers to transformation, as well. This is where my work comes in, examining the cultural dimension of socio-ecological transformations. What role do world views, values and emotions play for environmental orientations? And what challenges arise when translating those orientations into social contexts?

My dissertation explores these questions in the context of the Australian bushfires of 2019-20, known as 'Black Summer'. Australia is a paradigmatic case for the climate paradox of Western societies: the country is both a driver of the fossil fuel economy that drives climate disasters such as wildfires, and extremely vulnerable to its effects. Although fire is an important ecological agent in many Australian ecosystems, climate change increases the scale, size, and intensity of forest fires, with devastating consequences for people and the environment. 'Black Summer' was globally perceived as a harbinger of the climate catastrophe and therefore offers a key moment for examining how affected communities renegotiate nature-society relations in the face of such crises. In a one-year field study in southeast Australia, I conducted interviews and ethnographic research with ecologists, activists, farmers, fire managers, and other land users in bushfire-affected communities. I examined how caring orientations toward the environment came to be shaped, and what conflicts people faced when trying to translate them into given social contexts.

These conflicts, around issues including land use, fire management, threatened species conservation and lifestyles, I analysed through the lens of feminist 'care theory'. This perspective allows to understand sustainability as successful care in human-nature relationships, and obstacles to socio-ecological transformation as 'conflicts of care' in those relations. Such conflicts may take many forms, from cultural disputes, over political struggles, to moral dilemmas and dealing with uncertainties and difficult feelings. Overall, the results of my research show that climate inaction is often not due to a lack of awareness, but rather based on conflicting needs, values, norms, emotions, and identities. My work thus makes an important contribution to understanding the societal barriers to socio-ecological transformation and has important implications for policy and practice: If climate action is considered as a duty of care for humans, animals, and nature, aspects like climate justice, conflict resolution, and participation must be prioritised alongside techno-scientific measures in sustainability transformations.