

# "Chicken wars", water fights, and other contested ecologies along the rural-urban interface in California's Sierra Nevada foothills

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## Abstract

The regional political ecology approach entails attention to chains of explanation both up and down scale while acknowledging both the similarities and distinctiveness between and among local level patterns and processes. In this paper, I apply the regional political ecology approach to the study of the rural-urban interface. The rural-urban interface is the site of multi-dimensional (environmental, economic, sociocultural) change as shifts in landscapes and lifestyles iteratively influence land use/management and the cultural context of places in flux. In Calaveras County, California (USA), situated in the Sierra Nevada foothills, certain features of and activities on the landscape are being mobilized by a variety of actors, in different ways, and at cross-purposes. In two cases in particular, specific resources (water) and activities (backyard agriculture) became powerful symbolic figures in increasingly heated public policy debates revolving around the use and value of various landscapes in the area. Using mixed, though mainly ethnographic, methods, I examine these instances of environmental conflict, one revolving around a sheep ranch turned golf course and another focused on the proper place of chickens, along the rural-urban interface. After analyzing the processes of change driving these contested ecologies, I describe the challenges of negotiating what is "acceptable" in the context of place-based change and differently situated actors. I conclude by offering some comments on the difficulties of managing competing expectations of use and function in rural places and arguing the significance of pursuing a particularly *regional* political ecology.

**Keywords:** rural-urban interface; (regional) political ecology; land and environmental management; contested ecologies; environmental conflict.

## Résumé

L'approche pratiquée en écologie politique régionale implique de prêter attention aux explications en chaînes, à la fois en augmentant et en réduisant l'échelle d'analyse, tout en reconnaissant les similarités aussi bien que les différences entre et au sein des processus et pratiques locales. Dans cet article, j'applique l'approche pratiquée en écologie politique régionale à l'étude de l'interface entre zones rurales et zones urbaines. Cette interface est le lieu de changements multidimensionnels (environnementaux, économiques, socio-culturels) lorsque des variations dans les paysages et les modes de vies influencent de manière itérative la gestion/l'utilisation des terres et le contexte culturel de lieux en évolution. Dans le comté de Calaveras en Californie (USA), situé sur les contreforts de la Sierra Nevada, certaines caractéristiques du paysage, et certaines activités sur celui-ci, sont mobilisées par divers acteurs, de différentes manières, et avec des objectifs opposés. Dans deux cas en particulier, des ressources (l'eau) et des activités (la production agricole de jardin) spécifiques sont devenues de puissants symboles au sein de débats publics de plus en plus houleux en rapport avec l'utilisation et la valeur de différents paysages locaux. En utilisant des approches combinées, bien que majoritairement ethnographiques, j'analyse ces situations de conflits environnementaux, un en rapport avec un élevage ovin transformé en parcours de golf et un autre axé sur la place revenant aux poules, le long de l'interface entre zones rurales et zones urbaines. Après avoir analysé les processus de transformation à l'origine de ces écologies contestées, je décris les défis liés à la négociation de ce qui est "acceptable" dans le contexte de changements territoriaux et d'acteurs ayant des localisations variées. Je conclus en proposant des remarques sur la difficulté de gérer des attentes en concurrence relatives aux usages

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et aux fonctions des territoires ruraux et en plaidant pour l'importance de poursuivre une écologie politique qui soit particulièrement régionale.

**Mots clés:** interface rurale-urbain; écologie politique régionale; gestion territoriale et environnementale; écologies contestées; conflits environnementaux

## Resumen

La ecología política regional busca forjar cadenas explicativas que ligan escalas geográficas, reconociendo a la vez las diferencias y similitudes entre procesos locales. En este artículo utilizo la ecología política regional para estudiar el interfaz entre lo urbano y lo rural. El interfaz urbano-rural es sitio de cambios multidimensionales (ambientales, económicos, socioculturales), cuando paisajes y estilos de vida ejercen influencia de manera incremental sobre el uso de suelo y la cultura. En el Condado de Calaveras (USA), ubicado en las estribaciones de la Sierra Nevada, actividades en y usos del paisaje de varios actores están produciendo conflictos. En particular, el agua y la agricultura de traspatio se han convertido en figuras simbólicas poderosas en debates sobre política pública. Utilizando métodos mixtos y etnográficos, estudio dos conflictos ambientales que estallaron en el interfaz urbano-rural: uno sobre la conversión de un rancho de borregos a un campo de golf, y el otro enfocado a definir el lugar apropiado para la crianza doméstica de gallinas. Primero describo el proceso de cambio que está impulsando estos cambios. Después explico los retos de negociar "lo aceptable" en el contexto de los cambios y la diversidad de actores involucrados en el proceso. Concluyo ofreciendo comentarios sobre la dificultad de negociar entre distintas ideas del uso correcto del espacio rural, y argumento en favor de desarrollar una ecología política que es explícitamente regional.

**Palabras clave:** interfaz rural-urbano; ecología política regional; gestión de tierra y ambiente; ecologías peleadas; conflicto ambiental

## 1. A (regional) political ecology framework

Authors Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003), following Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) and Schminck and Wood (1987), suggest that political ecology should be used to explain how political and economic processes have led to the exploitation of natural resources. Blaikie and Brookfield's foundational work focuses on the role of land users (often marginalized peasants) and the interactions of processes operating at and across different scales, i.e., "chains of explanation" (1987). A plurality of factors influencing land degradation are considered as potential causal agents in land management outcomes (Peet and Watts 2004), including environmental conflicts and cultural clashes that have resulted in shifting patterns of resource access and use, which can significantly affect the biophysical environment (Gezon 2005). Specifically, political-environmental interactions create circumstances that can be both enabling (for those with/in power) and disabling (for marginalized groups/individuals) (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003).

It is this nexus of power and the social actors carrying it that ultimately decide who will have access to or control over and who will be excluded from access to or control over resources or other components of the environment...These power geometries shape the social and political configurations and...environments in which we live (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003: 911).<sup>2</sup>

As such, Peet and Watts argue that "the politics of ownership and control must be central to political ecology" (2004: 12).

While there was, at one time, much debate about the (appropriate, if any) distinction(s) between so-called First World and Third World political ecology (McCarthy 2002, McCarthy 2005, Neumann 2010, Robbins 2002, Walker 2003), 'First World' contexts have since been acknowledged as appropriate sites for political ecological research (Hurley and Halfacre 2011, Schroeder, Martin and Albert 2006, Walker and Fortmann 2003, Walker 2003). And, indeed, political ecology research has burgeoned in developed and

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Doreen Massey, the originator of the concept "power geometries", is not cited. See Massey (1994, 2005).

developing world contexts in rural and urban settings (Robbins 2011). However, in response to the (false) first/third world binary, scholars sought a middle way. Although first described by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), the concept of "regional" political ecology has since been further elaborated by a number of others (Black 1990, Neumann 2010, Walker 2003).

Walker (2003), for example, rather than advocating for First or Third World political ecologies, argues instead for reintegration of the region into analysis as an important meso-scale, which mediates between local and global processes. A regional perspective, while recognizing that the distinction between First and Third World is not steady, also acknowledges that the uniqueness of particular places and contexts remains. As such, Walker (2003) argues that a regional focus allows for recognition, analysis, and subsequent comparison of larger-scale processes.

Neumann (2010: 368) reminds us that Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) believed the adjective "regional" was important because it allows the scholar to "...take account of environmental variability and the spatial variations in resilience and sensitivity of the land." He and others argue that political ecologists focus on the historical and relational aspects of regions in order to build "a more universal and theoretically robust" regional political ecology which focuses on the "reproduction and transformation of society [as] inseparable from the transformation of nature within prevailing relations of power" (see also Black 1990, Neumann 2010: 372).

Walker (2003: 10) explains that much political ecology has maintained a very local focus, and often outside of formal institutions, "...including cultural and symbolic contests and everyday resistance within the household, the community and civil society." Walker, echoing Robbins (2002), encourages political ecologies, especially those undertaken in industrialized contexts, to recognize the formal institutions (the state) as "arenas of environmental contestation" (Walker 2003: 11). Walker argues that regional political ecologies can continue the long-standing tradition of studying local level processes "...while situating these dynamics within broader scales of regional (and global) processes" (2003: 7). He argues for a focus on *regional* political ecologies because the region, as a frame of analysis, allows for an examination of "both the commonalities and the equally important and interesting *distinctiveness* of environmental politics in the industrialized and non-industrialized worlds" (Walker 2003: 8; emphasis in original).

Thus, regional specificity is useful in two ways: first, by grounding one's findings and assertions in particular places and circumstances one can avoid overly broad generalizations; and, second, a regional approach helps to ground theorizing in a specific place while also drawing out the linkages and "chains of explanation" which help explain local circumstances and outcomes. As described in this Special Section, the prominence of the concept of region has ebbed and flowed and is still evolving. Specifically, while sometimes applied uncritically, the concept of region, especially in the context of political ecological analysis, "does work" and can serve as a functional framing piece to understand political and ecological processes occurring at multiple scales (McKinnon and Hiner 2016; Simon 2016; Walker 2016).

## 2. Considering rural places in flux

As evidenced by significant scholarship from geographers, sociologists, and planners, different actors can have different conceptions of the function and value of rural landscapes (see, for example: Cadieux and Hurley 2011, Cloke, Marsden and Mooney 2006, Gallent, Andersson and Bianconi 2006, Gosnell and Abrams 2011, Larsen and Hutton 2011, Lichter and Brown 2011, Pincetl 2006, Taylor 2011, Taylor and Hurley 2016, Travis 2007, Woods 2011). These differing definitions of rurality, conceptions of rural place, and contrasting environmental imaginaries impact on land use options and decisions, leading to *contested ecologies* (Hiner 2016), and cases of environmental conflict due to differing political ideologies and environmental imaginaries (Nesbitt and Weiner 2001, Peet and Watts 2004).

This paper discusses instances whereby differing political or ideological perspectives and/or environmental imaginaries play a role in a land use change. As described by Gosnell and Abrams (2011: 311):

The social identities of rural places become susceptible to redefinition as new social groups begin to occupy space once occupied by others. Changes in patterns of land development, use and habitation...serve to alter the socially constructed meaning of those spaces, rewriting the rules of what kinds of people, activities, and social relationships "belong."

This shift in "mentality", as one of my respondents called it, can lead to small and large misunderstandings between local actors in regards to the meaning and function of rural space (Hiner 2014).

For example, in Calaveras County, California (USA), certain features of and activities on the landscape were being mobilized by a variety of actors, in different ways, and at cross-purposes. Similarly, Sayre (2006) describes how the masked bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus ridgewayi*), a bird endemic to the Southwest (and Mexico), became a powerful symbolic pawn in the conflict over the utility and value of environmental conservation in the Southwest and the struggle to restore nature to a previous, 'original' state. Although Sayre argues this 'original' natural state does not actually exist, at least not in a static sense, the symbolism remains potent and instrumental in the land use policies and environmental governance of his study area in Arizona. In brief, the story he tells is one which features the "dialectic of nature produced and nature producing" (Sayre 2006: xvii-xviii).

In Calaveras County a similar scenario emerged revolving around the use and value of various landscapes along the rural-urban edge. To explore these conflicts and to try and explain them, I utilize two micro case studies, or 'vignettes'; one featuring a controversial land use shift from ranching to golf and another featuring a social conflict over the 'right to farm' in an exurban setting. Using Sayre's framework, and building upon the regional political ecology framework, I asked: What are the 'species of capital' at play in these cases? What objects, animals, elements, features are at play in the symbolic battle between interests in Calaveras County? Furthermore, what processes are driving the environmental conflicts occurring in places of change along the rural-urban edge?

These micro case studies serve as telling examples of how rural values can be contradictory, even while rural spaces are perceived as homogeneous (Hiner 2015). Furthermore, the vignettes highlight the impacts that ideological and place-based conflict can have on policy and land use. I describe the challenges of negotiating what is "acceptable" in the context of rural place-based change and conclude by 1) offering some comments on the difficulties of managing competing expectations of use and function in rural places in flux, and 2) arguing the significance of pursuing a particularly *regional* political ecology.

### 3. Methodology and approach

My project methodology has three main features: a regional political ecological framing, a 'phronetic' approach, and case-based methods. In addition to using a (regional) political ecology framework (as described above), I take an actor-oriented approach, which focuses on the interests and characteristics of different types of actors and seeks to understand "...conflicts (cooperation too) as an outcome of the interaction of different actors often pursuing quite distinctive aims and interests" while emphasizing the role of politics in political ecology (Bryant and Bailey 1997: 24). In addition, I adopt a "phronetic" research style, following Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) who advocates for value-rational scholarship that recognizes the positionality of both the researcher and researched and pushes for relevant and meaningful scholarship (see also Kondon, Pain and Kesby 2007). The main goal of research, according to Flyvbjerg (2001), should be to select research questions that are pertinent to "real world" problems and are of interest to the communities being studied such that research results, and indeed the process of research itself, become additive rather than extractive. This is a foundational element of political ecology research in general (Robbins 2011). The final element of this methodological trio is the case study approach, which allows for in-depth analysis of specific cases in order to move beyond the superficial elements of a particular circumstance and to delve into the particular relationships and causal links driving an issue (DeLyser et al. 2010, Patton 2002, Yin 2009).

For this study, I purposefully selected cases for comparison and analysis that demonstrated significantly divergent land use contexts and outcomes but were located within the same county to minimize variability in terms of administrative rules or proximity to major urban centers, thus aiming to control for

potentially interfering causal processes. This mixed method study involved in-depth interviews with key informants paired with a political-ideological survey (n=51), participant observation over more than six months, and analysis of public documents and local media coverage of the selected cases. By focusing on the political and planning processes occurring in given place at a given moment in time, my study investigates several examples of land use change as they are situated *in place* and *amid contestation* between various interest groups who have differing views and perspectives of landscape function and meaning.

#### 4. Site and situation: Calaveras County, California

Calaveras County is located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, occupying the lower level "foothill" zone of that range. The landscape is heterogeneous, both ecologically and socially. Ecologically, the environment of the place is characterized by its geographic spread from the hotter, flatter, lower-elevation San Joaquin Valley floor to the cooler, conifer forested, alpine reaches of the mountain range, with large swaths of rolling oak woodland (Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project 1996; Figure 1). Socioculturally, the county, and wider region, has undergone shifts in recent decades away from a strong and nearly complete emphasis on primary production and resource extraction to an economy that is more mixed, with a greater diversity of interests, backgrounds, and occupations among its residents (Beebe and Wheeler 2012, Chase 2015, Hiner 2014, Mintier & Associates, Environmental Science Associates and Calaveras County Community Development Agency 2008, Momsen 1996). Indeed, the Sierra Nevada is a place with a storied past, linked to multiple rounds of extraction (and associated environmental change) and population shifts related to regional, national, and global resource flows (Brechtin 2006, Duane 1999, Filan and Hiner in revision, Hiner and Filan in revision).

Calaveras County, much like Nevada County, also in the Sierra Nevada region, is at an "uneasy crossroads between 'traditional' natural resources-based production and 'new' economies and cultures of aesthetic landscape 'consumption'" (Walker and Fortmann 2003: 470). Examples of the kinds of shifts occurring in the area include long-standing ranches transitioning into vineyards and wine production, shifts from resource extraction activities to ones that focus on tourism and service provision to visitors and in-migrants, and ranching operations and leases being neglected in favor of more amenity-focused, recreational activities such as golf (Hiner 2016). The population of the county increased 135.5% between 1970 and 1990, and 42.4% from 1990 to 2010 and is currently hovering around 45,000 residents (Census Bureau 2010, Forstall 1995). In short, Calaveras County is still quite rural according to conventional descriptions, such as population, housing density, and the prevalence of undeveloped land (Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008, Woods 2005). That said, there are several town centers (though only one incorporated city) and extensive exurban zones.

#### 5. Contested ecologies: vignettes of change

The following analysis rests on two micro case studies or 'vignettes' of *contested ecologies*, instances wherein disagreements over the meaning, values, and function of land, landscape, and resources resulted in divergent environmental understandings of a particular place, resource, or activity (Hiner 2016). Each vignette will be taken in turn.

##### *Vignette 1: Trinitas and the symbolic role of water*

Water in Calaveras County has taken on myriad connotations and meanings due to the fact that, at the time of this study (2010), the county was simultaneously considered water-rich and water-poor. As the case examined the symbolic role and importance of water resources rather than the actual hydrological properties or processes occurring in the area, detailed analyses of aquifer function and infrastructure are not in the scope of this paper. However, suffice it to say, local officials believed the county to have ample groundwater supplies but poor infrastructure with which to use it (Respondent 11, February 2010). Moreover, although the county theoretically had enough water to meet its needs, it is located above an aquifer that also supplies water to thirsty nearby metropolitan areas (Respondent 11, February 2010; see also Campbell 2012). For these reasons, water had become a potent environmental symbol in the area, especially as the region is marked by

cyclical periods of low rainfall and/or drought and it features the characteristically dry landscape of an oak savannah ecosystem.



Figure 1: (An) environmental context in the Sierra Nevada, rolling oak woodland. Photo by C.C. Hiner, 07/10/14.

The Trinitas case, presented here, revolves around a former sheep ranch that was controversially transformed into a golf course. The owner/operator/developer of the Trinitas golf course saw water as an abundant resource, one which had not yet begun to be tapped. Conversely, opponents of the golf course insisted the installation of the golfing greens, followed by the intensive watering needed to maintain them, had an appreciable impact on their own water availability. For example, one neighbor showed up to a Board of Supervisors (BOS) meeting with a sand-filled water pump in hand to demonstrate how her water access has been curtailed. However, strictly speaking, at least at the time of this study, water was not a resource Calaveras was lacking because, as a county water district administrator put it, "we are fortunate that we have a good supply of water and low demand" (Campbell 2012). Nonetheless, landowners in the immediate vicinity of the Trinitas golf course, including the sheep farmer wielding the sand-filled water pumps at the BOS meetings, described a very distinct link between when their wells became problematic and dried up, and when the owner/developer of Trinitas began pumping groundwater for his golfing greens.

Moreover, although the narrative (and evidence?) of the material environment may have demonstrated that the county, generally speaking, is water rich, the particular area in question, along the county's western edge (near the rapidly growing town of Valley Springs), is less so. Visually, Calaveras County, including the area where the Trinitas golf course was sited, is dry for most of the year. As such, regardless of the real quantity and availability of water, the use of that water locally is making a difference in how the landscape looks and functions. Take for example the images presented in Figure 2, which show the sharp contrast between the un-irrigated, oak woodland savannah endemic to the area and the irrigated golfing greens of the Trinitas golf course. This case 'resolved' when the landowners were foreclosed on, and thus abandoned the property. Nevertheless, discussion and resolution of this contested land use monopolized significant local

government time and financial resources as well as involving regional and national banking institutions and judicial bodies. Moreover, even though the immediate issue ended with the foreclosure, the long-term implications of the case are significant in terms of local governance and perceptions of people and place in the area (Hiner 2015, Hiner 2016). In sum, the Trinitas case elucidates how economic drivers such as differential land values and preferences related to amenity development and recreation can spur significant (localized) environmental change with broad political and management implications (see also Taylor and Hurley 2016, Travis 2007, Walker and Hurley 2011).



Figure 2: Images showing contrast of dry grass of the area with golfing greens. Top: Google Map aerial view (accessed 5/3/2012). Bottom: photo from <http://www.trinitasgolf.com/> (accessed 4/27/2012).

#### *Vignette 2: The 'chicken wars' of Rail Road Flat*

Similarly to the Trinitas case, the so-called 'chicken wars' provide an instructive example of when and how different conceptions of rural life come into direct conflict with each other. The 'chicken wars' provide an account of the way contested meanings and values can mushroom into larger policy debates and sociocultural strife. In this case, the chickens took on symbolic value related to varying conceptions of rural life and created a countywide controversy.

The story of the 'chicken wars' goes like this: a man, living in a small, 5 acre (approximately 2 hectares) parcel subdivision in 'up-country' Calaveras, establishes a chicken flock mainly consisting of prize

roosters. He considers his 16 birds part 'commercial venture', part 4-H project<sup>3</sup>, and part conservation effort as he farms two 'endangered' or rare breeds of chickens and roosters (Langley 2008a, Nichols 2008). His neighbors, other residents of this small, six-home subdivision "at the end of a road" (Respondent 38, April 2010), however, became displeased with the noise and began to complain. The detractors' attempts to get a reprieve from the crowing of the fowl resulted in visits from the Sheriff as well as animal control agents, two court cases (one in their favor and one in favor of the 'chicken man'), and a visit from the County Agricultural Commissioner, the County Agricultural Advisor, and a poultry expert from the University of California, Davis (Langley 2008a, Langley 2008b, Nichols 2008).

Despite overtures from the chicken owner to engage with the Agricultural Dispute Resolution Committee, the official body designated by the Board of Supervisors (BOS) to handle such conflicts (Respondent 34, April 2010; Nichols 2008), the ruffled neighbors refused to engage with the committee, as they were already involved in litigation. The conflict became quite a hullabaloo in the community as the 'chicken man' and his detractors gained notoriety for their dispute. The 'anti-chicken' neighbors were frequent visitors to the Board of Supervisors meetings to appeal that crowing fowl be included in the noise ordinance being negotiated at the time (Figure 3). The inclusion of crowing fowl would, they asserted, be appropriate as a measure to protect their private property interests as homeowners (Langley 2008a, Langley 2008b).

Although, ultimately, the noise ordinance was formulated to exclude the regulation of certain activities, such as hunting and agriculture (Nichols 2010), the "chicken war of Rail Road Flat" became a flashpoint for the issue of "right to farm" in this rural county (Supervisors 1980). Moreover, the fundamental disagreement between these parties about the acceptability of various uses in small parcel exurban subdivisions highlighted in a colorful – and raucous – way the conversation happening across the county in regards to zoning and minimum parcel size regulations and, more importantly, what is and is not an appropriate function of rural space. These kinds of shifts are occurring across the Sierra Nevada as landscapes shift from a focus on production to consumption (Beebe and Wheeler 2012, Chase 2015, Hiner and Filan In revision, Walker and Fortmann 2003).

## 6. Differing perceptions of place or 'mentality'

Although rural conflict is often attributed to problems with zoning (incompatible uses in proximity to each other) or parcel size (small-lot developments, which attract a particular type of buyer, adjacent to working farms or ranches), the larger issue is one of expectations and uses. One of my respondents, a long-time rancher, attributed it to a difference in "mentality":

A lot of this is mentality. You know, I do have people on 5 acres next to the ranch. And some of them, they're pleasant, they understand, there's not a problem. You know, they accept what it is. And then there's others that get upset when they hear something. They hear a shot or a cowbell going off or something like that. They don't like that. It ruins their space. So, a lot of it has to do with the mentality of those people. *Those people* – I say it in that way, I don't really mean it in that way. [But] we have to be aware of that. And, when possible, try to avoid those types of conflicts. Because that's what will get ... the zoning code changed. Or that's what will get some regulation put in place that will restrict things that we've historically been able to do. (Respondent 2, January 2010).

Respondent 2's comment explains how the introduction of a different 'mentality' about rural spaces can have significant impacts on rural functions and way(s) of life. Further, the rancher's statement demonstrates rural stakeholders (and farmers/ranchers in particular) feel the need to be aware of the concerns of those with different opinions than themselves, presumably in an attempt to head off problems before they occur. Otherwise, if neighbor issues get out of hand, the rancher's whole way of life could be impacted.

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<sup>3</sup> 4-H is the United States' largest youth development organization; 4-H programming is focused on the "four Hs" – Head, Heart, Hands, and Health – through hands-on learning activities in the areas of science, citizenship, and healthy living (Council 2015).



While this kind of concern can seem almost hyperbolic, such differences in place perception are widespread and can be extreme. Take, for instance, these anonymous comments to an article covering the 'chicken wars' (Langley 2008a):

Typical. I wonder where the people complaining about this noise moved from? This is the end of your rural lifestyle you all claim to love if you enforce a noise ordinance on CHICKENS! Look folks - if you don't like the smell of cattle don't move next to a ranch. If you don't like dust, don't move next to a farm. If you don't like the noise of animals then don't move to the COUNTRY! (anonymous online comment in response to: Langley 2008a).



### Noise ordinance nothing to crow about

Terry Baker shows off his newest weapon in his fight to stop the noisy roosters in his neighborhood. Enterprise photo by Claudette Langley

Figure 3: Ruffled neighbor with his “Quiet Please” sign. Photo by C. Langley (Langley 2008b).

Another commenter put it this way:

Are Terry and Beverly [the anti-chicken activists] new to the country? Are their expectations of peace and quiet shattered by the sounds of an agricultural county? What's next guys silencing Blue Jays, placing a muzzle on sheep, arresting the wind for blowing through the trees, or better yet [call the] noise police, writing tickets to farmers for noisy cows. C'mon, we have better things to do than worry about a few chickens. It amazes me that people move to rural areas and want to alter the laws to fit their view of things. Go back to the city... (anonymous online comment in response to: Langley 2008a).

Although these comments reify a problematic divide between "been-heres" and "come-heres" (Hiner 2014), they do demonstrate the vast differences that can emerge between various stakeholders in rural places experiencing change. Too much conflict – and attendant activism on the part of the displeased – can result in

regulatory and legal changes that can, as Respondent 2 put it, "...restrict things that we've historically been able to do" (Respondent 2, January 2010). Trinitas is another case wherein an instance of appreciable change in use and function in the landscape was perceived and accepted differently among stakeholders, igniting community conflict. Yet, had the change been introduced differently, fewer detractors may have emerged (Hiner 2016).

## 7. Action and actors across the rural-urban interface

As the preceding discussion indicates, definitions of and preferences for rurality vary. In addition, as the functional differences between 'rural' and 'urban' places diminish, for many rural residents, both old and new, the meaning and value of rural places increasingly rests on their perception of those place being rural (Woods 2011). However, definitions regarding what makes a place rural can, clearly, vary among stakeholders. In other words, the fundamental features that characterize rural place can be conceived differently. For example, for some, rural space is partially defined by the presence of animals such as livestock and chickens; these kinds of animals are seen as part of the landscape and lifestyle. However, others disagree, as suggested by the 'chicken wars.' These 'other' people see certain activities as too messy, too smelly, or too disruptive of the rural idyll, either personally or environmentally.

This kind of fundamental disagreement causes conflict because, as processes of regional change occur, residents can feel that their identities – and indeed their livelihoods – are fragile and in need of protecting. And this sense of threat is not unfounded. As noted by Gosnell and Abrams (2011), the social identities of rural places shift as 'new' people arrive. In this way, in-migration pairs with changes to patterns of use and development to drive the process of rural restructuring (Lichter and Brown 2011, Nelson 2001, Woods 2011), and the fundamental restructuring of rural lifestyles, livelihoods, and landscapes. Furthermore, these processes of change are reflective of wider changes and metabolisms occurring up- and down-scale, making consideration of the "chains of explanation", the regional political ecology, especially relevant. The regional political ecology approach, as advocated by Walker (2003) and others (Black 1990, Neumann 2010), argues for studying local level political and environmental dynamics within the context of larger scale political, economic, and environmental processes. This set of vignettes demonstrates the continued relevance of a regional political ecology approach as a mechanism for understanding local-level processes and grounding them within wider chains or networks of context, whether social/political or ecological.

As Bell, Lloyd, and Vatovec (2010) remind us, rather than being passive objects experiencing an inevitable urban-to-rural march or an inescapable process of rural urbanization, rural dwellers are agents of change playing an active role in the transformation taking place. Activities that do not fit predominant conceptions of rurality are policed by residents and stakeholders who see themselves as protectors of a sometimes vulnerable rural landscape and identity. The agency of such rural actors is demonstrated well by the anti-chicken activists in the case of the 'chicken wars' and by the opponents to the Trinitas golf course who mobilized the concept of water in a symbolic contest with the landowners. These actors are enmeshed in political economies that span time and space, and, as such, their actions are not taken in a vacuum. For example, the "boom and bust" history of the Sierra Nevada has continuing relevance for contemporary politics and environmental management in the area (Filan and Hiner in revision), revealing the importance of attention to both local and global scale dynamics in a regional (political ecology) analysis

In this region, environmental conflicts such as those presented here are often framed as 'us vs. them' or as rural vs. urban, however, the actors present do not fit into neat boxes. Rather, their actions are driven more by ideology and (differing) environmental imaginaries (Hiner 2015), thus producing *contested ecologies*, situations wherein the very definition of the environment, its associated 'problems', and the solutions to those problems become contested (Hiner 2016). Balint *et al.* (2011) describe a similar challenge in their discussion of "wicked" environmental problems, but I suggest that when there is a pervasive mismatch between worldviews in a particular regional context, conflict will erupt even over 'simple' environmental problems.

## 8. Negotiating acceptable

The Trinitas and 'chicken wars' cases encapsulate the kind of contested ecologies that present themselves in places along the rural-urban fringe. There are legal aspects to these contested ecologies and ethical-ecological elements that are not necessarily covered in law, but are the domain of popular struggle

(e.g. legal water rights versus what is perceived as ethical and/or fair resource use). For example, in the case of Trinitas, water availability is an issue, but it is not an *environmental* issue; it is a social, economic and structural one having to do with political will, economic investments and physical infrastructure restraints. That said, water use is a subject being mobilized by opposition groups to bolster their argument that the Trinitas golf course is a resource hog that is disrupting the neighbors' ability to live, work, and play.

In this sense, water, in addition to being an actual, 'natural' feature, is also a symbol in the debate over the legitimacy of the golf course and its right to exist in the community. This argument harkens back to Bourdieu (1998) and Sayre's (2011, 2006) discussions of symbolic or other species of capital (Bourdieu 1998: 47, as cited by Sayre 2006: 22):

Symbolic capital is any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural, or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value.

Indeed, the Trinitas case demonstrates how a particular resource or object can be the basis for numerous symbolic claims; claims over physical and ecological features (trees, streams, groundwater, plants and/or vegetation, roads, signage, etc.) as well as aesthetic, spiritual, and/or moral norms. The case of the 'chicken wars', which takes place in a landscape increasingly inhabited by differently-oriented residents and stakeholders, similarly transcends its basic premise – a neighborly dispute over the proximity of disruptive, but allowable, uses – and becomes a value-laden contest over symbolic and material outcomes in the county vis-à-vis the Calaveras County noise ordinance.

These cases, taken together, demonstrate how community conflict over the form and function of the rural landscape can have wide-reaching policy and lifestyle impacts, as suggested by the rancher who noted that "mentality" plays a role in how land use disputes play out. At the heart of these various claims is not just conflict over whether certain activities or standards are *legal*, but also whether they are *acceptable*. In other words, the question becomes: What 'fits' in the rural landscape? And, moreover, who gets to decide?

## 9. Managing competing expectations of land use and function

The transformation of rural spaces undoubtedly creates space for new economic, recreational, and lifestyle choices. However, these changes also have the potential to close off opportunities for other practices, historic or otherwise (Gosnell and Abrams 2011, Hurley et al. 2008, Sheridan 2007). As such, understanding these varying conceptions of place is not merely an academic endeavor; these debates involve and invoke policy and land management decision processes, which can have wide-reaching material (social, economic, environmental) outcomes.

As internal and external forces begin to shift the look and function of a place, (local) actors seize upon material and symbolic capital to reinforce and build the identity/identities of people and place that they see as appropriate. For instance, the potential inclusion of crowing fowl in the Calaveras County noise ordinance was due almost entirely to the ongoing chicken war in Rail Road Flat.<sup>4</sup> As one respondent put it, the chicken war was "profound", and had "wide ranging implications" (Respondent 34, April 2010). Although particular to a specific place and time, the 'chicken wars' conflict is no anomaly. Conflicts of this type, conflicts in the perception of appropriate uses, crop up regularly in the region. The case of the Trinitas golf course (Vignette 1) is another excellent example of such conflict.

As such conflicts escalate, whatever the source problem may have been, an issue can balloon out of proportion, and problems that were once technical or legal become personal (or vice versa, as when a personal conflict gets inflated to the technical or legal). When this occurs, rational thinking and practical problem solving become more difficult. The 'chicken wars', as well as the case of Trinitas, demonstrate this principle very well. As one rancher put it: "One says white and the other one says black, and they just can't get together to resolve the issue" (Respondent 2, January 2010). In short, divergent political and ideological views, paired with competing rural or environmental imaginaries, make resolving conflicts like this very challenging.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal Communication with County Agriculture Advisor, December 2009.

Planning and land use policy are mechanisms for managing some of these challenges. Specifically, land use planning and policy creates the parameters for certain kinds of land uses (Walker and Hurley 2011), and, as such, policy and governmental decision making guides not only environmental and place change processes, but is vital to it. As suggested by Soss and Schram (2007: 113):

Policies do more than satisfy or dissatisfy; they change basic features of the political landscape. Policies can set political agendas and shape identities and interests. They can influence beliefs about what is possible, desirable, and normal. They can alter conceptions of citizenship and status. They can channel or constrain agency, define incentives, and redistribute resources. They can convey cues that define, arouse, or pacify constituencies.

Decision makers and stakeholders shape the landscape and the people in it and play a fundamental role in how rural places look and function now and in the future (Domon 2011, van Lier 1998). The resultant material and symbolic contests can arouse conflict over both the policy *process* and policy *outcomes* ((Abrams and Gosnell 2012, Hurley and Walker 2004, Walker and Fortmann 2003, Walker 2003, Yung, Patterson and Freimund 2010).

## 10. On the significance of *regional political ecologies*

In sum, different ideologies and imaginaries, like those discussed here, can have real, material impacts on rural landscapes as they play out in decision- and policy-making processes. These cases demonstrate that in addition to contestation over the physical material elements of landscapes and ecologies, there are larger debates occurring over conceptions of place more broadly. The uneven outcomes presented by the Trinitas and 'chicken wars' cases suggest that varying instances of land use change are understood differently by various members of the public and in public decision making processes. Furthermore, these cases prove to be links in a longer chain of explanation revolving around regional rural change.

As landscapes and lifestyles shift, the fundamental features of rural places are altered. For example, even though the actors were responding to drivers pertinent to them personally and visible locally, the issues emerging from the Trinitas case were made possible by shifts in land value, increasing mobility, and changes to the amenity economy at the regional scale and beyond (Abrams et al. 2012, Cadieux and Hurley 2011, Gosnell and Abrams 2011). The 'chicken wars' reflect how different actors' interactions, again facilitated by political economic shifts at several scales, can lead to policy changes with wider implications beyond the local level. These power geometries are not simply reflections of micro scale dynamics; they are indicative of larger economic, environmental, and sociocultural processes occurring up and down the chain. The role of *regional* political ecology in this context, then, is to examine local level processes, to determine the driving factors and forces at work economically, environmentally, and culturally, and draw out linkages both across scales and between those areas seen as being functionally separate (such as 'rural' vs. 'urban'). This is possible as the region, in this case Calaveras County, serves as an important meso-scale as part of the Sierra Nevada foothills that allows for attention to particular environmental contexts in situ and which facilitates recognition of the distinctiveness of local level processes within broader relations of power. The ultimate goal of the inquiry is to gain a clearer understanding of the drivers of, and implications for local responses in one place in order to encourage more proactive policy making elsewhere while acknowledging and addressing linked (structural) limitations and opportunities in place.

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