



# ENVIRONMENT

Anais Augé and Naicy Niane



CLEAR

LEXICO PROJECT

Partners



With the support of



## Research commissioned by: Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD).

*Opinions from the organising entity do not automatically reflect those either of the Belgian government or ARES or VLIR-UOS, and can never bind either the Belgian government or ARES or VLIR-UOS.*

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DR. ANAIS AUGÉ is an FNRS researcher at UCLouvain. Her work focuses on the public understanding of political discourse in intercultural contexts and, particularly, in the context of the climate crisis.

NAICY NIANE graduated from a Master's degree in Development Studies (UCL). Using the lens of environmental anthropology, decolonial ecology and ecofeminism, her research focused on land management and relations with territory in the context of climate change in Colombia.

TIEN NGUYEN is an animator and illustrator, currently studying at Lacambre. As I like to say, 32 erasers and 63 pencils — that's the secret to my talent!

# ENVIRONMENT

Anaïs Augé and Naicy Niane<sup>1</sup>

---

Environment is a complex term to define because it has multiple meanings that vary across disciplines, cultures, and individuals. Most definitions refer to the relationship between humans and their environment. However, this relationship is open to different interpretations. Are humans and their environment interconnected and interdependent, or are they separated by a hierarchical relationship? These divergences are reflected in debates and political orientations on environmental and climate issues. Ecofeminism and decolonial ecology also draw attention to the political and social issues that affect how the environment is perceived.

---

## Concept

The concept of environment is part of our everyday language and refers to our family and professional environments as well as the natural spaces around us. It has its etymological roots in the preposition *environ* (Etymonline, n.d.; Merriam Webster, n.d.), which first appeared as *environment* in its nominative form in 1827. It encompasses both abstract elements, such as social conditions, and tangible realities, such as nature. It was not until 1956 in English and 1964 in French that its ecological meaning emerged, revealing the gradual shift in its meaning toward more specific environmental concerns.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: Artificial intelligence tools were used to simplify the terms used in our scientific texts, making them easier to understand.

Virtually all definitions of the concept emphasize the close relationship between humans and their environment: the concept can only be understood

**The confusion surrounding the concept of the environment is deeply rooted in the relationship between human beings and their surroundings. While some believe they can control it, others advocate coexistence with the living.**

in relation to the people with whom it is associated. This view is also reflected in the ecological meaning of the concept of environment. Indeed, Lévy (1999) describes the environment as “nature in relation to human activities”. Charles and Kaloara (2022) also assert that the environment concerns “the relationships between humans and living things”. Defining the environment is therefore an

inherently subjective process, a means by which individuals interpret their reality (Carrizosa Umaña, 2000; Doyon, 2016; Sauvé, 2002; Scarwell, 2022; Ulloa, 2011).

The multiple subjective interpretations of this concept have led to considerable confusion. This is clearly reflected in the documents produced by various environmental organizations, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), France Nature Environnement (FNE), and Friends of the Earth (FOE). Two different perspectives emerge. On the one hand, the environment is presented as an autonomous entity distinct from humans, as emphasized by WWF and UNEP. They emphasize the vulnerability of the environment to human actions and thus focus their efforts on protecting and preserving it. FNE and ADLT, on the other hand, see the environment and humanity as inseparable and insist on the importance of *coexistence and environmental education*. They emphasize the vital importance of preserving the environment to ensure its sustainability and that of humanity.

The confusion surrounding the concept of the environment is deeply rooted in the relationship between human beings

and their surroundings. While some believe they can control it, others advocate *coexistence with the living*. As Doyon (2016) suggests, this conceptual confusion is also fueled by the different definitions put forward by different disciplines. The social sciences, in particular, have gradually integrated social interactions into the concept of the environment, thus diverging from the natural sciences (Carrizosa Umaña, 2000; Lévy, 1999). These different perspectives are reflected in the environmental policies that have emerged over time.

A closer look at this chronology reveals some interesting facts. Since the 1960s, the ecological meaning of the environment has become increasingly popular. This trend coincided with an increase in environmental degradation because of industrialization. In response to these new challenges, ecological movements emerged (Doyon, 2016), leading to the institutionalization of environmental issues at both national and international levels. In this context, the countries of the Global South were also hit hard by the intensification of productivism (Gathey, 2021).

**In response to these new challenges, ecological movements emerged (Doyon, 2016), leading to the institutionalization of environmental issues at both national and international levels.**

In the 1980s, the environment became a cross-cutting political issue (Charles and Kalaora, 2022), requiring programs focused on its *management, protection, and control* (Doyon, 2016; Scarwell, 2022). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the environment has gradually become one of the three pillars of *sustainable development*, the other two being the economic and social pillars. The concept of the environment has become an integral part of the UN global policy (Scarwell, 2022). According to the 1987 Bruntland Report, sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

However, within this framework of sustainable development, environmental policy is not without ideology. Specialists in environmental studies (Doyon, 2016; Sauvé, 2002 and 2007; Scarwell, 2022) have challenged the dominant conception of the environment and questioned the anthropocentric orientation of definitions. Indeed, considering humans as superior to the environment leads to a desire to control and govern the latter. Others have questioned the dominant definitions of modernity

**Differences in environmental perceptions and their politicization are central to the climate justice debate. In addition to disparities between countries in the global North and global South (Greenpeace and the Runnymede Trust, 2022), climate justice highlights social inequalities, particularly between genders.**

and development within the concept of sustainable development (Sauvé, 2007; Escobar, 2016; Moore, 2022). Thus, it is not surprising that environmental conflicts can be generated by conflicting perspectives on environment and development (Svampa, 2011).

Indeed, several authors have highlighted the existence of multiple understandings of the world and the environment, all of which differ depending on the cultural context (Bouleau and Hautdidier, 2020; Carrizosa Umaña, 2000; Descola and Pignocchi, 2022). Several studies have also tried to show the hierarchical nature of this knowledge, and thus the downgrading, or even the invisibilisation, of some forms of knowledge (Leff, 2015; Ulloa, 2011).

Decolonial and ecofeminist studies are of particular interest in this debate as they highlight the dominant (neo)colonial and patriarchal logics that are evident in current environmental policies focused on environmental *conservation, protection, and management* (Blanc and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2020; Ferdinand, 2019; Merchant, 2021). Indeed, many environmental protection and conservation policies and programs are based on the exclusion

of people living in *protected* areas. Such environmental policies are often accompanied by land grabbing and environmental rent extraction by elites (Grosfoguel, 2016).

Differences in environmental perceptions and their politicization are central to the climate justice debate. In addition to disparities between countries in the global North and global South (Greenpeace and the Runnymede Trust, 2022), climate justice highlights social inequalities, particularly between genders. For example, ecofeminist discourses on the environment highlight the dual domination of men over both living things and women, reducing both to exploitable objects and resources (Augé, 2023, 111-117).

## Case study

We have already suggested that the concept of the *environment* is defined, politicized, and institutionalized according to the perceptions and uses of the people that this *environment* encompasses. We can therefore assume that these perceptions differ according to the geographical areas in which these people evolve, their social status, and their gender. Ideological narratives are also important. To this end, we can link the concept of the environment to ecofeminist literature that highlights the role of the colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist systems in objectifying the environment. The critical analysis shows how the dominant ideology that colors our understanding of the environment is at odds with the more holistic conceptions of the environment present in alternative currents rooted in specific contexts (Sachs, 1993; Hache, 2016; UN Women, 2022).

Within this framework, we would like to present the environmental representations of Inga and Kamsa women living in Valle de Sibundoy, a valley located in the north of Putumayo, an Amazonian region of Colombia in Latin America, targeted by a REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) project in 2022. In this context, a case study by Niane (2023) highlights the different ways in which

the stakeholders involved perceive and interact with the environment and their positions towards the project. REDD+ projects are financed by private or public actors, mainly from the North, and are implemented in tropical forest areas of Global South countries. The population is then receiving a remuneration in exchange of carbon storage. The study reveals a gap regarding one's understanding of the environment between the proponents of the REDD+ project and its opponents, in particular the environmental NGO *Censat Agua Viva* and certain communities of indigenous women.

**The study reveals a gap regarding one's understanding of the environment between the proponents of the REDD+ project and its opponents, in particular the environmental NGO Censat Agua Viva and certain communities of indigenous women**

On the one hand, the REDD+ project has adopted a commercial and utilitarian approach to the environment, which seeks to quantify and market environmental services such as carbon sequestration in order to reduce and offset greenhouse gas emissions. This implies a new territorial management, changing local practices such as production models or the conservation of certain areas. However, the consent of the local population is rarely respected in relation to these projects, which reinforces the land grabbing of populations in the South, who are already the most affected by climate change (Ulloa, 2011).

On the other hand, the testimonies of indigenous *Inga* and *Kamsa* women reveal a different relationship with the environment, imbued with affectivity and spirituality, as in many other indigenous cultures (Gudynas, 2011; Escobar, 2016). For these local populations, the environment is not simply something external or impersonal. In reality, they rarely talk about *the environment*, but rather about their *land* or *territory*, to which they feel deeply connected, almost like a part of themselves. They see the land and the creatures that inhabit it as having a

kind of personality. For example, in the *Kamsa* language, Valle de Sibundoy is referred to as *tabanók*, which means *sacred place of origin* (Ruiz, 2020).

In addition, *Inga* and *Kamsa* women have developed a special connection to this land, which also fulfils reproductive and maternal functions. As they are responsible for domestic tasks, including the maintenance of the family gardens (*chagra*), they attach great importance to the state of the environment, which in turn motivates them to participate in the protection of their territory. Some of the women in these communities were among the first to warn of the dangers of the REDD+ project in 2022 and to call on the environmental NGO *Censat Agua Viva* to facilitate public debate in their communities.

In conclusion, perceptions of the environment, its protection, and management vary. However, this diversity – and the relevance of voices such as those of the *Inga* and *Kamsa* women and other local populations – is rarely considered in environmental policies, which are dominated by a utilitarian approach focused on economic growth. From a democratic perspective, it seems important to include these diverse perspectives in decisions about the environment and climate change.

**However, this diversity – and the relevance of voices such as those of the *Inga* and *Kamsa* women and other local populations – is rarely considered in environmental policies, which are dominated by a utilitarian approach focused on economic growth.**

## References

- Amis de la Terre. (1969). Amis de la Terre Belgique. <https://www.amisdela-terre.be/> (consulté le 11.03.2024)
- Augé, A. (2023). *Metaphor and Argumentation in Climate Crisis Discourse*. Routledge.
- Blanc, G., & Fauvelle-Aymar, F. (2020). *L'invention du colonialisme vert: Pour en finir avec le mythe de l'éden africain*. Flammarion.
- Bouleau, G., & Hautdidier, B. (2020). *Political ecology*. CNRS Éditions. <https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-03224955>
- Carrizosa Umaña, J. (2000). ¿Qué es ambientalismo? La visión ambiental complejo. CEREC, IDEA, PNUMA. [https://enriquedussel.com/txt/Textos\\_200\\_Obras/Filosofia\\_ambiental/Que\\_es\\_ambientalismo-Julio\\_Carrizosa.pdf](https://enriquedussel.com/txt/Textos_200_Obras/Filosofia_ambiental/Que_es_ambientalismo-Julio_Carrizosa.pdf)
- Charles, L., & Kalaora, B. (2022, février 22). Environnement et pouvoir des mots. *AOC media - Analyse Opinion Critique*. <https://aoc.media/opinion/2022/02/22/environnement-et-pouvoir-des-mots/>
- Descola, P., & Pignocchi, A. (2022). *Ethnographies des mondes à venir*. Seuil.
- Doyon, S. (2016). Environnement. *Anthropen*. <https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.anthropen.007>
- Escobar, A. (2016). Sentipensar con la Tierra: Las Luchas Territoriales y la Dimensión Ontológica de las Epistemologías del Sur. *Antropólogos Iberoamericanos En Red*, 11(01), 11–32. <https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110102>
- Etymonline. (N.d). Etymology Online. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=environment> (consulté le 08.04.2024)
- Ferdinand, M. (2019). *Une écologie décoloniale: Penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen*. Seuil.
- France Nature Environnement. (1968). France Nature Environnement. <https://fne.asso.fr/> (consulté le 11.03.2024)
- Gatthey, E. (2021). Global histories of empire and climate in the Anthropocene. *History Compass* 19(8),e12683.
- Greenpeace and the Runnymede Trust (2022). Confronting injustice: Racism and the environmental emergency. Greenpeace UK. [www.greenpeace.org.uk/](http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/) (consulté le 29.06.2023)
- Grosfoguel, R. (2016). Del «extractivismo económico» al «extractivismo epistémico» y «extractivismo ontológico»: una forma destructiva de conocer, ser y estar en el mundo. *Tabula Rasa*, 24, 123–143. <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39646776006>
- Gudynas, E. (2011). Buen Vivir: Today's tomorrow. *Development*, 54(4), 441–447. <https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2011.86>
- Hache, E. (2016). *Reclaim: Anthologie de textes écoféministes*. Cambourakis.
- Leff, E. (2015). La complexité environnementale. *Écologie & politique*, 51(2), 159–171. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ecopo.051.0159>
- Lévy, B. (1999). Nature et environnement. Considérations épistémologiques. [http://archives-fig-st-die.cndp.fr/actes/actes\\_99/nature\\_environnement/article.htm](http://archives-fig-st-die.cndp.fr/actes/actes_99/nature_environnement/article.htm)

- Merchant, C. (2021). *La mort de la nature: Les femmes, l'écologie et la révolution scientifique*. Wildproject.
- Merriam Webster. (N.d). Merriam Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment?src=search-dict-hed> (consulté le 08.04.2024)
- Moore, J. W. (2022). Anthropocene, capitalocene & the flight from world history: Dialectical universalism & the geographies of class power in the capitalist world-ecology, 1492-2022. *Nordia Geographical Publications*, 51(2), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.30671/nordia.116148>
- Niane, N. (2023). *Environnementalismes pluriels dans le contexte de lutte contre le changement climatique*. Faculté des sciences économiques, sociales, politiques et de communication, Université catholique de Louvain.
- Programme des Nations Unies pour l'Environnement. (1972). United Nations Environment Programme. <https://www.unep.org/fr> (consulté le 11.03.2024)
- Rapport de Brundtland. (1987). Rapport de Brundtland. <https://www.are.admin.ch/are/fr/home/media-et-publications/publications/developpement-durable/brundtland-report.html> (consulté le 12.03.2025)
- Ruiz, J.R. (2020). *La territorialidad del pueblo Kamëntsa de Sibundoy (Putumayo, Colombia). Una dimensión cultural para la construcción política*. Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar. Sede Ecuador. [mémoire] <https://repositorio.uasb.edu.ec/bitstream/10644/7428/1/T3224-MEC-Villamil-La%20territorialidad.pdf>
- Sachs, W. (1993). *Global Ecology: A New Arena of Political Conflict*. Fernwood Publishing, Halifax.
- Sauvé, L. (2002). L'Éducation relative à l'environnement: possibilités et contraintes. *Connexion*, XXVII(1/2), 1-4. [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146295\\_fre](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146295_fre)
- Sauvé, L. (2007). L'équivoque du développement durable. *Chemin de Traverse*, 4, 31-47.
- Scarwell, H.-J. (2022). Environnement. Développement durable et territoires. *Économie, Géographie, Politique, Droit, Sociologie*, 13(3), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.4000/developpementdurable.22001>
- Svampa, M. (2011). Néo-« développementisme » extractiviste, gouvernements et mouvements sociaux en Amérique latine. *Problèmes d'Amérique latine*, 81(3), 101-127. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pal.081.0101>
- Ulloa, A., Escobar, E.M., Donato, L.M. y Escobar, P. (2008). *Mujeres indígenas y cambio climático. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*. Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Fundación Natura, UNODC, Bogotá. <https://www.unodc.org/documents/colombia/2013/Agosta/DA2013/MUJERES-INDIGENAS-CAMBIO-CLIMATICO.2008.pdf>
- Ulloa, A. (2011). *Perspectivas culturales del clima*. Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- UNWomen. (2022). Explainer: How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected. United Nations Women. <https://wrd.unwomen.org/index.php/explore/library/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected> (consulté le 29.06.2023)
- World Wild Funds. (1961). World Wildlife Fund Belgium. <https://wwf.be/fr> (consulté le 11.03.2024)