

WS 06

'Sustainabilities', or the politics of a many-faced (non-negotiable?) concept
RG Zirkumpolaregebiete und Sibirien

30.09.2019, Teil 1: 14:00-15:30 Uhr / Teil 2: 16:00-17:30 Uhr, Raum D432

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Undoubtedly, 'sustainability' has become a widely used buzzword not only in our daily lives, but also on both domestic and international political stages. With regard to the Circumpolar North, it has recently been suggested that "sustainability research in the Arctic has moved to the forefront of intellectual and policy realms" (Petrov et al. 2016: 166).

Historian Jeremy Caradonna remarked that the concept of 'sustainability' ('Nachhaltigkeit') emerged in the context of conflicts over resources, especially wood, induced by the proto-industrialist economies of Early Modern Europe at the beginning of the 18th century (Caradonna 2014). He did not pay, however, much attention to the political effects of this particular development. In contrast, historian Joachim Radkau argued that the articulation of 'Nachhaltigkeit' ('sustainability') essentially relates to the emergence of the modern, bureaucratic state and that therefore the invocation of 'sustainability' has to be understood in clearly political terms (Radkau & Schäfer 1987; Radkau 2011). In line with this rather critical stance towards 'sustainability', we propose to shift attention to the politics of its invocation: What are the consequences of the introduction of the concept in specific ethnographic settings? What kinds of actors are mobilized and what types of alliances are formed (e.g. NGOs, governmental organizations etc.)? How do these actors deal with potentially different notions of 'sustainability'? How does 'sustainability' relate to the emergence of intensive resource extraction and the (colonial) bureaucratic state? To what extent do invocations of 'sustainability' shape the discursive frames of political processes, limiting the field of alternative views? With a view to the DGSKA Conference's main theme, we will question the tenet that 'sustainability' is a given that apparently cannot be negotiated anymore and explore the current discursive frames and uses of this concept.

The workshop explicitly attempts at breaching narrow regional as well as disciplinary perspectives and therefore welcomes contributions not only from other parts of the globe, but also from related disciplines.

Keynote:

Jessica Graybill (Colgate University, USA)

The norming of sustainability in non-normal space-time: meaning, implications, questions

We have made sustainability the goal for development, for living, and for imagining futures for communities and places globally. Sustainability "speak" and sustainability "actions" abound in scholarly and professional literature, media, and everyday life. I argue that the aggrandizement of sustainability in the 21st century, particularly in the Global North, has created a sustainability imaginary that is global in vision yet often unsympathetic to regional-local people, places, and phenomena in the Global South, Global East, or other regions not normally captured by such naming, such as the Arctic. Further, I argue that a global sustainability imaginary works to normalize this concept in everyday desires and actions where we live, work, and play. Here, I explore different

vectors of the sustainability imaginary to elucidate where ideas about sustainability originate, to where they propagate, and why or how are they taken up in local places. I engage the Arctic region to explore how this imaginary is introduced, (re)defined, and normalized among actors comprising Arctic communities, including local and Indigenous peoples, industry, government, scholars, and NGOs. I question, explicitly, who “we” are in the Arctic and how a globalized sustainability imaginary is politicized via the introduction and circulation of sustainability speak and action.

Vortragende Teil 1/ Speakers part 1:

Christine Le Jeune (University of Florida)

Sustainability in the North Caucasus: between the state, academia, and the local

This paper examines how the Russian state, Russian academia, and local community members in the North Caucasian Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia conceptualize sustainability, how they have come to utilize the concept of sustainability, and what the consequences have been for invoking and mobilizing sustainability in various ways. Recent years have seen a push by the Russian state to develop tourism as an economically viable industry throughout the mountainous areas of the North Caucasus. As a main driver behind tourism development, the state highlights sustainable practices in the building of tourism infrastructure and the protection of wildlife. Scholars studying the North Caucasus have adopted the terminology of sustainable development, as captured in the Russian journal Sustainable Development of Mountain Territories (Устойчивое Развитие Горных Территорий). Despite the state and academic attention to sustainability, the voices of local community members remain less apparent. This paper examines local notions and practices of sustainability and how they have been affected by the Russian state’s policies and Russian academia’s discourse on sustainability and sustainable development.

Aylin Yıldırım Tschöepe (University of Basel)

Urban natures and green brandscapes: contest and alliance over notions of sustainability

“Sustainability” as a set of everyday practices, institutionalized strategies and environmental knowledges is often under negotiation, and I have found it to be particularly contested in Turkey. Ethnographic research among Istanbul's competing environmental, governmental, public and real estate actors around the greening of the megacity will shed light on the socio-cultural and material production of sustainability in its various forms and in relation to contesting practices such as marketing, survival strategies, insurgent tactical urbanism.

While some actors contextualize sustainability in reaction to resource scarcity and relate it to political and social green movements, others have re-appropriated it in a narrow, technical/structural sense as part of a neoliberal “green” brandscape. Government/real estate-driven green projects embrace selection, domestication and control as part of their sustainability concept, which contradicts the understanding of other actors who communicate it as encompassing the environmental, as well as the social, cultural and spatial dimension as existential parts of the concept toward a livable, inclusive future. In the complexity of negotiations among actors, alliances emerge- often in unexpected, yet hopeful ways.

Joachim Otto Habeck (University of Hamburg)

Recollecting ‘sustainable Development’ in research and regional politics of Northern Russia

Drawing on the legacy of SPICE (“Sustainable Pechora in a Changing Environment”) I discuss the divergent uses of sustainability in terms of research design, regional politics and local applicability.

Within this interdisciplinary project in northern Russia, I was responsible for stakeholder consultation and interviews on local citizens' views about sustainable development. Inclusion of sustainability in the research agenda certainly contributed to the proposal receiving the European Commission's support; but far from just paying lip service, the project did place sustainability at centre stage. Stakeholders' comments on the concept elicited a shared frame of understanding, yet they highlighted local resource-use conflicts. Some actors straightforwardly interpreted sustainable development as economic growth, ignoring or even maligning the claims and concerns of environmental activists. Recollecting the experience of SPICE triggers questions about the preconditions for participatory research: how and how much are local inhabitants (stakeholders) able to negotiate the aims and the process of similar research projects? Further, how do conditions for such involvement differ across the circumpolar North?

Vortragende Teil 2/ Speakers part 2:

Olga Povoroznyuk (University of Vienna)

Living along the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM):

Resources, social change, and "sustainability" among indigenous communities

The BAM, built in the 1970s and 1980s in East Siberia, has become the last Soviet "project of the century". Aimed primarily at exploitation of the untapped mineral resources, it has caused dramatic environmental and social change. The transformation of natural landscapes including pastures and hunting grounds and the massive inflow of migrants affected indigenous Evenki people. Yet, the impacts and risks of the railroad construction and resource extraction, as well as expectations and concerns of the local population, have rarely been addressed by experts or publicly discussed. Only in the Post-Soviet period, as the Soviet modernization myth has been challenged, were the effects of the BAM critically assessed. The concepts of sustainability and sustainable development borrowed from international laws, white papers and media, entered the language of the Russian legislation, resource extraction projects, academic and activist discourses. This paper argues that "sustainability" has rarely served as a category of analysis of entanglements of indigenous people with the railroad infrastructure, remaining primarily a discursive resource used by a variety of stakeholders in the region.

Geoffrey Hobbis (University of Groningen)

Negotiating the value of dolphins: the politics of marine sustainability in Solomon Islands.

The Lau-speakers of Solomon Islands hunt dolphins for their teeth. Used as a traditional currency and part of a broader, long-standing approach to sustainable marine resource management, the future of the hunt is uncertain. The habitat of the dolphins is endangered by a confluence of factors beyond the control of the Lau such as rising sea levels and temperatures, industrial fisheries and coral bleaching. The responsibility for climate change, and the processes of global capitalism that drive it, are located well beyond this least developed state on the margins of geopolitics. Yet, Solomon Islanders feel the more dramatic effects of climate change such as the loss of their land, resources and the sociocultural practices linked to both. This paper examines how the Lau continue to manage their coastal ecology including the dolphin hunt that has received increasing negative attention from international conservationists. The debates surrounding the dolphin hunt allow me to tease out how competing visions for sustainability are negotiated within global inequalities and how contemporary conservation discourses recreate the very system that precipitated the current environmental crisis.

Paula Schiefer (Independent Researcher)

Contested sustainabilities: managing salmon runs in Southwest Alaska

This paper will explore different concepts of 'sustainability' within current efforts to manage salmon runs in the Kuskokwim River in Southwest Alaska. It describes changes in local indigenous Yup'ik fishing practices after the State of Alaska intensified its conservation strategies and restricted king salmon harvest in the area. Combined with an understanding of the colonial structures in which governmental salmon management is embedded, the paper furthermore shows the political impacts that salmon management has on local indigenous communities.

In addition, I argue that both subsistence harvesting and governmental salmon management carry concepts of sustainability but appear as incommensurable in moments of crisis. Rooted in human-animal studies the paper will show how different ascriptions of agency assigned to salmon determine how relationships with this animal can be perpetuated into the future.

Peter Schweitzer (University of Vienna)

'Culture' and 'sustainability': can the two notions be brought together?

While the combination of 'culture' and 'sustainability' has gained prominence in recent years, there is no single, straightforward definition of how these two concepts interact. In this paper, we pursue two possible constellations: 'sustainable cultures,' focusing on the prospects of cultural viability in Arctic contexts; and 'cultural sustainability,' which explores the role of culture(s) in broader sustainability contexts. In the first part, we set out to examine conceptual perspectives, which have been applied to cultural sustainability, followed by a broader discussion of terminology. The second part of the paper deals with empirical examples from the North American region and a discussion of indigenous language retention. It also entails a discussion of Russian literature on culture and sustainability in the Arctic, which identifies a number of crosscutting themes. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of knowledge gaps and needs for further research.