

Creative Report: A Gallery of Posters

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FOREWORD BY AUTHOR

For several days at the beginning of January 2020, I had the privilege and opportunity to participate in a seminar entitled “Sustainability on Trial: Environmental Justice in Northern Europe.” During these days our class traveled through the countries of Norway, Sweden, and Finland with our best ethnographers’ eyes and a fair amount of literature to provide us with information beyond our experiences.

To guide our experiences, we were each assigned one of three possible roles (scientist, activist, policy-maker) and one of seven possible resources (land, water, food, animals, gas and oil, trees, air), with each person having a unique role. I was assigned to be the land activist.

This report is intended to be a creative representation of the things I experienced and learned over the course of the seminar, with the perspective specifically of a land activist. Originally, I had intended to create a series of posters that one would see at a protest against land development on a specific site. Protests are the first thing that comes to mind when I think of a typical activist, and land development is one of the most prolific issues in the modern age. Not only is going to protests about giving hope to those who live in fear, but it is also to provoke new thoughts and discussions.

It is for that reason that the vast majority of the slogans I wrote are, without me consciously deciding this, questions. They are the most commonly used tool to incite new thoughts and to ask people to consider viewpoints they may be missing while deciding what actions to take. It was further not intended that these questions do anything beyond resemble the words one would see on posters at a protest. However, when I was reflecting on them, I realized they are exactly the genre of questions we ask ourselves while completing impact assessments.

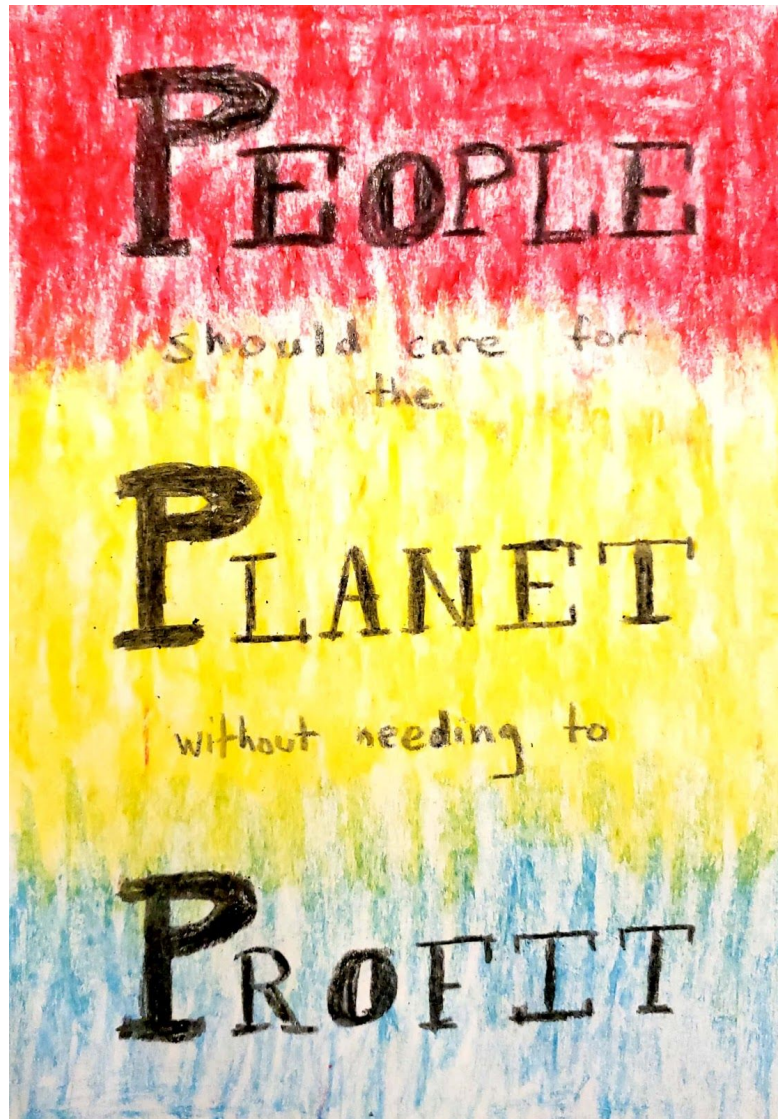
An impact assessment asks you to consider the effects you have on the world around you. Every day of the course we were asked to write a few paragraphs about what we had noticed or participated in that day, sometimes with the lens of the resources we had been assigned. You may be familiar with this kind of reflection: have you heard of a carbon footprint? It is the term used to describe how much carbon an individual or group uses, through heating or transportation or any other carbon-burning activity. This is just one facet of an impact assessment, which asks you to consider your carbon footprint in addition to your use of other resources and the effects you have on the people around you.

I do not create physical art as much as I would like to, and I am always envious of the people who show up to protests with thought-provoking and clever posters, so I thought I would try my hand at it instead of working with any other media that I am more familiar with.

I have included a small bit of text with each one for the sake of the viewer’s education and insight. Enjoy, and feel free to reach out to mbenesch@reed.edu with any clarifying questions or for more information on any of the subjects included below.

EXPLORING SUSTAINABILITY

[Photo ID: Three large words, “People,” “Planet,” and “Profit”, appear in block black capital letters. Smaller words in lowercase appear between them, so the full phrase reads “People should care for the Planet without needing to Profit.”]



This poster was the first I completed, and is one of the few that is not a question. The other genre of protest posters that I see most often is powerful statements about what we should be doing. You will notice this in both this and the next example.

One of the first points we struck on during this seminar was a need to define sustainability. A leading definition is easy to remember: “People, Planet, Profit.” The idea is that there should be a balance between the interests of these three things.

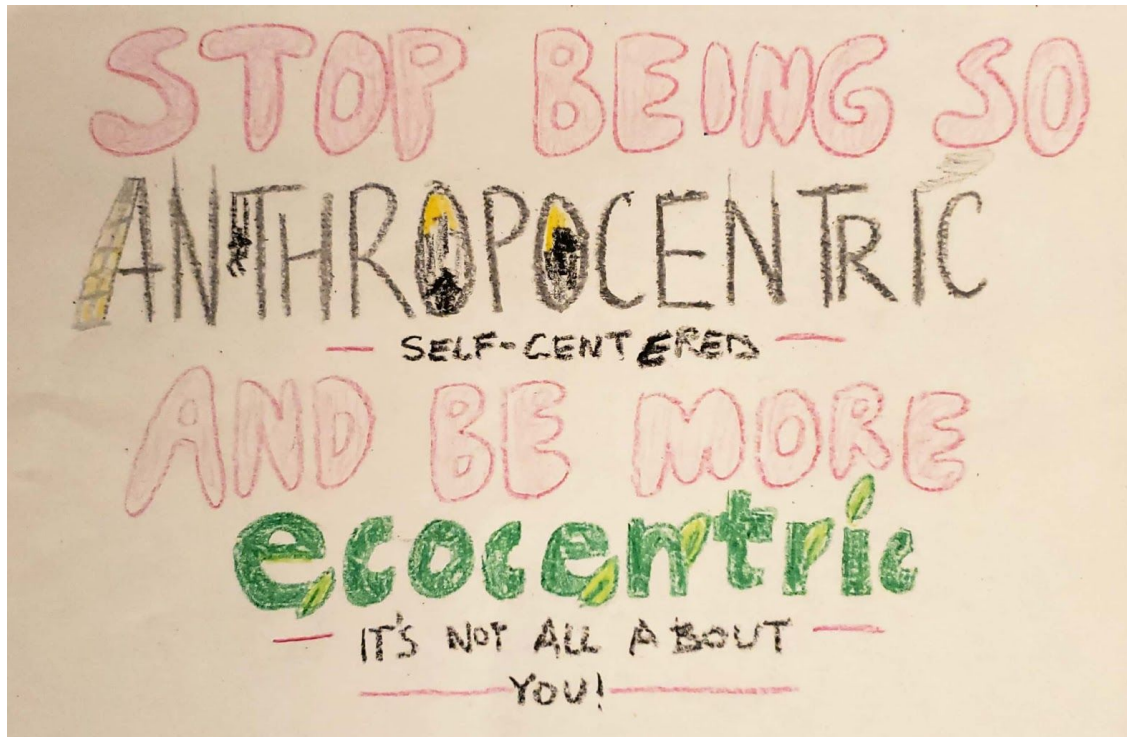
When we dig deeper, a more nuanced definition is more equitable: when there are three sides, with two of them being anthropocentric (more on that later), there is an imbalance between the needs of the “Planet” and the “People/Profit.” Indeed, the very idea that “People” and “Planet” and separate from the “planet” raises issues of defining nature, and where to draw this line. More on this later, as well.

Although I chose to use the 3 “P”s because they make for a catchy slogan, Kuhlman and Farrington (2010) suggest a more balanced definition for sustainability: “a state of affairs where the sum of natural and man-made resources remains at least constant for the foreseeable future, in order that the well-being of future generations does not decline.” I personally prefer this definition, as it does not have the same preference for the human aspect found in the 3 “P”s.

Caring for the planet, specifically for the land, is something people all across the world do and have been doing as long as there have been people. Farmers using crop rotation so as not to drain the soil of its nutrients, Aboriginal Australians doing controlled burns of the forests to allow for new growth and minimize the risk of uncontrolled fires. Stewardship of the land is one thing most civilizations have in common.

THINKING ECOCENTRICALLY

[Photo ID: This handwritten poster reads “Stop being so anthropocentric” on the top third of the page. The word anthropocentric is stylized to include human infrastructure around its letters. Directly underneath, the word “self-centered” in black capital letters appears within a pink horizontal line. The main letters then continue with “and be more ecocentric”. The word ecocentric is stylized in green with leaves decorating the letters. A final line at the bottom reads “it’s not all about you”, again in all black capital letters within a pink horizontal line.]



These posters will not be presented in order of introduction in the course, but rather in a more natural flow of my own thoughts as I was creating them.

Again, this poster is not a question and instead falls into the category of a protest poster that is a direct call to action rather than an inherent one.

“Anthropocentric” is a word from Greek “ánthrōpos,” meaning human, and “kéntron,” meaning center. It reflects a mindset that is focused on humans and what will benefit us and putting those needs, or perceived needs, above all else.

Consider the 3 “P”s: that is a more anthropocentric definition of sustainability than the Kuhlman and Farrington definition, as it places the higher value into human benefit than the planet. Many of the initiatives we heard about took caring for the environment very seriously. For example, urban development currently happening in Stockholm, including a

bridge being reconstructed in the Slussen district and the conversion of the Royal Seaport into housing, while for human benefit, is absolutely taking steps to be considerate of the environment and sustainability. The resources that come from the extant structures being torn down is being reused to the fullest extent it can be, and what isn’t being used is being dealt with as ethically as possible. Also, as the poster regarding eco-ethics discusses, they take into mind the pre-existing ecosystems of the area.

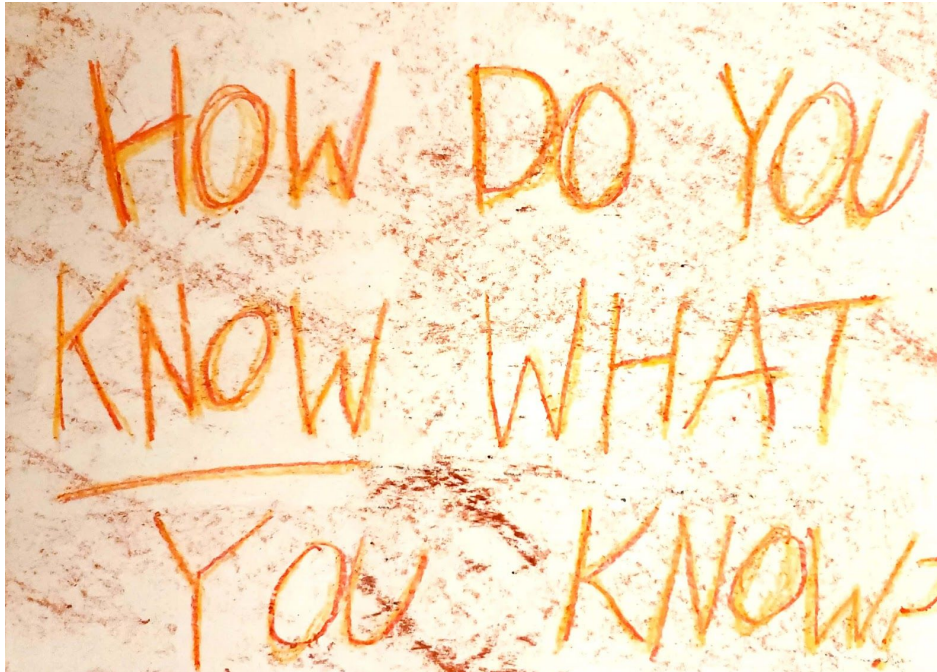
CONSTRUCTING NATURE

One of the themes we discussed, which I believe is pertinent to mention at this point, is “constructing nature.” What is nature? How do we define it? And, a question I am still not sure about: if we are to draw a line between humans and nature, where is that line? I ask you, reader, is a smartphone any less natural than the rock a bird drops on a shell to crack it open? The blurriness or perhaps non-existence of this line means we must be careful when the above two posters, which do separate the two.

It was a conscious decision not to make a poster for this theme, though. I believe that with the agenda of furthering the ideas a land activist might fight for, it is best not to bring to the forefront of the discussion the fact that humans and the things we create could, with only some argument, be considered natural. With this mindset and argument in the wrong hands, any sort of development, no matter how harmful the impact would be, could and probably would be written off as being acceptable simply because of its status as “natural.” Although the idea that humans are not really as separate from nature as we would like to believe has crossed my mind, this is an impact I had never thought of before this seminar.

QUESTIONING EPISTEMOLOGIES

[Photo ID: In all capital letters, orange words reading “how do you know what you know?” The first “know” is underlined. The background is a textured, nondescript brown.]



The look of this poster was intended to reflect the marker-on-cardboard look of many posters at protests related to the environment: it would be ironic, in fact, if people did not reuse what they have around their house to make such signs.

This also begins the series of questions. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and involves questioning how we know what we consider ourselves to know. Where did we learn that information? What is the agenda behind the medium we learned it from? And what is our own, internal agenda? People have inherent biases, as many people will learn in their introductory psychology classes. One such bias means we are more likely to believe information that agrees with what we already consider to be true. In other words, people do not like to be wrong.

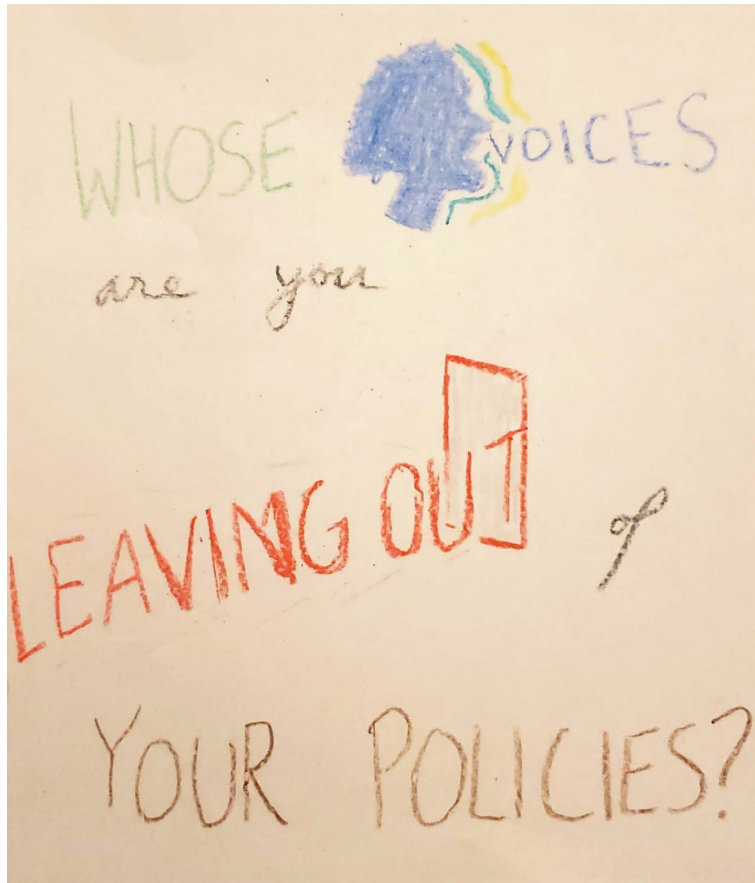
Although being wrong is scary, it is an invaluable route to growth. Being held accountable, not only for our actions but for the information we have absorbed and consider to be true, is how we learn. This poster is a call to action for the people reading it to consider what they know to be true and to examine this knowledge carefully, perhaps with the perspective of a differing opinion. Think about the people you disagree with. How

do they know what they know? It's a truly fascinating thing to consider. I can say fascinating in a theoretical sense because we are removed from it, but it is dangerous in a powerful way in practice. There are people who are genuinely racist and sexist and refuse to consider where they learned these things and to work to have more accepting beliefs. And although it is slightly scary to be wrong, it is genuinely terrifying to live in a world where people exist who hate you and believe they are absolutely right and justified in doing so.

This poster, however, in the context of a protest, would ask the viewer how they know the information upon which they are making the policies they are. Again, what is the agenda behind the information that you have been provided with? It is important for policy-makers to consider such things, and a large part of an activist's role is reminding them of this.

INVESTIGATING JUSTICE

[Photo ID: This poster reads “whose voices are you leaving out of your policies?” The word “voices” is shaped like a megaphone and positioned to come out of a facial silhouette. The words “leaving out” are drawn as if they are leaving through a door drawn on the page.]



It's in the title of the course: “Environmental Justice in Northern Europe.” But what does that mean, really? Just as with sustainability, if we were going to discuss justice, we first needed to define it.

Although if you had asked me before this class if I believed in and would fight for justice I would have said yes, I would not have been able to tell you what exactly justice meant. I think it is for that reason that I found this day's reading and discussion so compelling. We, too often, do not stop and think about the full meanings of the words we use every day.

What Schlosberg (2004) had to say about justice is that there are three key tenets of justice. No, not “People, Planet, and Profit,” this time it's “distribution, participation, and recognition.” Considering these factors is his suggested way of determining if something is just.

Distribution involves not only the resource itself but also the risk and damage that adverse effects will have. For example, Pacific Islanders have an increased risk to their homelands because of climate change.

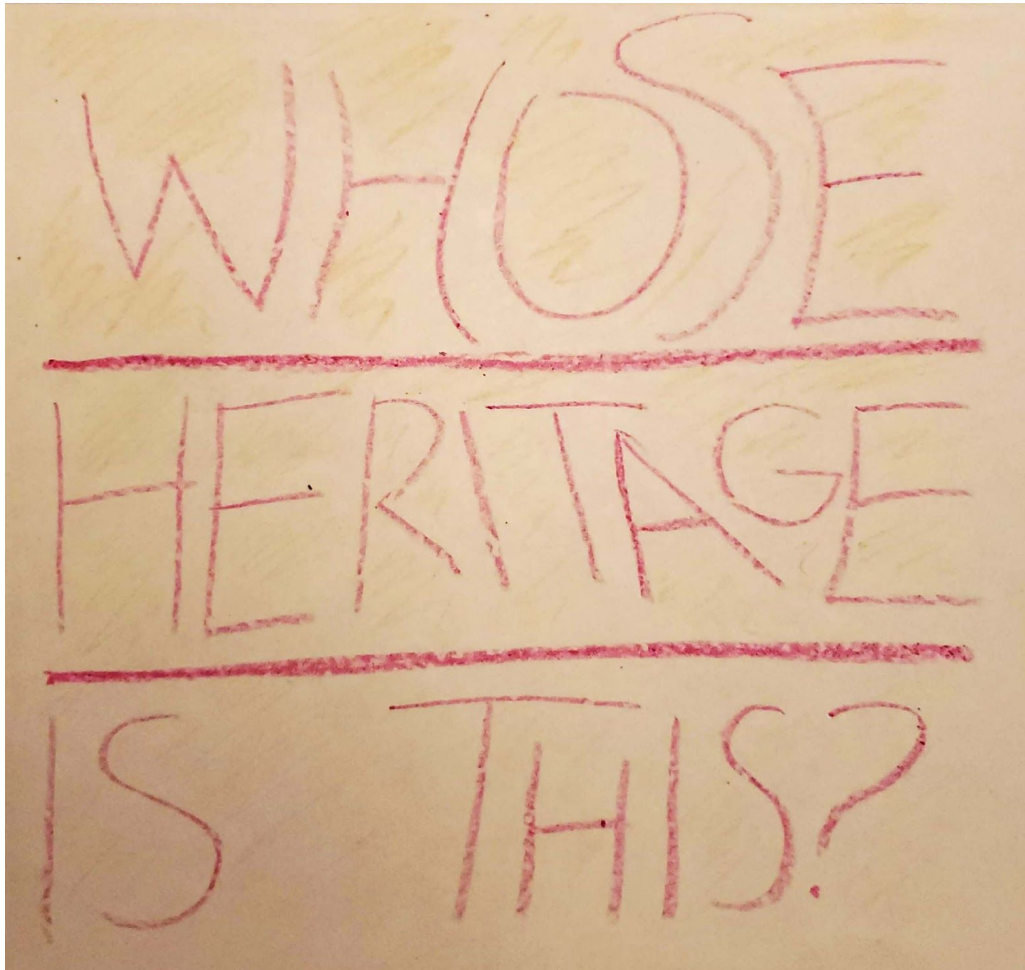
Participation involves the decision-making process and is what this poster focuses on. Who has a voice in the creation of a policy? And, as you can read in the poster, whose voices are you leaving out? Should they be included?

Recognition has to do with the various viewpoints held by different people and asks which ones need to be recognized. One interesting question that relates to this is, should people who do not believe in climate change be included in decisions involving it? Should those voices be recognized? I personally say no, but there are those who would disagree with me. None of these factors can be considered individually, as they all relate to each other. It is, as such, a hefty task to decide whether something is just, and different conclusions can and probably would be reached by two different

people considering the same action. Justice with a more specific tie into land is discussed more completely in the next poster.

VALUING HERITAGE

[Photo ID: This poster is square and has three lines of text. The phrase “whose heritage is this?” is split across these three lines in purple writing. There is a very light-colored background to add text with no discernable objects.]



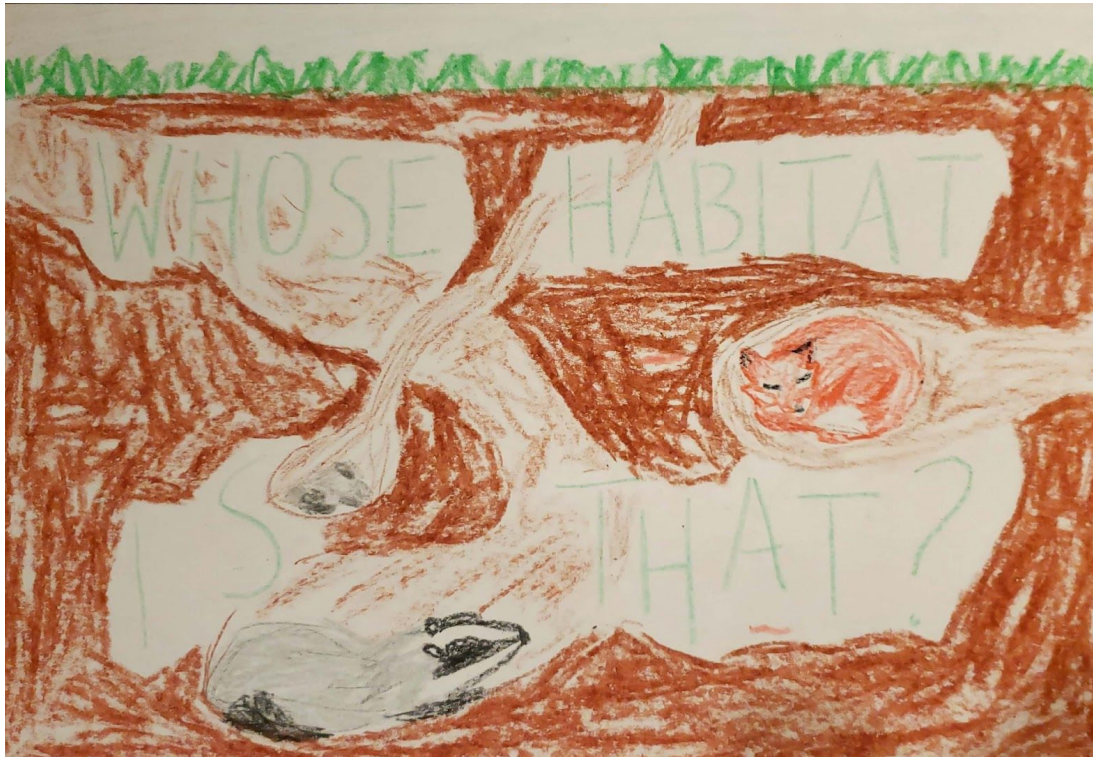
This poster ties directly into the last, with the idea of justice, namely recognition and participation. Land policy-makers have a duty to recognize those the indigenous people whose heritage is tied to the land they are on and to go out of their way to ensure that these voices have an opportunity to participate in decisions being made regarding this land.

One example that we discussed at length during our class in the Sámi people in Finland and the decisions that are made about the land they are living on. Although the Sámi have their own parliament, Sajos, they have no representation in the Finnish government and are therefore often excluded from decisions made regarding the land they are on. Although as one Sámi mentioned, they do not necessarily want complete autonomy over land management: they are simply not set up with the resources and structure to be able to deal with all of the issues that come along with that. The land team's policy brief next week will be directed at the Finnish government with suggestions on this very issue, so if you are interested in knowing more, feel free to read that next week,

This poster would be at home at any protest against developers on indigenous land, whether in Sápmi or on Mauna Kea, a Hawaiian island where researchers planned to put a telescope.

CONSIDERING ECO-ETHICS

[Photo ID: The words “Whose habitat is this?” are written in capital green letters surrounded by dirt with grass on top, as though underground. Between them, we see three different dens, each with a sleeping animal: one rabbit, one fox, and one badger.]



When developing land, the people whose heritage it is are not the only people affected: no matter where one is in the world, there is some sort of ecosystem that exists there that would be disrupted by any development made.

This poster makes its argument through the heart-warming route, as people are unfortunately often more sympathetic towards animals than they are to other people. It is a classic argument but I do not believe that makes it any less valid.

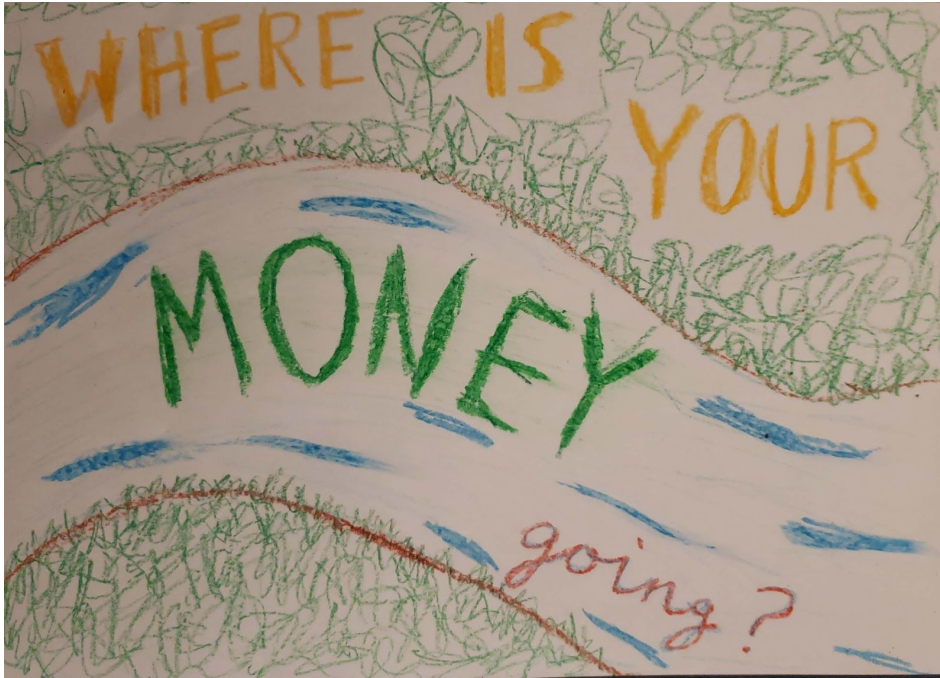
This poster ties into thinking ecocentrically, clearly, as the land developers who are thinking ecocentrically will take the time to consider the habitats they are disrupting and integrate them into their development, like the Royal Seaport in Stockholm, Sweden. They have created insect migration paths through the development because they recognized that the land they were developing was already a home for many animals. The Slussen development in Sweden did something similar, creating a fish ladder through the bridge so as not to disrupt the natural

migratory path of the native animals.

Not only does this reflect ecocentric thinking and considering eco-ethics, but also justice: animals can be amongst the voices recognized in a decision, and, when making decisions about land, definitely should be. The developers of Royal Seaport and Slussen display their dedication to eco-ethics and minimal disruption of the local ecosystem through these efforts, and more developers should take steps like the ones they are.

DEBATING ECOTOURISM

[Photo ID: The words “Where is your money going?” appear in this picture. The word “money” is written in a horizontally flowing river and the pastel it was written with has been smudged to make it look like it is going in the direction of the water. On the top and bottom of the drawn river is grass drawn around the other words.]



For me, the discussions we had on this day were some of the most thought-provoking of the class. As someone who likes both travel and minimizing my impact on other people and the environment, discussing ways to do that and some specifics media through which we affect the communities we travel in was eye-opening.

Beyond the carbon output of the transportation itself, the traveler pulls resources away from the local community because they can out-compete financially. Not only this, but the money they are dispensing often goes to multinational hotel or restaurant chains instead of remaining in the local economy, meaning that they are draining resources from the area they visit without contributing anything back.

There is also the balance for the people working in tourist attractions around their culture between making money to support their practices and simply performing their culture for profit. Not that these people should not be able to profit in any way they choose to off of their work, but the fact that at a certain point it becomes a job more than anything else. A Sámi reindeer farmer we talked to in Sápmi discussed these issues

with us, which I had never thought about before that point.

This is also extremely relevant to the Norwegian city of Flåm. During the off-season, it is a small town, but in the summer when large cruise ships travel through the fjords to visit this picturesque village, the population increases drastically. Many people make their living from working in the tourism industry, and use the off-season to recuperate. While having more tourists in the off-season provides more income, it means less rest for the people working and also for the land. A constant stream of people through the forests would leave trails where there were once none, a literal footprint of impact on the world. There is certainly a limit to the number of people this remote town has the resources for, and balancing that with income is an impressive feat.

Thank you for taking the time to browse these posters and read the accompanying text.
For further information, reach out to Mx. Benesch at mbenesch@reed.edu