Introduction:
Rethinking Geographies of Nature

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Thirty years have passed since publication of Neil Smith’s (1984) Uneven Development, a ground-breaking work that provided a foundational paradigm for a body of research that we are here referencing under the umbrella phrase “geographies of nature”. Smith’s great achievement was to boldly and persuasively argue that nature—that which is conventionally seen as external to society—is socio-materially produced. This “production of nature” thesis caught the attention, inspired the imagination and catalyzed the investigations of a generation of geographers aiming to problematize the innocence of nature. The production of nature thesis was quickly taken up by a number of geographers (e.g. Redclift 1987; Fitzsimons 1989) and then adopted and adapted throughout geography and beyond. It was also one of the main sources of inspiration for the influential concept and body of research on “social nature” (e.g. Braun and Castree 1998; Castree and Braun 2001). Recently, however, explicit attention to the social production of nature has become more implicit along with the appearance of numerous and diverse approaches to geographies of nature; including urban nature, political ecology, neoliberalization of nature, human-animal relations, hybrid geographies, and more-than-human geographies. The ironic consequence of the blossoming of highly heterogeneous approaches to nature is that the concept of nature itself has been somewhat abandoned. However, as Castree (2004) warned a decade ago, reports of the ‘death of nature’ have been exaggerated and there remains an urgent need to reassert the necessity of critically examining how nature matters in contemporary society. Thirty years after Smith’s production of nature thesis helped to catalyze critical geographical scholarship on nature, it is as imperative to reconsider the significance of nature in our times and its prospect for the future, and thus to rethink geographies of nature.

The following special issue stems from two joint sessions held at the IGU Kyoto Regional Conference 2013 under the joint auspices of IGU and the Human Geographical Society of Japan. The title and main theme of these sessions was “Rethinking Geographies of Nature”. The first session considered the relationship between the picturesque aesthetic and landscape management from cross-cultural perspectives. The second session considered the topic of rethinking geographies of nature from the perspective of imagining alternative natures. All of the articles included in the special issue originate from, or are inspired by, the papers presented during these sessions.

The joint sessions held at the IGU Kyoto Regional Conference 2013 mark the first ones at an academic meeting in Japan that have focused specifically on “geographies of nature”. Although the phrase “geographies of nature” is not frequently used in Anglophone geography, and does not constitute a clear sub-discipline, the concept of nature as socially produced through human intervention has permeated Anglophone critical geography during the last thirty years. Yet in academic geography in Japan, relatively few studies have explicitly examined the social
production of nature. A great deal of research has focused on nature-society relations. However, as noted by Asano and Nakashima (2013), there is a serious paucity of geographical literature in Japan that has engaged with the vast literature in critical and radical geography on the social production of nature.

With this critical gap in mind, this special issue aims to spur discussion on socially produced nature in Japanese geography, and also contribute to the international discussion on geographies of nature. However, our purpose here is not limited to academic debate. As Smith (2008: 245) pointed out, the socially produced nature of our times is enrolled in the dominant regime of global capitalism and neoliberalism and is then “a new super determinant of our social fate”. It is therefore necessary for us to radically criticize the way in which “establishment environmentalism” mobilizes socially produced nature for reinforcing the dominant regime, and construct alternative productions of nature for a “revolutionary environmentalism” (Smith 1998).

The papers in this issue are grouped into three sections, each approaching the question of nature from quite different perspectives. The first group — “Representation and Visuality of Nature” — includes three papers critically investigating the links between nature and culture. First, Tachibana examines the production of Japanese gardens in early twentieth century Britain in order to problematize the construction of exotic natures. This is followed by Watkins examination of how Uvedale Price’s conceptualization of the picturesque shaped nineteenth century notions of nature, art and landscape. Finally a paper by Mori shifts focus to Japan and to the political role of nature by focusing on the way in which localness and nationhood were produced through the formation of national parks and natural landscapes.

In our second group — “Politics and Economy of Nature” — two papers interrogate the relationship between international economy and environment on local sites of production and conservation. Asano demonstrates that the concept of “wise use” of Ramsar wetlands in Japan serves mostly to affirm and maintain conventional relations between local residents and wetlands, but has also begun to be used as a basis for regional development plans. While some sites are targets for conservation and recreation, others are targeted appropriation to feed the global economy. Iga discusses the globalization of food and its social and spatial consequences, focusing on the ways in which food supplies are disembedded from their local context by agribusiness.

Finally, under the heading — “New Horizons for the Production of Nature” — two papers critically reflect on Smith’s production of nature thesis and attempt to stake out some critical horizons for taking that thesis forward from today. Nakashima examines the struggle of local people in southern Japan against US and Japanese troops continued use and appropriation of their farmland for a maneuver field from the perspective of “alternative productions of nature”. Bolthouse argues that there is an urgent need and opportunity to move from the production of nature as thesis to a world-ecological synthesis of the actual historical geography of the capitalist production of nature. He pushes in this direction through a review and critique of the “world-ecology perspective”, a knowledge frontier advanced by geographer Jason W. Moore that provides a key pathway forward for revitalizing geographies of nature.

Notes

1. In addition to his key contribution to critical studies of nature through his conceptualization of the production of nature thesis, Neil Smith made original and profound contributions to various fields of geographical research; including gentrification, the politics of scale, production of space and history of geography. However, for Smith, the issue of nature remained central to his wide-ranging research interests (Loftus 2012).
2. The actual title of the first session was "Rethinking geographies of nature (1): Picturesque, natures, and landscape management: cross-cultural perspectives". The keynote speaker for this panel session was Charles Watkins (University of Nottingham). Discussants included Setsu Tachibana (Kobe Yamate University), Hirokazu Oku (Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute), Masato Mori (Mie University), and Koji Nakashima (Kanazawa University).

3. The actual title of the second session was "Rethinking geographies of nature (2): Imagining nature in alternative ways". Presenters included Koji Nakashima (Kanazawa University), Jay Bolthouse (University of Tokyo), Noriko Ishiyama (Meiji University), and Marcella Schmidt Di Friedberg (University of Milano-Bicocca).

4. The author has attended several international conferences where sessions were titled "geographies of nature": including a "Geographies of Nature" session at the Third International Conference of Critical Geography in Békéscsaba, Hungary, 2002; a "Geographies of Nature" session at the Fourth International Conference of Critical Geography in Mexico City, 2005; and a "Critical geographies of nature" session at the Fifth East Asian Regional Conference in Alternative Geography (EARCAG) in Seoul, South Korea, 2008.

References


