Twenty Years of Constructing Constructions

The “social construction of nature” (SCON) is a common theoretical approach to interpreting social groups’ relationships with the non-human world. Yet its conceptual underpinnings, and its practical consequences, often are overlooked, and new approaches insist that SCON is outdated. Rik Scarce has been employing SCON for twenty years, applying it to salmon biologists’ constructions of salmon, ranchers’ constructions of wolves, radical environmentalists’ constructions of nature, and, most recently, the construction of the entire Hudson River region as a locus of sustainability. Drawing from those studies—with a particular emphasis on his Hudson region study—Rik will argue that it is inevitable that we construct nature and that constructions typically reveal as much about those doing the constructing as about the things being constructed. In short, SCONs are actually SCOSs: constructions of society.

Rik is the author of Creating Sustainable Communities: Lessons from the Hudson River Region (State University of New York Press, 2015) and the filmmaker of the parallel documentary, Sustaining This Place: Creating a New Hudson River Region Landscape (Gruppo Zero Productions, 2015). In addition, Rik has authored three books: Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement; Contempt of Court: One Scholar’s Battle for Free Speech from Behind Bars; and Fishy Business: Salmon, Biology, and the Social Construction of Nature. His other scholarly works include articles and book chapters on the social construction of nature in the law, research ethics, and public participation in regulatory proceedings. Rik earned his Ph.D. in sociology in 1995 from Washington State University; his B.A. from Stetson University and his M.A. from the University of Hawaii are both in political science. Prior to joining the Skidmore faculty in 2003, he taught at Michigan State and Montana State.