Sports, Environmentalism, Land Use, and Urban Development

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What happens when sport meets nature? Sports Illustrated (SI) answered this question in March 2007 with an issue devoted to global warming. As its cover makes clear, SI’s forecast is one of imminent danger: Dontrelle Willis, the Florida Marlins’ pitcher, stands knee-deep in water in Miami Gardens’ emptied Dolphin Stadium. Holding his baseball glove, Willis grimly meets the reader’s gaze. The copy reads: “As the planet changes, so do the games we play.” In smaller print, a message is added: “Time to pay attention.”

With diminishing snowfall and warmer winters, the magazine reports, world famous ski resorts have been forced to cut their ski seasons and begin protecting “their” glaciers by wrapping them with football-field-sized foil sheets to keep sunlight out (Wolff, 2007, p. 43). To highlight the acute risks of environmental change, another article asks readers to consider the kinetic effects of thinning air on bodily capacities and objects: “Would Willie Mays have caught [his famous] ball today?” The question’s author, Alexander Wolff, quotes physicist Alan Nathan to suggest that the increase in average temperatures by 1.17˚ since 1954 would have allowed the ball to travel an extra 2 inches, leaving Mays empty-handed on the late September day that made him into a baseball legend.

In addition, the expansion of the ash borer (beetle) habitat further north is reported to threaten harvests of timber, the source for production of the big leagues’ baseball bats. To underscore more disturbing possibilities, SI draws its readers’ attention to the rising levels of water expected to flood coastal areas in the United States by 2100—a scenario that leaves 13 nationally acclaimed stadiums (including, for example, Tropicana Field in St. Petersberg, the Orange Bowl in Miami, Monster Park in San Francisco, and Oracle Arena in Oakland)—deep under water.

No doubt, the alarming images of flooded stadiums and mountains wrapped up in foil like a Christo sculpture send a warning and directive to sports fans to think seriously about the environment. Yet what is most striking about SI’s “green” issue is not its portrayal of sport’s vulnerability to global warming, but the way it represents environmentally vulnerable sport in isolation from the rest of the world. As major stadiums are
flooded and skiing resorts destroyed, what happens to the people who work and live in the area? What happens to entire cities, economies, and industries, but also to animals, plants, and wildlife living in and nearby stadiums? What about toxic waste that has been disposed of in the fragile costal areas of Florida within driving distance of Tropicana Field and St. Pete Times Forum? Furthermore, as ash borer destroy timber for baseball bats, what effects might such invasive species have on emergent diseases? Will we even have enough food? Who will bear the brunt of these ecological shifts?

We, like SI, suggest that sports are not immune to global environmental change. But more important, we show that sports cannot be understood apart from the changes in social relations and political processes that accompany large-scale environmental transformations. Just like the tragic events in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina that drew thousands of the most underprivileged citizens in the United States to search for shelter in the Louisiana Superdome, the use of sporting facilities—whether indoors or outdoors—is deeply implicated in issues of social justice, exclusion, development, and power. Sports, as actual places and practices, embody governments, political careers, media infrastructures, capital investments, and modalities of ethics in late modernist societies. These relationships are tested, managed, exploited, and reinvented in contexts of environmental devastation.

Today we are faced with environmental issues of global proportions such as climate change, pollution, conflicts over water rights and land use, major shifts in ecosystems, and natural resource depletion. These problems present challenges to neoliberal economic models, consumerist societies, and unfettered development. Attentive to these developments, this issue of Journal of Sports and Social Issues (JSSI) explores the environmental dimensions of sporting activities and industries and the complicated, dynamic relationship between sports and nature including land use and urban development. We begin by first situating “nature” in human systems and vice versa. This issue’s editors and authors approach the environment as a complex set of relations that includes human, technical, and natural dimensions. Drawing from a growing body of work in environmental studies and insights from science and technology studies and sociology of the body, we recognize that human activities and communities are fundamentally altered by environmental conditions and processes, while our own lives on Earth shape our planet in profound, perhaps irrevocable ways.

As illustrated by SI’s “green” issue, environmental concerns have recently moved from the margins of “liberal” agendas to mainstream media; and, their currency has accelerated in corporate headquarters, marketing departments, and advertising story boards. For example, in response to criticisms about expansive use of land, toxic pollution of both soil and water, overuse of water resources as well as exclusionary politics and exploitation from environmental groups and local media, the golf industry introduced the “Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards.” Presented annually by Golf Digest Magazine to superintendents of what the magazine editors and experts consider to be “the leaders of environmental stewardship” in golfing, these awards started to define the parameters of “organic” golf. With the origins of environmental
Marketing at the Sydney Summer Olympics in 2000, environmentalism is now inseparable from the Olympic brand. Similarly, the most controversial issues surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympics were air pollution, water use, greenhouse gas emissions, and human rights to live in healthy environments.

Despite such *greening* of mainstream leisure industries and the resurgence of environmental discourses in popular culture, connections between sports and its environments continue to be relatively understudied in scholarly work. In the past three decades, only a handful—specifically, 14—articles were published within two major peer-reviewed journals in sociology of sports, this journal and the *International Review for Sport Sociology (IRSS)*. Of these 14 articles, 6 appeared in the 1998 *IRSS* special issue on sports and the environment.

Within environmental studies and environmental sociology, sports as sites where economies and industries intersect with biophysical worlds are also often overlooked. The journals *Society and Natural Resources, Environmental Politics, Political Ecology, Environment and Planning A and D*, and *Human Ecology Review* published a handful of articles within the past two decades that directly addressed the socioecological imprints of sports, signaling little change from the mid-1970s mindset that classified sports within environmental sociology’s low-ranking subfield of “recreation and leisure.” This may be due to the misconception that sports are disconnected from labor, inequalities, social movements, and developmental politics, as well as to a disciplinary gaze that sees “true” environmental issues in terms of ecodisasters, social movements, national parks and wilderness preserves, resource management issues, and economic relations.

This special issue seeks to fill the gap in scholarship. Here, we cross-pollinate environmental sociology’s commitment to social and environmental justice with the sociology of sports’ focus on embodied experiences of human activity and corresponding issues of labor, power, and inequalities in leisure economies. In addition, we draw on the work of geographers of sport who have more inclusively examined sporting landscapes by theorizing relationships between spaces and social relations. And we borrow from a critical ecofeminist tradition that has emphasized the connection between exploitation of nature and social (specifically gender) inequalities. This special issue contributes to and extends debates in these fields with the aim of rethinking the connectedness of social inequalities, environmental issues, and sports.

More specifically, the articles featured here extend our understanding that “nature” is not a pristine, sacred space (e.g., Mother Nature, Goddess Earth, Eden) external to human meanings and endeavors. This does not mean that humans created nature nor that we control it, despite our repeated efforts to harness natural resources for our own purposes. What it does mean is that *nature*, as Raymond Williams, Arturo Escobar, William Cronon, Donna Haraway, and many others show, is intricately woven into human activities and that human activities, including movement of sporting bodies through space and time, can and do deeply affect the environment.

Moreover, the articles here recognize that environmental issues encompass social justice issues: Environmentalism no longer focuses solely on land and its (mis)uses but
also includes the interrelated human dimensions of racism, hazardous waste siting, poverty, and development. Environmental studies has tracked shifts in activism from 19th-century wilderness conservation to 20th-century justice movements. Where once privileged White men (and some women) worked to save park-like settings for limited use, people of color and low-income people now advocate to keep their homes safe from the perils of industrial effluvia and toxic releases. Land use refers not only to who has access to clear rivers and untrammeled mountain passes but also to where industries decide to locate their manufacturing and disposal facilities and who may be affected.

Finally, rather than analytically constructing nature only as a prism for viewing and understanding social relations, we view nature as a structuring agent in the production of power, hierarchies, human subjectivities, and political realities. Natural and social relations are, we show, intimately connected. Many case studies on sports and the environment tend to restrict nature to a signifier. By focusing on mountaineering, surfing, hunting, and extreme sports, some approaches have adopted an anthropocentric perspective wherein the environment becomes a vehicle for mediating social relations and identities. In these studies, nature is assumed to be a neutral and static background against which able-bodied, typically male athletes perform their identities, where cultural myths are reinvented, and where ideologies are contested. This special issue moves beyond this approach to reconsider environments—and more specifically urban environments—as constitutive agents in the production and maintenance of social relations.

When we issued a call for our special issue “Sports and Environmental Politics,” we received many excellent proposals—more than enough, in fact, to produce two special theme issues. This first issue focuses on sports and land use. The second issue, to be published August 2009, focuses on sports and sporting “bodies in the wild”. “Sports, Environmentalism, Land Use, and Urban Development” includes an interdisciplinary group of papers representing cultural studies (Sze), sociology (Vivoni and Atkinson), geography (Tranter), and communications (Lowes). The authors take a critical approach to studying environmental dimensions of sports in the United States (Sze, Vivoni), Australia (Tranter and Lowes), and Canada (Atkinson).

The first article, by Julie Sze, examines conflict over the siting of a professional sports stadium in central Brooklyn, New York. Using a framework of environmental justice studies, Sze traces the emergence of unexpected alliances between developers and local groups who are most likely to bear the brunt of this development project. Through a detailed analysis of how the Atlantic Yards developers employed Brooklyn’s collective identities, history and nostalgia in their attempts to sell the stadium to local citizens, Sze shows how they succeeded in connecting to social and racial identities, exploiting labor issues, and preventing groups from forming coalitions. But Sze goes beyond placing blame on the corporate developer, the Forrest City Ratner Companies, to expose how conflicts over sports siting are embedded in historical processes, racial inequalities, the framing of stakeholder positions, and the (in)ability of those with the least access to resources to shape the struggle for environmental justice. Sze engages and challenges environmental justice frameworks to
consider land use in the context of divergent motivations for public mobilization as well as the contested geographies of neoliberalism.

Francisco Vivoni considers skateboarding at the intersection of alternative sports, spatial regulation ideologies and practices, and the politics of cooptation and commercialization. Vivoni advances a below-the-knees approach for examining skateboarding terrains—railings, asphalt, and scuff—to map the politics of urban land use as it plays out on the ground. More important, such a methodological approach allows Vivoni to move away “from in-the-sky spectacle to on-the-ground everyday routines.” By carefully investigating concrete surfaces, Vivoni shows contestations and competition for spaces among skateboarders, BMX riders, and aggressive inline skaters who leave different traces on the ground, as well as the efforts of cities and states to police urban spaces by erasing these marks and barring the movement of “undisciplined” groups. Vivoni draws connections between and across material spaces, mediascapes, marketplaces, and neoliberal ideologies. At the center of his project is the question of inclusion: Vivoni argues for a more inclusive city that opens spaces for alternative forms of movement and play.

David Tranter and Mark Lowes challenge a widely held assumption that sport development is beneficial for cities, urban economies, and local communities. Looking at the staging of mega-sports in Australian cities, they examine the links between sports and health—broadly defined as environmental health, economic well-being, and public health. Tranter and Lowes focus on “place marketing” as it is used to rationalize sport development. Citing numerous economic analyses and public health studies, the authors demonstrate as unfounded and misleading the often cited claims that building sport facilities and staging mega-sport events provide a boost to the economic well-being of the host city. They not only critique assumptions about sports as tools of urban “improvement,” but they show how sport development projects and mega-sport events conceal private interests and corporate investments under a facade of public good. More important, by taking a holistic approach to urban and sport development, Tranter and Lowes argue that the location of motorsport events in Australian cities reinforces societal values that undermine public health concerns and environmental issues.

In the final article, Michael Atkinson explores free running to draw connections between the experiences of traversing urban spaces and fostering self/other–environment connections. Using ethnographic data on the Parkour movement in Toronto, Atkinson examines a “physical, cultural lifestyle” that maps bodies onto landscapes in novel ways. Parkour, a combination of corporeal gymnastic techniques in urban settings, redefines “pedestrian” as it challenges established definitions of use of space in cities. The article makes a compelling case that Parkour destabilizes technocapitalist meanings of a city landscape and brings forth experiences of poiesis as well as physical and spiritual self in its practitioners. Building on the work of Heidegger, Schopenhauer, and Lefebvre, Atkinson traces the transformation of the sport from a form of training in “natural” environments in France’s colonial frontiers in the early 20th century to running in the centers of contemporary metropoles as a way of experiencing and challenging the politics of
urban development, consumer society, and (post)industrialization. He frames free running as an emerging “anarcho-environmental” movement, a practice that deconstructs taken-for-granted understandings of urban environments. The article offers an original analysis of individual and collective use of urban spaces as well as new ways of understanding how power is built into urban structures.

A number of themes emerged in and across these articles. Prominent among these is a critique of the sterilized capitalist city whose built environments reproduce the logic of market economies and neoliberal ideologies. With the designation of urban areas for single-use purposes, sprawling Western cities such as those profiled here (e.g., Brooklyn, Canberra, Portland, San Bernadino, Toronto) are separated into districts organized according to functions of labor, leisure, and living as well as income levels of those who occupy them. Embodying the constructed notions of “safety,” efficiency, market value, and consumerism, modern cities separate and classify human practices through built environments. As a result, such a spatial organization (re)produces social inequalities, shreds social fabric, and eliminates public spaces and culture by sanitizing and isolating groups and individuals of different race and ethnic backgrounds, age, gender and sexual orientation, physical ability, life experiences, and social standing.

In sports, attempts to maintain spatial boundaries and social order are particularly obvious as certain moving bodies are explicitly barred from entering spaces where they do not “belong.” By installing automated sprinkler systems, TV cameras, obstacles such as concertina wire on railings, and signs, as well as summoning the police, cities discipline the “unruly” bodies of skateboarders and free runners who enter and disrupt the “orderly” flow of commodities, businesspersons, capital, and technologies. These processes of power permit sports only in designated, commercialized (and often expensive) places. At the same time, creative intrusions such as scuff, graffiti, and do-it-yourself skateboarding playgrounds are considered as material(ized) signs of social deviance and are quickly removed. As a result, cities emerge as sites of “exclusion with graffiti-proof walls, TV cameras, automated sprinkler systems, pigeon-proof ledges and burn-proof benches” (Vivoni).

Architecture and the built environment are central to policing people’s bodily movements. Unlike an articulation of power that produces and is produced by a self-reflexive and self-disciplined population, the environmental and material power profiled here works by physically (re)directing the movement of bodies, including their containment within designated sporting facilities. The articles in this issue draw attention to the relations among technologies and geographies of exclusion, “tacit” forms of discipline, neoliberalism, and land use. However, when such tacit forms fail to manage bodies, other forms of neoliberal discipline, such as police power, may be called upon by those in power. Akin to the criminology theory of “broken windows,” by which urban decay is understood to bring social decline and vice versa, anxiety about nonstandard pedestrian practices and movements reveals the power structures behind notions of which bodies belong where. Scuffs and graffiti, like broken windows, invoke hysteria about social decline and the collapse of social order.
The sterilization and control of landscapes has far-reaching implications. The authors argue that privatization of open public spaces by private developments “symbolically promote[s] the architecture of neoliberalism” (Sze). While heavily dependent on state subsidies and public money, Sze and Atkinson suggest, “commercial ordering of city space and the architectural determination of movement reproduces the tacit logic of market capitalism itself.” In tracking the movements of nonconforming bodies and responses to these by disciplinary agents, the authors show how power works.

In addition, the authors highlight a pivotal contradiction between sports and the environment: between sports as leisure, games, and recreation and sports as labor, industry, and development. As a leisure activity, sports are considered as an opportunity to protect public health, promote healthy lifestyles, conserve nature, enable local community building, and invite environmental education. Yet this image of sports often obscures the pervasive use of scarce natural resources to manufacture sporting goods and spaces (e.g., water for golf courses), radical alterations in natural habitats to make them amenable for sport activities (e.g., building ski resorts and lodges), conspicuous consumption of apparel, equipment and memorabilia, the unequal access to facilities and sport, unjust politics of waste dumping, and sweatshop labor. The authors here explore the convergence of sport’s two “faces”—sometimes complementary, often contradictory. Showcasing diverse sites and research materials, the authors grapple with the question of how human experiences of play collide with the (re)production of power relations and inequalities in globalizing sport industries.

Sze and Tranter and Lowes in particular contribute to a third theme, the politics of place marketing and sport development. They show how marketing strategies are increasingly employed by cities hoping to parlay development into increased tourism, property values, tax incomes, and city budgets. They point out common misperceptions about sports development, improved city images, increased employment opportunities for locals, and enhanced city budgets in the face of growing global competition. “As ideological projects,” argues Sze, “sports and tourism are a central part of how cities and nations ‘brand’ themselves in the global economy” and thus attempt to remain competitive.

Tranter and Lowes, however, demonstrate that common sense beliefs about sports being good for the cities are simply wrong. They cite economic analyses that show that staging mega-sport events and/or building major sport facilities most often comes at the expense of the public who subsidizes such developments, while profits go directly to corporate and small businesses. They present data showing that mega-sport events strain local resources, increase traffic and pollution, displace local communities, consume scarce resources, dramatically increase waste and, in so doing, pose public health risks associated with mass consumption. Located in the most spectacular and valued parts of the city, these enterprises embody commercial interests while also revealing a major shift in public values by suggesting that the city “favors the consumer over the citizen” (Sze). Not only do spectacular sport facilities and events negatively affect local economies, public health, and experiences of citizenship but they also paradoxically undermine the
values of environmental and public health though promotion of conspicuous consumption (Tranter and Lowes). But what all of these articles also suggest is that the lines between public and private and commercial interests have been blurred and that these new relationships need to be mapped and understood.

A fourth major theme is that of industrial versus do-it-yourself sports. In addition to the development of commercial megasports, there are other or “alternative” forms of exercise and play. Examples presented in this special issue include skateboarding and free running. These sports are based on a different approach to bodies, spaces, play, and ownership. Unlike commercial sports that depend on professionalization, spectatorship, and capital, these sporting practices are centered on one’s unfettered/undisciplined interaction with the environment. They have the power of transforming any urban space into a play zone: “Spaces [produced through alternative sports] . . . are found on use and pleasure rather than exchange and accumulation” (Vivoni). Atkinson defines these as “post-sport” practices that disrupt technocapitalist special order.

Reading the four articles together highlights the tensions and contradictions between private and public spaces, between “free” and “disciplined” sporting bodies, between sport for play and sport for profit, between indoor and outdoor sporting environments, between built and unfettered landscapes, between economic development and social justice, and between institutions and people. Attention to conflicts about land use and space, and the appropriate movements and places of bodies, reveals the place of sport in contemporary networks of power. Sporting landscapes, and specifically urban spaces, are understood to be contested environments, zones of social inequality, and physical regimes of discipline. Mapping these urban settings, and the bodies and practices contained within them, tells an important story about the power of nature—that is, our understandings of space—and the nature of power.

References


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