



INTERDEPENDENCE: an interdisciplinary exploration

British Antarctic Survey, 7pm 29th March – 5pm 30th March

Aims of the seminar series:

- To test the potential and limits of applying the concept of 'interdependence' to contemporary environmental change debates, and to consider the work it might do within these debates by comparison with 'sustainability/sustainable development'
- To nourish the public communications strands of the Interdependence Day project, finding new ways of carrying academic research into public debate
- To generate academic publications and webcast material directly from the seminars

The Interdependence seminars create some space for creative conversations along a theme that we believe to be of urgent relevance. In addition to generating traditional academic outputs the seminar series will contribute intellectual underpinning to the Interdependence Day (ID) public communications project. We will be working with a broadcast/web journalist to record and narrowcast material from the series. The seminars will nourish thinking about the content and direction of the public event and web components of ID (see www.interdependenceday.co.uk). We also intend to generate proposals for arts and media commissions and will be inviting participants to contribute materials for a multi-authored 'Encyclopedia of Interdependence' that will be web and/or print published.

You will see from the first seminar programme (attached) that much of the work will be conducted in small groups, and group discussion that we will record and work from in the weeks that follow. Through the course of the series the seminars will involve an unusual mix of natural and social scientists, policy, arts and media participants. Interdisciplinary working is demanding, and the outcomes – often less immediate or easily categorised than disciplinary working - can be frustrating. The design of the seminars seeks to overcome some of these problems and to provoke us all to step outside the comforting familiarity of our individual disciplines and practices.

Seminar I Interdependence (29/30th March, British Antarctic Survey, Cambridge)

There are debates and concepts circulating that refer to or hint at 'interdependence' as a powerful underlying theme. These include sustainability / sustainable development, global environmental change research and studies of dimensions of globalization and development. But many of these terms and issues, and their implications are often not well understood by the public. One of the tasks of the first seminar will be to start to explore the potency of the concept of interdependence as a means of communicating the state of knowledge about the relationship between global environmental and social change. The second, related, task is to look at the practice of the science of environmental change. Such research offers some of the most potent resources for thinking about the world in terms of interdependence. Using the case study of Antarctica and the Polar Regions we will investigate the scientific practices that have contributed to an understanding of climate change in the BAS labs.

This is our starting point for looking at how this kind of work invites particular kinds of ethical responses that are rarely discussed explicitly within academia. Polar scientists have seen their research travel from the periphery to the centre of political and ethical debates about global warming, environmental change and sustainability. How do these debates about future change force us to consider the work that knowledge does in the world today?

The seminar will discuss people's experience of bringing new knowledge into the world about environmental change, and will explore the provocative questions raised in the process.

Seminar 2: Response - Responsibilities? Autumn 2006 (one day) Kew Gardens TBC

The second meeting will pick up the question that we anticipate the BAS meeting will conclude with: what kind of response is demanded by the conclusions of research into global environmental change? Is the placing of conclusions of research within the context of global environmental change and sustainable development debates driving academics towards implicit ethical / political positions? Are researchers working on environmental change issues being delivered into a form of determinism regarding the interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental change? How do the interests of 'distant others' (both human and non-human; distant in both space and time) express themselves in current academic work in these areas? This second seminar will create space for researchers to reflect on the kinds of ethical/political commitments arising from their work. We intend to hold this at Kew Gardens, and anticipate making biodiversity research the hub of the case-based part of the meeting. This seminar will explore the distinctive nature of the responses and responsibilities demanded by working on global environmental and social change issues.

Seminar 3: Translations & Mediations Spring 2007 (two day) Windsor TBC

The movement of research findings out of academia and into policy and public debate has been a stated goal of governments and research councils since global environmental change issues emerged. This seminar will create an opportunity for researchers and research 'users' to reflect on their experiences and consider the nature of the relationship between the research and policy communities. We will contain this broad theme by looking at particular cases selected with reference to discussion in the first two seminars. Following academics' experiences of the journeys through the policy process made by their work it is intended that ways of working between academia and the policy community will be critically explored and new modes considered.

What is the career of concepts and findings once they move from academic or policy communities into wider public realms? The seminar will move beyond the apportioning of blame amongst shy or overcomplicated academics; lazy journalists; ratings obsessed media companies and dull(ed) audiences. Instead it will look at the life of ideas as they move through the broadcast media, the arts, schools and museums. It will consider the way that the mediating of ideas transforms as well as translates them. The meeting will also look at possibilities for bringing the public into the prioritising of scientific research.

Seminar 4: Creativity Autumn 2007 (one day) Tate Modern TBC

The final seminar will consider how research brings new ideas, materials and processes into the world. Environmental change – including human-induced change – is inevitable. Environmentalism has promoted the need for cautious, conserving, caring responses to the world around us. But this response may deny the fact (and desirability) of dynamic and interconnected human and natural worlds. The novel challenges and demands we face may need a more open-ended and experimental response. Amongst other things, the notion of 'interdependence' raises questions about how we might face up to the tension between caring for things that exist, and creating the conditions for new things to emerge; between precaution and risk taking.

This concluding meeting will ask whether there are more productive ways for the media, arts, policy communities, sciences and social thought to work together to reveal and explore the extent and significance of interdependencies. The seminar will affirm the importance of, and seek to inspire, creativity in understanding and responding to an interdependent world.