

Emergence and Evolution of Environmental Discourses in South Korea

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Abstract

This paper attempts a discursive approach to modern environmentalism in South Korea with a focus on examining how environmental discourse emerged and evolved during the period of modernization in Korea, what kind of environmental discourses exist, how they are related to each other, and what each of them reflects. By doing so, the paper tries to figure out the social configuration in which environmentalism, a social ideology crystallized from environmental discourse, becomes politicized through an interaction between societal actors in state and civil society. In conclusion, implications are drawn on the contributions and limits of environmental discourses in the Korean society.

Keywords: environmental perception, environmental discourse, developmentalism, environmentalism, ecological value

Introduction

Many popular polls show that ordinary Koreans regard environmental problems as a priority agenda which society as a whole should address, not only right now but also for the future (Cho 2001). It does not mean that environmental problems are so acute as to threaten the well-being of society, but rather that the environment is perceived as an integral part of their life world which should be kept in harmony with the natural order. This may be a result of social awareness regarding the importance of the environment. In everyday life, people are easily engaged in environmental debates, by reading newspapers, seeing TV news and documentaries, and participating in public debates or campaigns, all dealing with the environment. It may therefore be natural that environmental debate constitutes the largest segment of the public sphere in South Korea's nascent civil society, as indicated by the fact that environmental NGOs occupy almost more than half of 24,000 registered NGOs in South Korea (hereafter, Korea). In fact, to the extent that, for ordinary Koreans, the terms "civil organization" or "NGO" refer automatically to environmental organizations, Korean environmental NGOs have the strongest and loudest voice in civil society. It is a paradoxical result of the non-democratic manner in which the authoritarian state in Korea has promoted industrialization. Debates on environmental issues in civil society involve two compound issues: one related to development, the other to the state. This suggests that people's concern for the environment reflects their wishes for a better living environment protected from development and for a democratic society.

Environmental concern is socialized through public debates, discussions and campaigns where people are engaged in talking about, exchanging, and sharing their views towards the surrounding environment. We call this kind of public act environmental discourse, which is tentatively defined as a constellation of narratives that people develop about the environment. This paper attempts a discursive approach to modern environmentalism in Korea, with a focus on examining how environmental discourse emerged and evolved during

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the period of modernization, what kind of environmental discourses exist, how they are related to each other, and what each of them reflects. By doing so, the paper tries to figure out the social configuration in which environmentalism, a social ideology crystallized from environmental discourse, becomes politicized through an interaction between societal actors in the state and civil society. In conclusion, implications are drawn on the contributions and limits of environmental discourses in Korean society.

A Discourse Approach to Environmentalism

The concept of discourse plays an increasingly significant role in contemporary social science by generating various discourse approaches to social phenomena. For some, discourse analysis is a very narrow enterprise that concentrates on a single utterance, or at most a conversation between two people. Others see discourse as synonymous with the entire social system, in which discourses literally constitute the social and political world (Howarth 2000, 2). As with other concepts in social sciences, the meaning and application of discourse is relative to the different theoretical systems in which it is embedded.

Generally speaking, positivists and empiricists argue that discourses are best viewed as frames or cognitive schemata, by which they mean the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion a shared understanding of the world and of those that legitimate and motivate collective action (McAdam et al. 1996, 6). Viewed as frames, discourses are primarily instrumental devices that can foster common perceptions and understandings for specific purposes.

By contrast, realist accounts of discourse place much greater emphasis on what they call the ontological dimensions of discourse theory and analysis. For them, discourses are regarded as particular objects with their own properties and powers, in which case it is necessary to focus on language as a structured system in its own right. This approach stresses the underlying material resources, such as social orders and symbolic systems, which make discourse possible,

and the task of discourse analysis is to examine the historical and political construction and functioning of discourses. While sharing the underlying assumptions of realism or structuralism, Marxists stress the ways in which discourses have to be explained by reference to the contradictory processes of economic production and reproduction. In this regard, discourses are viewed as ideological systems of meaning that obfuscate and naturalize uneven distributions of power and resources.

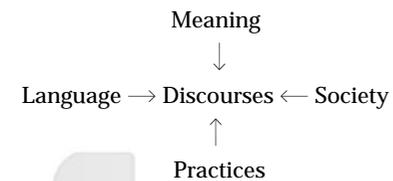


Figure 1. A Structure of Discourse

Thus, discourse is an interface between language and society through signifying practices or a system of meaning (see fig. 1). Discourses are basically linguistic or semiotic practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak, and they consist of historically specific rules that determine the difference between what we refer to and what we do not. In his earlier archaeological writings, Foucault (1970, 1973) stresses that discursive practices form both the objects and subjects of discursive formations. At this level, discourses are historically specific systems of meaning which produce the identities of subject and objects.

Discursive practices take place within a social context and are shaped by social practices and the ways in which they in turn fashion social relationships and institutions. This means that social practices construct and contest the discourses that form social reality. At this level, discourses are concrete systems of social relations and practices; they are intrinsically political, in that their formation is an act

of radical institutionalizing, which involves the construction of antagonism and the drawing of political frontiers between insiders and outsiders. By involving the exercise of power and a consequent structuring of the relations between different social agents (Dyrberg 1997), discourses are contingent and historical constructions, always vulnerable to those political forces excluded in the process of their production, as well as the dislocating effects of events beyond their control (Laclau 1990, 31-6).

Discourse theory engages with the structuralist, hermeneutical, and Marxist traditions of thinking (Howarth 2000, 10-12). In opposition to linguistic theories, which assert that words and language refer to a world of objects, structuralists argue that meaning depends on relations between different elements of a system. This structuralist view is applied to all signifying systems and practices. The hermeneutical tradition puts its analytical emphasis on interpreting the meanings and self-understandings of actions, rather than pinpointing their causal mechanisms. This means that one of the major goals of discursive social inquiry is to discover the historically specific rules and conventions that structure the production of meaning in a particular context. The Marxist tradition understands discourse as ideological phenomena that have to be explained by reference to underlying economic and political processes. It is also concerned with the role of social agents in criticizing and contesting relations of exploitation and domination.

When a discourse approach is applied to the examination, apprehension, and interpretation of environmentalism, it provides us with three vantage points for analysis. First, it leads us to draw our foremost attention to the discursive formation of environmental problems, which comes into being through the complex interplay between the environment as a semiotic entity and society as a construction of social relations producing environmental problems. Second, it stimulates us to delve into concrete discursive practices that construct and contest the meaning of environmental problems by focusing on the diverse interpretation of contesting agents towards the environmental problems that are defined within a political and economic system.

Third, it demands that we extend our analysis into the area where environmental discourses are essentially retrieved to political and ideological frontiers associated with capitalist modernization, or the power relations between the state and civil society in modern society. These three dimensions of discourse approach to environmentalism fit broadly with the above-mentioned three traditions of discourse theory: the structuralist, the hermeneutic, and the Marxist.

Genesis of Environmental Discourses: A Discursive Formation of Environment

When did environmental discourses emerge in Korea? It may not be an interesting question, but it can stimulate us to think about what kind of environmental discourses we have had in the past and now. As a perceptive and discursive reaction to the environment, environmental discourses evolve along the changing patterns of interaction between humans and the environment. The period of industrialization in Korea, which began in the early 1960s and brought about profound changes in the traditional environmental landscape, was a watershed in the history of Korean environmental discourse, marking a change from a traditional discourse to a modern one. Before the 1960s, the environment was viewed ambivalently either as something people were subordinate to or as something to be overcome or transformed in order to create a better material life. These divergent perceptions formed the basis of traditional environmental discourse, and the latter aspect became particularly prominent with the advance of industrial development.

This perception of the environment as something to be overcome was vividly revealed in government posters that pictured factory chimneys emitting black smoke in the middle of green fields, modern paved roads stretching through deep mountains, shiny high-rise buildings erected in rural areas—all symbolic of the reclamation of the natural environment (Cho 2001). This implies that, by the early stage of industrialization, there was no popular acceptance of the nat-

ural environment as an integral part of ecology, in which humans were included as one species. Had there been any environmental discourse to speak of, they would likely have been concerned with environmental illiteracy.

Traditional environmentalism began to change from the early 1970s, when local residents living near industrial complexes in cities, such as Ulsan, experienced serious damage to their health and living environs as a result of hazardous pollutants emitted from heavy chemical factories.¹ This became a prelude to the rise and spread of modern environmental consciousness and discourse in Korea. Stimulated by the adverse effects of environmental pollution, people began to think and talk about what role the environment played in their lives. Since then, environmental consciousness and discourse in Korea have undergone three distinctive stages of development (Cho 2001).²

The first stage took place between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s, during which people's consciousness towards "our environment" first emerged with a primitive sense of environmental rights, giving rise to Korea's first generation of environmental activists. Dur-

1. The first environmental pollution incident in Korea was a dispute over exhaust gas belched out by the Gamchoen electrical power plant in Busan in May 1966. But the first case to attract nationwide public concern was the damaging of crops by industrial pollution, which broke out near heavy chemical complexes in Ulsan between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Since then, similar accidents broke out consecutively in the vicinities of other industrial areas like Gwangyang. Among these, the most famous accident was the outbreak of "unidentified pollution disease" in villages near the Onsan heavy chemical complex in Ulsan in the mid-1980s. Called "Onsan Disease," this disease was discovered by one research team from Seoul National University and stimulated nationwide debates over its cause and damage. This became an important catalyst for people to become concerned about their environment, and for environmental issues to be included in agendas for social campaigns.

2. What follows is based on the author's previous work on environmental consciousness and movements in Korea which is included in a book titled *Noksaek sahoe-ui tamsaek* (Exploring a Green Society) (Cho 2001, ch. 14). Please refer to the above chapter for more detailed account on the evolution of environmental consciousness and movement in Korea.

ing this first stage, the environment began to be publicly perceived in regards to environmental pollution, which was referred to as "public nuisance," a concept brought in from Japan. The term "public nuisance" was a common linguistic and semiotic vehicle with which people exchanged and shared a conception of the environment. In other words, by uttering the term "public nuisance" (*gongghae*), people were engaged in forming a discursive interaction around an environment in need of defense. That is to say, the environment was discursively signified based on the concept of "offender-defender relations." In fact, while the victims were proactive in seeking compensation for their damages, this led to the formation of "our environment" used in a discursive fashion, which was underpinned by the environmental movements rising from the mid-1980s.³

Environmental movements essentially rose against the state, which tried to cover up the negative aspects of development. During the 1960s and 1970s, when industrialization took off at a startling growth rate, Korean society was ruled by the so-called developmental dictatorship led by President Park Chung-hee; resistance or criticism against state policy or authority was brutally repressed. Under such political circumstances, environmental activists launched social campaigns to bring to light the suffering of peasant farmers and urban residents caused by industrial pollution, and to demand that the government take proper measures, such as full investigation and compensation. Through these social campaigns, a vague conception of the environment became a discursive entity that constituted a reality

3. In reaction to people's suffering from public nuisance, a group of activists including local clergy formed Korea Public Nuisance Institute in 1982, with an aim at making people conscious of public nuisances and able to expel the nuisances from their environs. Following this first environmental NGO, Anti-Pollution Movement Council and Citizens' Council for Anti-Pollution Movements were formed respectively in 1984 and 1998. In 1988 these two NGOs were merged into the Korean Anti-Pollution Movement Association (KAPMA) who played a role to tug the heightening of people's awareness on pollution and to give support to local environmental movements in industrial and urban areas. This organization became a womb of Korea Federation for Environmental Movement which is one of "Big Three" among environmental NGOs in Korea.

of daily life. At the same time, the environment was perceived of as property or an asset to be protected. This notion of environmental rights became the first enlightened consciousness of the environment and enabled people to communicate about it, thereby giving rise to modern environmental discourses. That is, environmental discourses evolved around people's efforts to protect their living environs, houses, and fields against the negative impacts of economic and industrial development. This developed further into social consciousness, as the state tried to conceal environmental problems and crack down on people's demands for compensation for environmental damage to their property and health. Hence, this earliest environmental discourse was naturally intermingled with the discourse of environmental movements. This means that Korea's first environmental discourse was imbued with political consciousness. In fact, the first generation of environmental activists in Korea was those who carried out environmental activism in line with anti-government movements during the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, as a kind of movement discourse, this first environmental discourse was subject to heavy-handed political repression and could not blossom fully into people's assimilation with their environment. It was also mixed with the discourse of an environmental protection campaign launched by the state as its own.⁴ The state's campaign was a type of mobilized social campaign in which citizens themselves were encouraged to keep the environment clean, such as by cleaning roads and picking up rubbish in the streets.

The second stage of development in environmental discourse took place between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. With industrialization deepening towards the mid-1980s, environmental consciousness changed from a local and *ex post facto* concept of "public nuisance" to a wide and prevention-oriented concept of the living environ as a whole. The deepening of industrial production led to industrial disasters and contributed to the spread of contaminated materi-

4. The first pro-government NGO was the Korea Environment Protection Association, set up in 1975.

als across urban and rural areas, while the deepening of consumption rendered the living environ covered by excessive disposal of consumer waste.

It was believed that such environmental damage would pose a threat to the wider regional ecosystem and instigate an full development of environmental consciousness. Contributing to this trend was the outbreak of an environmental disaster in 1992, when a *jaebeol*, or large corporation, illegally released phenol, a fatally hazardous material, into the Nakdonggang river, thus jeopardizing the safety of the drinking water supplied from the river. This not only inspired the further heightening of public environmental consciousness, but also encouraged all media to turn to environmental issues, producing environmental discourses.

Behind this discursive circumstance lay a significant social change. In the late 1980s, Korea's per capita GNP reached 5,000 US\$. This income rise was accompanied by the emergence of a new urban middle class who was concerned about their living environment and the opening of civil society from the late 1980s. These two conditions combined to prompt the blossoming of environmental discourses; this is evidenced by the fact that the number of newspaper articles and reports regarding the environment increased tremendously from about 600 per year between 1980 and 1988 to 7,000 per year between 1990 and 1997. Environmental issues provided the most popular topic of debates in mass media as well as a motive for civil society campaigns to rise.⁵

Furthermore, civic consciousness regarding the environment changed from a passive approach of compensation for and treatment of "public nuisance" to a proactive one of preventing damage to the environment as a whole. Accordingly, the discursive formation of the environment also changed from that of a physical object for the sake of public nuisance reduction and compensation for damages, to an institutional and ideological object for civil and environmental rights.

This change was reinforced by the flourishing of organized envi-

5. In fact most NGOs in Korea were formed at this time.

ronmental movements, which was in turn stimulated by the opening of civil society from the late 1980s⁶ and the global diffusion of new environmental movements after the 1992 Rio conference on sustainable development. Supported by NGO-led environmental movements, people's concern for the environment was embodied by collective actions for the protection of the environment. A healthy environment was regarded as part and parcel of civil life and was to be formed by citizens' own efforts. As a result of these discursive interactions, the environment became a more distinctively discursive formation.

With the advent of the 1990s, environmental discourses were no longer monopolized by civil society. Environmental discourse and concern emerged in areas of the government, private corporate, and mass media. The corporate sector's environmental discourse was emerging alongside the introduction of concepts like green management, environment industry, and environment-friendly technology. Governmental sector's environmental discourse was also forming, along with the institution of the Environment Administration (later on, Ministry of Environment), the Environmental Impact Assessment System and Environmental Taxation. Finally, environmental discourse in the area of mass media expanded rapidly by leading the environmental discourse taking place in civil society.

The third stage of development in environmental discourse continues from the early 1990s. Environmental discourse, now a core

6. The Korean Anti-Pollution Movement Association (KAPMA) was set up in 1988 through the merging of two existing NGOs, before becoming the Korea Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM) in 1993. Green Korea United and an environmental movement branch within the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (which later became independent and was renamed Citizen's Movement for Environmental Justice) were both formed in 1993. These three environmental NGOs are now called the "Big Three" in Korea. Prior to the emergence of these three NGOs, the Korea Green Party was set up in 1989 with the aim of politicization of green movements. Hansallim (Great Living) was formed to disseminate "ecological ways of life" in Korea, and the Environment and Pollution Research Institute, an NGO, was established to provide citizens with information regarding the environment. These NGOs contributed to the diversification of environmental discourses in the 1990s.

discourse in Korean society, has become much more diversified. Many Western and theoretical environmental discourses have been introduced and widely studied both in the NGO community and academic institutions. Environmentalism began to be treated as a counterpart to the hegemonic ideology of economic and physical developmentalism (Cho 2003), and a new symbiotic concept of environmental economy has been born and forms the basis for new environmental policy. For example, the concept of sustainable development is an overarching environmental discourse, within which individual discourses on the environment are integrated. Environmental discourses are combined with discursive practices in the search for a sustainable society. As a result, environmental discourse was no longer confined to a physical concept, but rather has grown into an ideological and institutional entity in which new relations between people and nature are discursively established. Also, the environment and its problems have become progressively more discursive in nature. In other words, the environment and its problems are understood entirely as a discursive formation comprising new beliefs, orientations, values, and languages; this understanding has largely replaced prior views of the environment. Within the discursive field, therefore, environmental discourse poses the most radical critique of existing discourses based on the predominance of humans over nature.

The radicalization of environmental discourse is a discursive reflection on the changing environment. Along with neo-liberal globalization, human activities for value-added production have penetrated all corners of the globe, whereby the ecological world of nature is subsumed into the working field of capital or market logic (Cho 2002). Environmental problems exist on a grand scale and warn of global ecological crisis. Unless this trend is reversed, the very future of human society is clouded and uncertain.

Environmental discourses prevailing from the 1990s reflect a discursive interpretation on such situation of our life. The environment attains its character more distinctively as a discursive entity. Environmental discourses are combined with discursive practices in the process of searching for a sustainable society. Interestingly, with the

resumption of the local autonomy system in 1993, environmental movements became fragmented and localized. One such representative environmental movement after the 1990s is the Local Agenda 21 movement in which sustainable development, geared to the integration of economy and environment, is pursued at a local level through the cooperation and partnership of local multi-stakeholders. In fact, 97% of 250 local governments run respective Local Agenda 21 programs in one way or another. Through this type of environmentalism, environmental discourse has become an integral part of every day discourses in Korea.

Styling Environmental Discourses: Discursive Practices of Environmental Signification

In the course of emerging as a discursive reaction to environmental pollution, environmental discourses evolved into three different categories of discursive signification of the value of environment vis-à-vis the value of development. These three distinctive types consist of policy discourse, activist discourse, and academic discourse on the environment.

Policy Discourse on the Environment

This type of discourse chiefly arises and circulates within the field of government policymaking. In response to people's increasing concern over environmental problems, the Korean government incorporated environmental issues into governmental policy, beginning in the mid-1980s when the Environmental Agency, a former body of the Ministry of Environment, was established. Policy discourse on the environment focuses largely on improving environmental conditions by means of policy intervention, such as regulation, budget allocation, taxation, protection, restoration, and so on. This began as a government reaction to popular protests against environmental pollution and damage, and therefore contains an institutional power or author-

ity to repress popular interpretations of the value of the environment. Further, it has re-centered the protection and valuation of the environment within the frame of developmental policy. This means that the environment is included within the realm of developmental policy, for which environmental economics and environmental engineering provide two pivotal theoretical perspectives for the justification of policy discourse. Environmental engineering provides a kind of hardware, or technical knowledge and perspective for reorganizing the environment for the maximization of development, while environmental economics functions as a kind of software guidance. Environmental managerialism is the gist of the policy discourse, which means that the environment is an object for policy-makers or bureaucrats to manage in order to eliminate the external diseconomy of the environment and to reengineer it.

The agents involved in policy discourse include policymakers, bureaucrats, researchers, and professional advisors, all working for the government (e.g., Ministry of Environment, Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development, local government, etc.) and its associates (e.g., environmental research institutes, engineering companies, etc.). They communicate through concepts like environmental economism, the two ecos (economy+ ecology), and sustainable development. Nowadays, with so-called neoliberalism spreading, environmental economism is more prevalent as it has co-opted market competition logic and evolved into so-called market environmentalism, which assumes the management of the environment according to market principles. One example is the recent dissolution of the "green belt," a last barrack for environmental preservation around metropolitan cities.

The environment is deeply penetrated by market logic and has become more commodified, giving rise to the so-called "commodification" of nature or environment." Neo-developmentalism is a heightened version of development, characteristic of neoliberal developmentalism (Cho 2003). Hence, the policy discourse on the environment, strongly imbued with economic and market perspectives, is essentially representing the preponderance of market and capital

logic. When combined with an authoritarian power, the policy discourse on the environment risks being degraded into environmental authoritarianism.

Activist Discourse on the Environment

This comprises the mainstream of environmental discourse. People's individual environmental consciousness has been a major catalyst to the rise and spread of environmental discourses through civil movements. The origin lies in anti-pollution struggles, which have in due course developed into a new stream of social movements focusing on improving the quality of life in general. This discourse gains its momentum by posing as an antithesis to the economic development led by the government and by aligning itself with anti-developmentalism or oppositions to mainstream governmental policies (Cho 2003). It began through the protests of local people, but has been widely shared through discursive interactions among citizens and the organization of protests into civil movements led by NGOs. This process entails an intensive social raising of awareness, regarding the meaning of the environment, through the medium of environmental NGOs. Activist discourse is shaped through discursive interactions among a wide range of agents in civil society, such as NGOs, community organizations, mass media, etc.

Diverse variations of environmental discourses have been produced and developed through discursive practices geared to anti-developmentalism, green developmentalism, greening policy, greening government, green politics, environmental justice, alternative culture, return to the countryside, religious environmentalism, life theory, and so on. Each of these discourses are advocated for by a group of activists. The three major environment NGOs are the Korea Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM), Green Korea United, and Citizens' Movement for Environmental Justice. The KFEM was founded by a civil activist who led anti-pollution struggles from the mid-1970s, and still focuses on a militant campaign against the government's development projects, like land reclamation and urban devel-

opment. Nowadays, as the largest environmental NGO, the KEFM it plays a leading role (like the Green Party) in attempting to make the government and politics environment-friendly. Green Korea United was initiated by a group of advocates who are strongly devoted to the preservation of the natural environment including mountains, natural species, seaside, and national parks; this group focuses on social campaigns for making Korea into a green society. Compared with other NGOs, it relies on the idea of deep ecology or green fundamentalism. Citizens' Movement for Environmental Justice is a new environmental NGO spun off from the largest NGO, called Citizens Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ). Initially it was one bureau within the CCEJ, responsible for producing alternative policy against government development projects and environmental policy, but after separation, the group focuses on carrying out campaigns for protecting the ecologically or environmentally weak, including biologically weak and non-human species. It regards environmental problems as environmental injustice, and brings to the table the concept of equity between the socially strong and the socially weak, the biologically strong and the biologically weak, mankind and natural species.

In addition to these three major NGOs, there are varied kinds of voluntary movements which put into practice an alternative way of life, compatible with a market or capital-led life. Included are return-to-the-countryside movements, eco-community movements, religious ecological movements, life movements, and so on. All are devoted to the pursuit of alternative culture or self-conscious cultural practices in order to overcome the egoistic material life that is dictated by capital or market logic. For them, the environment is not simply an amenable object for improving the living environ for human beings, but rather is an arena within which humans experience a symbiotic relationship with nature. As such, the environment should be secured from encroachment and greedy development by the government and private corporations.

Issues, concepts, and meanings for green or environmental discourses are generated and discursively signified through communication, debate and experimentation among the members and agents

involved in NGOs. Activism is, in this regard, a social circuit of grand discursive interaction in which interpretation, signification, consensus, and practices around the value of the environment are prompted. It is a virtue of NGO or civil society organizations that they function in what Habermas calls the public sphere. Activism itself is a field of discursive practices for people engaged in communicating, debating, and sharing the meaning of the environment through a linguistic exchange of their views.

Here, mass media, and journalists in particular, play an important role, not only in spreading the idea of environmental NGO movements in society, but also in encouraging a discursive interaction among people around environmental issues. Currently, two journals, *Noksaek pyeongnon* (Green Review) and *Hwan-gyeong-gwa saengmyeong* (Environment and Life), lead environmental discourses in Korea: *Green Review*, edited by a professor of English literature, maintains a nationwide circle of communication and debate concerning alternative green thoughts and practices based on the idea of deep ecology. The journal itself serves as a discursive community in which subscribers of the magazine pursue various kinds of practices and activities devoted to an ecological way of life, such as the eco-village movement, ecological farming, local cooperative movement, anti-globalization movements, slow movement, and the like. On the other hand, *Environment and Life* was published with a clear approach to green politics as an alternative political culture that should be friendly to nature, the environment and life. The editing of this magazine was initially led by a group of politicians, including members of parliament, but nowadays it is led by a group of professors, researchers, novelists, and NGO leaders. This journal brings into relief new environmental discourses, including neo-developmentalism, new time and space ecology, a sustainable society, environmental justice, an eco city model, and global environmental regimes, to name a few.

In Korea, the activist discourse on the environment takes shape and evolves around criticizing the negative aspects of market-led or capital-induced development and searching for alternative norms,

values, and a way of life compatible with ecological principles. In these days, the movement discourse tends to be so diversified and fragmented that ecological value is reduced to a foundation of individual identity like eco-feminism or even a commodity to fulfill individual desire like eco well-being.

Academic Discourse on the Environment

This is a kind of environmental discourse which ferments in the academic circle. Environmental issues attracted the concern of academics, such as professors, researchers, and students, beginning in the early 1980s in Korea.

Even in the late 1970s, environmental problems, including pollution, were still understood mainly as a problem of engineering. But as anti-pollution campaigns began to capture growing popular attention, environmental problems also became a subject for social scientific research and study from the early 1980s when Graduate School of Environmental Studies was established at Seoul National University. Initially, early concern for the environment was largely associated with the formulation and analysis of environmental policy vis-à-vis economic development policy, for which environmental economists were invited to both universities and research institutes. Environmental economics provided analytical guidelines for establishing taxes on environmental pollutions and for managing the environment as a source of natural resources for industrial production. However, with environmental NGOs engaged in active social campaigns, academic concern for the environment has shifted to the social and political dimensions of environmental problems, giving rise to new environmental studies, like environmental sociology, environmental politics, and environmental philosophy. Until the late 1980s, most environmental theories were imported from abroad, i.e. from foreign-born perspectives. Environmental reality was interpreted and signified in mechanical terms. This situation changed considerably after the 1992 Phenol Incident in the Nakdonggang river, which inspired scholars to delve into the intricate links between capitalist industrialization and

environmental problems. With this concern emerging, radical ecological perspectives, such as social ecology and radical ecology, were introduced into the academic circle. Though based on foreign perspectives, it is undeniably true that this academic discourse contributed to deepening the understanding of environmental problems and to spreading environmental discourses among ordinary citizens.

As academic discourse was diversified and deepened, the environment has been subject to radical critique or reinterpretation, signaling a reversal from the perception of a human-centered world to one in which humans exist in a symbiotic relationship with nature. Ecological criticism is appreciated as the most all-encompassing and fundamental criticism against the dominant social culture. In fact, this perspective is applied to various fields of academic study. For instance, in the field of literature, ecological criticism raises fundamental questions regarding human-centered perspectives that are antagonistic to nature in modern literature. In the area of political science, the “green” or ecological approach points out the problems of human-centered power and limits to modern democracy and justice focusing on human rights—which are not all compatible with the ecological order or principles of nature. In the realm of critical political economics, ecological perspectives reveal the working of capital logic to induce the commodification of nature and the inclusion of nature into the circuit of capital. In the area of cultural studies, ecological critics try to go beyond the modern perspective of human-centered cultural primacy to seek a new cultural paradigm based on the view of the co-existence of humans and nature. Thus, with ecological perspectives brought into academic works, all modern knowledge on the state, power, culture, and so on can be rewritten by re-positioning human beings in nature. Nowadays, academic discourse on the environment tends to be more diversified and specified. Recent discourses include ecofeminism, eco-anarchism, and re-interpretation of traditional ecological thoughts like *do* (the Way) and *pungsu* (geomancy).

Academic discourse on the environment is formed and evolves through such discursive practices as presentations, talks, and debates

Table 1. Three Types of Environmental Discourses in Korea

	Policy Discourse	Activist Discourse	Academic Discourse
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental discourse circulating in the field of policy making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental discourse evolving along civil movements for environmental preservation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental discourses fermenting in academic circles
Key agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Environment • Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development • Environmental research institutes • Environmental engineers • Policy advisors, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental NGOs • Civil society organizations • Community organizations • Trade unions • Mass media, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professors • Researchers • Writers, etc.
Discursive foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental economism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecologism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecological theory
Discourses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental protection environmental policy • Two-ecos (Economy-Ecology) • Sustainable development • Market environmentalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-pollution • Anti-developmentalism • Green developmentalism • Greening policy • Greening government • Green politics • Environmental justice • Alternative culture • Return-to-countryside movement • Religious environmentalism • Life theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental economics • Geomancy • Ecological critics/thoughts • Ecological philosophy • Ecological ethics • Environmental sociology • Social ecology • Ecological Marxism
Recent diversification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neo-developmentalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eco-community • Eco-feminism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eco-critics • Eco-literature • Eco-anarchism
Ideological backdrop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital logic • Market value • Middle-class interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-market • Ecological value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critics on modern thoughts and theory
Area of society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government/state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government/civil society
Limit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eco-authoritarianism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eco-fascism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eco-totalism

in academic events such as lectures and conferences, as well as through the writing and publication of articles, papers, and books. It is thus widely and quickly disseminated to the public. Many scholars and professors work not only as advisors to the government but as voluntary activists in various NGOs. With these positions, academics play an intermediary role connecting knowledge and practice, policy and movement, GOs and NGOs along the social channels of environmental discourses. They provide professional knowledge, expertise, and theory to activist discourse, enabling activists to set direction and strategy for everyday campaigns or movements. For policy discourse, as well, academics bring expertise and provide advisory comments to policymakers, and produce policy recommendation reports as well. The role of academics in environmental discourse is comparable to that of so-called organic intellectuals, in that they organically maintain and interconnect two discursive communities by translating the meaning of the environment between the two and providing common theories and vocabularies for the separate communities to share in carrying out their own discourse against the other.

The Social Configuration of Environmental Discourses

Environmental discourses are essentially social processes in which one group of social actors contends with other groups regarding the way in which the meaning of the environment will be interpreted. As discussed in this paper, environmental discourses in Korea have emerged in reaction to the discourse of development dictated by the government. Producers of environmental discourses in Korea are divided into two contending groups, environmentalist and developmentalists (Cho 2003). The salience of environmental discourses in Korea indicates the extent to which the confrontation between these two groups is a tense one. In terms of social orientation, environmentalists prioritize the environment over development; vice versa for developmentalists. In ideological terms, the former represents envi-

ronmentalism, whereas the latter represents developmentalism. In a situation like Korea, where developmentalism is hegemonic, it may well be that environmentalism acts as an antithesis to the dominant social value or power.

The confrontation between environmentalists and developmentalists derives from the opposing views regarding the environment. In the course of its socialization, however, it becomes much more complicated by other overlapping conflicts, which arise between the state and civil society. Most environmental problems are generated by the negative effects of development policy, which the government manages in an institutional capacity. The actual course of development is circumscribed by the manner in which the state governs society in general. Since the early 1960s, the Korean state has placed its foremost governing role in engineering development to the fullest extent, earning it the nickname, "the developmental state" (Cho 2003). The developmental state relies on bureaucratic authoritarian means to mobilize social resources into the expansion of the economy at the cost of other sectors.⁷ Yet, the role of the developmental state is actually confined to commanding the strategy and course of development. Actual developmental maneuvers are conducted by large private corporations with strong political backup from the state. This determines the pattern of development in two ways: first, it underlines the primacy of economic growth over other social values, such as nature conservancy; and secondly, with the state and the corporate sector (or market) in alliance, it excludes civil society the course of its socialization.

This pattern of development is highly conducive to the quantitative growth of the macro-economy, such as the GNP, rates of export, and size of industry, but not to the improvement of living conditions in civil society, where new urban middle-class people live their daily life. The latter aspect became a prominent social issue from the late 1980s. At that time, the environmental movement came up against a

7. This style of social management is supposedly legitimized by its claims to the improvement of social well-being.

threatening situation. The movement was enabled by the mobilization of voluntarism in civil society, in stark contrast to the mobilization of authority by the government. Environmental movements became an avenue of social expression and discursive interactions for new middle-class citizens to reinterpret the environment, not as an object of development, but as an integral part of the life world. As a social movement, environmental discourses were not only concerned with the environment per se, but rather with the broader social context in which the environment is situated. For instance, while socially prioritizing the environment over development, environmentalists focused their discourse intensively on unmasking a political field in which the environment was degraded into an object of economic development and the demands of environmentalists were disregarded by the state and corporate sector. In the process, civil society actors, such as NGOs, locked horns with the state around its non-democratic governance over society and the institution of civil rights for an improved life (e.g., environmental rights). From this discursive process emerges the environment as a discursive formation in which it becomes signified through political interaction between developmentalists and environmentalists. This social interaction takes the form of environmental discourse.

Environmental discourses appear in the realm of civil society but are socialized through the confrontation between developmentalists and environmentalists, or the state and civil society. As an encounter between these two actors, environmental discourses involve a social process in which basic social values and ideology are divided into two relational categories, developmentalism versus environmentalism, each contending with the other for social hegemony. Currently in Korea, developmentalism and environmentalism are two overlapping but contending categories of political and social ideology. Each comprises a series of sectoral values and ideology pitted against the other. For instance, environmentalism has an affinity with the resistance of civil society against the state, conservation against development, the future against the present, culture against economy, inclusion against exclusion, nature against humans, and the like. Environ-

mental discourses, therefore, internalize a social process in which discursive actors prioritize the values of civil society, conservation, culture, inclusion, and nature. However, with developmentalism prevailing, such discursive processes become political by nature, in that environmentalists strive to advocate for what is weakly represented or excluded within the existing power and value system.

Political tensions take place within the camp of environmental discourses, as well. As shown above, there are internally divided views and standpoints within environmental discourses, and they compete as well as complement each other. For instance, policy discourse on the environment emerges primarily within the government as its internal reflection on over-representation of development policy and its selfish reaction to demands from civil society. But it is basically in conflict both with the developmentalism favored by the government and with the environmentalism advocated by civil society. On a broad front, it often shares common ground with the discourse of civil society (or NGOs) in giving policy priority to the environment. Nevertheless, policy discourse, though representing environmentalism, is essentially part of the discourse of development. This is because policy discourse is geared to the improvement of the economic value of the environment, an increasingly important component of developmental value (Cho 2003). Because of this, if civil society actors are implicated in policy discourse (for example, if an NGO conducts a policy-related project granted by the government), they are regarded as a betrayer of civil society.

Activist discourse on the environment is much more internally differentiated and more complicated in its interrelations. In terms of ideological stances within the activist discourse, there is a sharp division or juxtaposition between the strong green versus the weak green, the radical versus the conservative, the endogenous versus the exogenous, the local versus the central, the green versus the red, and so on. However, compared with its internal diversity, interactions between or across different discursive groups are not much diversified. This may be because environmental discourses are still in the process of emerging one after the other and subdividing along with the multiplication of environmen-

tal issues. At one end of the spectrum are militant NGOs that pursue a traditional social movement according to a vision of a radical green society, while at the other is the so-called “well-being tribe,” devoted to individualized consumption of nature and the personalization of green values for the sake of their own well-being. Participants in activist discourse are relatively good at forming a collective reaction against anti-environmental policies, but are less skilled at discussing and criticizing respective environmentalisms with open minds. The lack of discussion and debate in the activist discourse can pose a hindrance to the flourishing of diversity, plurality and symbiosis, which are virtues of the environment. This may be due to the nascence and weakness of civil society vis-à-vis the state in Korea.

This is also the case for academic discourse on the environment. Academic discourse is largely aloof from a secular world where, for instance, the state and civil society are in conflict over the way of social development. But it is very influential in shaping environmental discourse on a social level, through its role as a provider of new theories, perspectives, and visions regarding environmentalism. This role is played, for the most part, through the involvement of individual academics in policymaking or NGO movements. Internal diversity of academic discourse not only reflects the extent of discursive (or theoretical) development within it, but also has repercussions for changes in environmentalism in the state and civil society. However, academic discourse is still in an early stage of development. Most theoretical discourses on the environment are based on foreign, especially Western, environmental theories. These imported discourses serve as a perspective from which Korean environmentalism is interpreted. So academic discourse has a limited capacity to explain the ontological nature of “our own environment.” Academic concern for environmentalism is very much dependent upon the conditions of research itself, such as grant availability and research motives. This means that lesser diversity of the academic discourse reflects the level of academic development in general in Korea.⁸

8. Environmental study itself is still a peripheral subject in the academic field.

Conclusion: Contributions and Limits of Environmental Discourses

Even though environmental discourses are a relatively recent phenomenon in Korea, they provide us with significant implications for apprehending how the environment is situated in Korean society. This is a conceptual or theoretical contribution of environmental discourses. At the level of everyday life, their contribution also seems to be significant. With the emergence of environmental discourses, civil society turns into a green public sphere, abstract civil rights (e.g. basic rights) are redefined into concrete ones (e.g. environmental rights), and increasing awareness of the environment (the green) leads to the flourishing of diverse social values.

However, environmental discourses have certain limits associated with Korean civil society. Overall, environmental discourses reflect the weakness and immaturity of civil society vis-à-vis the state. As public discourses, they are socially carried out in a less civil manner than they should be, because civil society itself is still beset by traditional or pre-civil attributes. In many cases, environmental discourses reflect less of our own view on the environment, by virtue of their heavy reliance on foreign environmental theory. In general, environmental discourses seem overly politicized, as they must contend with the discourse of development. Recently, there has emerged a clear limit to environmental discourses in regards to class orientation. That is, environmental discourses tend to be degraded into an ideological or cultural fashion fitting middle-class interests, as revealed by explosion of the “well-being” trend in Korea. This is an important indicator that environmental discourses become subordinated to capitalist imperatives, a tendency which emerges along with the permeation of neo-liberalism into all corners of social life.

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