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SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

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Social work, climate change and environmental justice: Assessing claims of social work's transformative role

ABSTRACT

Considering increasing policy and scholarly claims that social work operates at the frontline of climate change, disaster response and environmental justice, this paper critically examines whether such claims are supported by empirical evidence. It addresses the central question of whether social work demonstrates a transformative, evidence-based role in advancing environmental outcomes. Drawing on a critical review of the environmental social work literature, the paper identifies a significant imbalance between normative and conceptual scholarship and empirically grounded research. It argues that, although social work has been influenced by environmental movements and contributes to related areas such as community development, disaster response and advocacy, its overall impact remains limited and insufficiently substantiated. The paper concludes that social work is better understood as a profession indirectly engaged with environmental issues rather than a leading or transformative environmental actor, and it outlines the types of empirical evidence required to support stronger claims regarding its role.

Keywords: environmentalism; environmental justice; environmental movements; environmental social work

INTRODUCTION

A movement implies concerted, organised activity aimed at social change. The green movement denotes action to achieve change vis-à-vis climate mitigation, judicious resource use and environmental restoration. Effective social movements shift people's thinking on, and attitudes to, social issues, lead to protective policymaking and legislation, and change sociocultural beliefs and practices. In recent years, social work has increasingly been positioned in policy and scholarly discourse as operating at the frontline of climate change, disaster response and environmental justice. However, the extent to which this claim is supported by empirical evidence remains unclear. This paper, therefore, draws on a review of the environmental social work literature (see Research note in this issue – Gray et al., 2026) to critically examine whether social work plays a transformative, evidence-based role in addressing environmental challenges.

While some debates have tentatively explored whether social work could be understood in relation to environmental movements, such questions are treated here as secondary and contextual rather than central to the analysis. The primary focus of this paper is on assessing the nature and extent of social work's actual engagement with environmental issues. It argues that social work is not in itself an environmental movement and that, though it has been heavily influenced by environmental movements, its influence on them is minimal. More specifically, it contends that claims regarding social work's frontline or transformative role are largely normative and aspirational rather than empirically substantiated.

The paper begins by examining the nature of environmental movements drawing on one of the first papers on the topic published in the *Indian Journal of Social Work* (Gadgil & Guha, 1998). This first section examines ideological forces driving environmental struggles; accommodation of human-environmental interests through local community development; and neglected rural dimensions. The second examines social work environmentalism and provides evidence to support the argument regarding social work's minimal engagement in, and influence on, environmental politics.

ENVIRONMENTAL OR GREEN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Environmental movements have played a huge role in heightening awareness of, and inducing responses to, climate change and environmental degradation. They have highlighted the vulnerability of poor people to the impacts of environmental change, with the environmental movement in the USA evolving from the quest for racial justice that highlighted the role of race in social and environmental injustice in the 1980s. At the same time, vibrant environmental movements were thriving elsewhere, as Gadgil and Guha's (1998) incisive account of environmental movements in India attests. Gadgil and Guha (1998) defined an environmental movement as an "organised social activity consciously directed towards promoting sustainable use of natural resources, halting environmental degradation or bringing about environmental restoration" (p. 455). This definition provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the structure and dynamics of environmental movements, rather than serving as a basis for categorising professions such as social work. They offer an analytical framework based on material, political and ideological struggles between three primary groups.

- *Ecosystems people*, following Dasmann (1989) (see Figure 1), are the most vulnerable group, since their livelihoods depend on natural resources and they have a limited resource catchment. Ecosystems people depend on the "natural environments of their own locality to meet most of their material needs" (Gadgil & Guha, 1998, p. 453). They constitute half of India's population and 80% of those in rural areas most affected by deforestation and land clearing for the construction of dams, mines, and industrial development, generally, i.e. the "growth of the artificial at the cost of the natural" (Gadgil & Guha, 1998, p. 453). Many of the vulnerable populations with whom social workers engage can be situated within this category, highlighting points of intersection rather than equivalence between social work and environmental movements (Gray & Meng, 2025).

Figure 1: ***Excerpt from Dasmann (1989, p. 277)***

> Some years ago, I found myself guilty of categorizing people into two groups. The occasion was a meeting of anthropologists and ecologists held at Cambridge University, where I was asked to consider the ecological relationships of 'primitive people', meaning hunter-gatherers, hunter-gardeners, nomadic pastoralists, and others who had retained a self-sufficient existence, largely cut off from the influence of the dominant cultures of the earth. What categorized these people, from one viewpoint, was their ability to survive, year after year and often for centuries or longer, on the resources of a single ecosystem or contiguous and related ecosystems. Through one means or another, they had achieved a sustainable way of life that did not bring about changes in the natural biota deleterious to their continued existence. I called these 'ecosystem people'.
>
> By contrast, apparently since the rise of civilization, the societies and cultures that are featured in the history books have demonstrated a capacity to overexploit and convert productive ecosystems into near barren wastelands. Although this capacity has in the past contributed to the collapse of kingdoms and empires, the practice of overexploitation (or the consumption of natural resource capital) continues today. Now those who are tied in with the global economy [biosphere people] can continue to survive, despite destructive exploitation of local environments. Through the exchange of the products of industry, they can draw on the total resources of the biosphere to override the controls previously exercised through the productive limits of local animal and plant populations.

- *Ecological refugees* are environmentally displaced people, who have lost their homes or land, due *inter alia* to development, disasters and natural resource depletion. Many have gravitated towards overcrowded urban slums in search of better economic prospects and employment opportunities (Gadgil & Guha, 1998). These groups frequently constitute key

populations in disaster and humanitarian social work, again indicating areas of overlap rather than suggesting that social work itself operates as a social movement.

- *Biosphere people* – or urban omnivores – are those with access to modern technology able to manipulate the environment for economic gain; they are the main beneficiaries of modern, progressive development. Constituting only a sixth of India's population, they "draw on the total resources of the biosphere to override the controls previously exercised through the productive limits of local animal and plant populations" (Dasmann, 1989, p. 277). They constitute the elites of environmentalism. As a predominantly urban and professional group, social workers may in some contexts be positioned closer to this category, although this does not imply alignment with environmental elites.

This analytical distinction applies not only to India, but globally. Gadgil and Guha's (1998) analysis of the rise of environmental movements in India – a complex, diverse society with huge inequality gaps – could apply to many postcolonial contexts affected by progressive development, technological innovation, ecological deterioration and social strife. Postcolonial scholars blame impersonal, abstract forces – such as 'capitalism', 'materialism' and 'modern Western patriarchal science' (modernism) – for the social upheaval and environmental degradation caused by the processes of modernisation and progressive development forced upon them, despite the absence of social-scientific studies to support their claims (Gadgil & Guha, 1998). Increasing social conflict arose from "competing claims on a dwindling resource base, [where] rich farmers and landless labourers fight for access to common grazing ground, while in city slums desperately poor households quarrel over the trickle of water that reaches them from a sole municipal tap" (p. 451). They described India as a "veritable cauldron of resource conflicts" (p. 451), which provided fertile ground for the growth of vibrant environmental movements driven by diverse ideologies that prevented the emergence of a comprehensive, consistent agenda for environmentally sound development.

Ideological forces driving environmental struggles

Gadgil and Guha (1998) described these various ideological forces, as follows:

1. Nature conservation movements mounted *aesthetic, recreational and scientific* arguments that led to the establishment of national parks, protected areas and wildlife reserves. These largely attracted biosphere people or urban omnivores;
2. Indigenous groups endeavouring to preserve their *cultural and religious traditions* argued for the protection of plants, trees and sacred sites. These grassroots movements mainly attracted ecosystems people;
3. Technocrats pressing for progressive development argued for *technological* solutions focused on resource efficiency. They prompted the establishment of land-use boards and integrated watershed development programmes, controlled and run by environmental elites. This top-down, technocratic strand stands in contrast to bottom-up grassroots movements;
4. *Equity struggles* or 'environmentalism of the poor' – the largest group – largely arose from conflicts between the beneficiaries of economic development (environmental elites) and ecosystems people, whose livelihoods were constantly undermined by resource fluxes biased against them and growing environmental degradation (Gadgil & Guha, 1998). Their

ideologically driven equity struggles often drew support from small groups of socially conscious biosphere people (in some cases including professionals such as social workers), who advocated for, and worked with, ecosystems people and ecological refugees. Gandhian and Indigenous grassroots movements, driven by moral imperatives, monitored resource exploitation and sought justice for the poor, while Marxists sought to dismantle the social order, primarily by speaking truth to power. Reconstructionists, including concerned scientists and local people involved in community-based management systems, sought technological solutions such as sustainable agricultural practices. These community-based management systems, which often evolved from spontaneous village-level action to protect essential natural resources, were frequently hijacked by bureaucrats and professionals with a moral-political agenda, such as policymakers and social workers seeking to enhance and capitalise on grassroots participation.

These diverse forces led to competing material, political and ideological struggles.

1. *Material* struggles concerned wide-ranging shortages of, and threats to, essential natural resources to meet human needs and sustain local livelihoods.
2. *Political* struggles led to the organisation of the victims of environmental degradation by social action groups, frequently outside party politics. These so-called 'victims' included ecosystems people and environmental elites. As Gadgil and Guha (1998) explained:

> *Even the urban well-to-do, increasingly subject to noise and air pollution, and deprived of exposure to nature, might be viewed as victims of environmental degradation, and their organisation into societies like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-India) is an environmental movement of sorts. Indeed, some Western scholars like Thurow (1980) have contended that environmentalism is predominantly an interest of the upper middle class of the rich countries, and that poor countries and poor individuals are simply not interested in environmentalism. It is abundantly, clear however, that Indian environmental movements very much involve the poor and the disadvantaged victims of environmental degradation* (p. 456).

3. *Ideological* struggles involved post-colonialists, Indigenous groups and Gandhians advocating a return to precolonial cultural roots, as well as Marxists seeking economic justice by organising the poor for collective action.

Gadgil and Guha's (1998) observations regarding the non-party-political nature of environmental movements resonated with the experiences of environmental groups in other countries. For example, Cannan (2000) observed that more British people belonged to environmental organisations than to political parties, though not all environmentalists adhered to the 'uncompromising ecologist tendencies' (Cannan, 2000, p. 368) of green politics. Cannan (2000), too, identified various ideological struggles within the environmental movement.

- *Bio- and eco-centric greens and radical ecologists* privileged nature over humans and blamed humans for the irretrievable loss of balanced natural ecosystems. Many romanticised traditional and Indigenous ways of living in harmony with nature (Besthorn, 2002; Cannan, 2000; Coates, 2003). This ideological strand is evident in deep ecology's grounding in "radical ecologism or radical environmental philosophies" (Besthorn, 2003,

p. 67) and in green politics, environmental activism and ecofeminism (Bartlett, 2003; Besthorn, 2003). Cannan (2000) was critical of deep ecology's "mysticism, romanticism, and attribution of intelligence and spirituality to the planet" (p. 368), while Besthorn (2002) rejected the romanticised view of nature. For him, nature-based wilderness practice involved powerful encounters "to restore and transform overall physical, emotional, spiritual, political, and social health and wholeness rather than seeking to cure specific, internalized psychological ills" (pp. 65-66). Through such practices, humans realise "they are nature" (Besthorn, 2002, p. 66).

- *Social ecologists* pointed to corporate interests and proposed new forms of social economy in small-scale, local, community initiatives (Cannan, 2000). Ungar (2003) talked about social workers as professional social ecologists being ecocentrics sceptical about modernity and lacking "faith in modern large-scale technology and the technical and bureaucratic elites, and … centralisation and materialism" (Pepper, 1993, p. 33 in Ungar, 2003, p. 13).
- *Eco-socialists* drew on the worker and trade union traditions of co-operatives in advocating for environmentally sustainable industries employing new technologies (Cannan, 2000).
- One might add *Marxist-ecofeminists*, for whom 'Nature' constituted wild, rural spaces, often construed as sites "of foreboding, dread, exclusion, and violence for people of color, women, and queer folk. For many of these populations, 'Nature' is not only a masculinist social construction, but one that is racist and heterosexist as well" (Evans, 2002, p. 191, in Pellow, 2016, p. 381).

Grassroots activists, post-colonialists, pro-growth liberals and degrowth socialists all provided critiques of progressive development and proposed alternatives for a sustainable future on ideological grounds. With a fifth of the world's population in industrialised urban nations consuming 80% of Earth's resources, environmentalists generally attributed conflict over natural resources to resource- and capital-intensive economic development and uncontrolled consumerism (Cannan, 2000; Kramer & Johnson, 1996). For Gadgil and Guha (1998), such debates on development options constituted "the ideological expression of the environmental movement" (p. 457).

Alongside these dominant ideological strands were additional actors, including 'wilderness enthusiasts' concerned with habitat protection and 'scientific conservationists' advocating formal environmental management through state institutions (Gadgil & Guha, 1998). Although these groups often lacked broad popular support, they exerted considerable influence on environmental policy and governance. As Reilly (1998) observed, similar developments in other contexts pointed to the growing importance of collaborative approaches in addressing complex environmental issues, where problem-solving and leadership increasingly involved partnerships between governmental agencies and civil society actors.

These developments illustrate that environmental movements do not operate in isolation but interact closely with state structures, professional actors and policy processes. Consequently, many environmental initiatives emerge through hybrid arrangements that combine grassroots mobilisation with institutional engagement. Non-party-political environmental formations,

comprising ‘alternative’ social movements, social action groups and green organisations, often function alongside formal political and administrative systems (Kothari, 1984). They seek to address gaps left by state and market actors, particularly in responding to environmental degradation affecting vulnerable populations. Their activities typically include raising awareness, mobilising communities and engaging in environmental rehabilitation efforts.

These diverse and often competing perspectives highlight the heterogeneity of environmental movements, which are better understood as plural and internally contested formations rather than unified actors. This complexity provides an important backdrop for the present analysis, which considers how, and to what extent, social work intersects with these movements without assuming equivalence between professional practice and social movement activity.

Given the diversity and complexity of these ideological strands, it is useful to summarise the main types of environmental movements, their underlying ideologies, and proposed solutions. Table 1 provides an analytical overview of these different formations.

Table 1: ***Nature and driving force of environmental movements***

Movement	Ideology	Solutions
Nature conservation – nature belongs to everyone	Aesthetic	Sense of place, connection to land, lure of the local, local work, food banks, and community gardens, small is beautiful, habitat development (more than the built environment)
	Recreational	Wildlife and land-use protection through national parks
	Scientific	Maintain biodiversity to benefit all
	Cultural and religious traditions	Culturally appropriate nature conservation and biodiversity maintenance practices and faith-based involvement
Technocratic	Bureaucratic-managerialist	Formal environmental management structures, such as water, energy, agricultural and land-use agencies
Moral-ethical	Humanist, rights-based	Monitor resource overuse and achieve justice for the poor
Equity struggles – environmentalism of the poor	Marxist– pedagogy of the oppressed and separatist direct social action	Dismantle the unjust social order through struggle; empower the poor through capacity building and consciousness raising
	Reconstructionist	Employ appropriate technologies to rebuild communities and restore natural resources
	Communitarian	Cooperative local planning and development through community-based systems; local efforts to achieve sustainable resource use and encourage environmentally friendly agricultural practices
Greens – deep and radical ecologists, and ecofeminists	Bio- and eco-centric, privileging nature over humans; radical ecologisms or radical environmental philosophies	Living in harmony with nature – return to Indigenous community traditions; green politics and environmental activism
Social ecologists – light greens	Anti-corporatist – challenge business interests	New forms of social economy – ethical and sustainable enterprises
Eco-socialists	Rooted in workers’ and trade union cooperative traditions	Environmentally sustainable industries employing new technologies

As Table 1 illustrates, environmental movements encompass a wide range of ideological positions, actors and strategies, further underscoring their fragmented and internally contested nature. This diversity reinforces the argument that environmental movements cannot be understood as a singular or unified entity, but rather as a constellation of overlapping and sometimes competing approaches to environmental change.

Accommodation of human-environmental interests through local community development

All strands of environmental movements identified in Gadgil and Guha's (1998) analysis relate to human wellbeing vis-à-vis the environment. Cannan (2000) identified an anti-human strand in green social movements for whom solutions to the environmental crisis – alternative energy sources, waste recycling, pollution reduction, wildlife protection and biodiversity preservation – require drastic changes to human consumption patterns. As with sustainable development – another social issue for greens – only redistributive social justice could achieve the kind of relationship with, and stewardship of, the environment ecocentrics called for. For Cannan (2000), however, it was possible to further wellbeing without divorcing humans from their ecological environment through multilevel community development grounded in social-democratic traditions focused on collective interests and participatory engagement to further concern for, and better management of, the environment. Others, too, saw strategies to empower the poor through local community participation – undergirded by the *multilevel* interventions used in the overlapping areas of planned sustainable and social development – as the solution to the world's most pressing environmental problems (Estes, 1993; Kramer & Johnson, 1996).

These approaches are particularly relevant to social work, given its longstanding engagement with community development and social justice. However, their presence within environmental movements does not in itself demonstrate that social work plays a leading or transformative role in shaping environmental outcomes. Regardless of community initiative, successful community development interventions depend crucially on the presence and 'effective use of resources and structures … outside formal governmental institutions' (Reilly, 1998, p. 117), as well as local government engagement with concerned stakeholders, funding provision, and coordination to legitimise local grassroots ventures. To this end, community development used multilevel interventions as follows:

- The *microlevel* included strategies to support local livelihoods and attain economic and social self-determination for vulnerable, oppressed individuals and groups;
- The *mezzolevel* included strategies to mobilise community members and their leaders, as well as government actionaries, to develop and support localised institutional responses, such as environmentally friendly industries – ecosocial innovations – to promote employment and capacity building;
- At the *national* level, they included social action strategies to pressurise governments to cooperate in international sustainable development efforts and control the excesses of multinational corporations;

- At the *global* level, "the quest for world peace, increased social justice, the universal satisfaction of basic human needs, and protection of the planet's fragile ecosystem" (Estes, 1993, p. 17) rested on the establishment of coordinated policies for poverty alleviation and sustainable development that recognised the relationship between the social, political, economic and ecological dimensions of wellbeing.

Like Cannan (2000) and others, Hillman (2002) noted the synergies between environmentalism and participatory community development. He, too, highlighted conflicts between human-centred community development and eco-centred green approaches, noting most environmental action occurred at the local level, where environmental change had the greatest impact. For him, local environmental action rested heavily on procedural justice, in which the *procedure* involved the education, mobilisation and participation of affected groups against injustice. When party politics became involved, it tended to feed off, and make capital out of, local discontent, or endeavoured to engage in partnership to stave off potential disruption, as Hillman's (2002) Australian example demonstrated. Even within public-private partnerships, formal environmental management structures were weighted towards government rather than community interests. The same pertained to community-business partnerships; both models were embedded firmly in economic rationalism. Communities always had less autonomy, power and control over resources than their more powerful partners. Interceding NGOs faced similar issues within the bureaucratic-management model, stuck as they were between their need for funding and support and the fight for representation, autonomy, power and control. In this sense, environmental action through community development often operates within existing institutional and policy frameworks, rather than through the kind of collective mobilisation and oppositional capacity typically associated with social movements. Thus, Pellow (2016) observed that environmental movements were rooted in, and accepted the fundamental legitimacy of, a state-centric model of social change, even as they sought to push the state and large corporations to embrace environmentally just practices This observation further reinforces the distinction between environmental movements as heterogeneous socio-political formations and professional fields such as social work, whose engagement tends to be mediated through institutional roles and practice contexts rather than movement-based action.

Neglected rural dimensions

Commenting on a special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies*, Pellow (2016) highlighted that rural communities were the sites of many of the battlegrounds of the early US environmental justice movement, though their dominant framing was around racial and class inequalities, leaving the spatial relationships and tensions between urban and rural communities largely under-theorised. This discourse has had a considerable influence on social work's theorisation of environmental justice. Also, social work has not only neglected rural areas and rural-urban differences but has also failed to include natural disasters and environmental injustices in rural areas under the rubric of rural social work (Gray & Meng, 2025). This gap is particularly significant given the profession's claims to address environmental justice, as it points to important areas where social work engagement remains limited or underdeveloped. From Pellow's (2016) perspective of environmental sociology, there were clear parallels between environmental social work and environmental sociology:

> *[Both] emerged as a response to the increasing evidence that urbanization and industrialization were producing severe ecological consequences around the globe … [Environmental sociology] owes much of its origins to rural sociology and rural studies and has, until recently, struggled to gain a foothold at the center of the discipline of Sociology [as has rural social work in the social work discipline]. Ironically, one of the fields that arguably gave environmental sociology a much-needed shot in the arm and heightened visibility in recent years 'Environmental Justice Studies' has also contributed to shifting its attention away from rural spaces toward urban centers* (p. 381).

Thus, environmental justice studies, too, overlooked the inextricable links between urban and rural spaces "bound up in intricate and highly uneven and unequal processes" (Pellow, 2016, p. 381). A closely related emergent field, Food Justice Studies, was bringing together many of the practices traditionally associated with rural spaces, such as agricultural food production and distribution, and its association with urban community politics. Kelly-Reif and Wing (2016) characterised rural environmental injustice – driven by racism, classism, imperialism, local elitism, indigeneity and globalisation – as a "parasitic relationship between urban and rural communities because urban populations obtain most of their food and energy from rural areas and return their wastes to rural areas" (p. 350). For the most part, however, rural contexts remain neglected, when they have never been at greater risk, as a result of:

> *Threats associated with environmental injustice, extractivism, mining, pesticide drift, nuclear power, prison construction, hydroelectric dams, political and economic marginalization, and militarized state violence … [and as] human migration flows move from rural areas to urban centers within and across national borders* (Pellow, 2016, p. 382).

These observations suggest that even within environmental justice frameworks, areas of critical importance such as rural contexts remain insufficiently addressed. This further supports the argument that social work's engagement with environmental issues is uneven and fragmented, rather than indicative of a coherent or leading role.

SOCIAL WORK ENVIRONMENTALISM

Extrapolating what social work environmentalism might entail from the more radical-critical literature suggests an ideological thrust that makes the personal ecological and the ecological political. It would be avowedly green and ecocentric and involve equity struggles grounded in environmental rights and redistributive justice. Much of this literature is explicitly normative, advancing visions of what social work *should* be, rather than providing evidence of what it *does* in practice. In this vein, early environmental social work literature warned of environmental catastrophe and advocated transformative, emancipatory ecosocial and community-based practice (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003; Hall, 1996; Ungar, 2003). Furthermore, social work environmentalism would call for a return to a relational ontology characteristic of Indigenous worldviews (Coates et al., 2006; Gray et al., 2007; Zapf, 2005, 2008).

Ungar (2003) drew on the work of a US pioneer of the environmental movement, Murray Bookchin, who, in turn, based his theory of social ecology and urban planning on Marxist-anarchist, libertarian-socialist and ecological-political thought. His political-economic theory advocated a form of communalism based on a non-hierarchical society with public ownership of property, combined with a communitarian philosophy emphasising the importance of community over extreme individualism (Ungar, 2003). Like Freirean pedagogy, it argued for participatory, grassroots politics, democratic planning and community management of local municipalities. Bookchin (1982) eschewed environmentalism that reduced nature to 'natural resources' or 'raw materials' (p. 21) and promoted development with minimal disruption to the human 'habitat' (p. 21), though failed to challenge the ongoing commodification, exploitation and degradation that accompanied modernism that Coates (2003, 2005) critiqued.

However, the translation of these theoretical and ideological positions into sustained professional practice within social work remains limited and uneven. Despite the avowedly ecocentric thrust of early and later ecosocial work literature, it was a stretch for a profession rooted in people's wellbeing to forgo human interests for the sake of the environment. As Mathias et al. (2023) observed, few "critically examined the dilemmas or trade-offs that may await a more [environmentally] expansive social work" (p. 569). Indeed, "some varieties of environmentalism have perpetuated inequity among humans" (p. 569). They explored the way in which movements for environmental justice offered a way forward for social work, despite their human-centred equity concerns: "Environmental justice foregrounds dilemmas raised by integrating concern for humans and nonhumans, and it offers principles for addressing these dilemmas that are rooted in a living tradition of practice" (Mathias et al., 2023, p. 569). They shifted the focus from philosophical normative-political arguments to the practical consequences of environmental interventions for vulnerable, marginalised people, the focus of environmental justice. For example, they highlighted critiques of sustainability and sustainable development that promoted neoliberal economic development and its accompanying social injustices and urban gentrification and conservation programmes that displaced vulnerable people (Krings & Copic, 2021; Krings & Schusler, 2020). This echoed Gadgil and Guha's (1998) argument about environmental elites and nature conservationists displacing or diverting attention away from grassroots environmental justice struggles to protect their livelihoods. Mathias et al. (2023) noted that, at another level, "the marginalization of environmental justice movements continues via ideologies that privilege 'global' struggles against climate change over the efforts of 'local' marginalized groups to protect their own people from harm" (p. 582). Thus, not all environmental causes were worthy causes, and environmentalism could, often, cement inequalities and social injustice for marginalised communities. This applied equally to aspects of environmental justice.

By addressing the inequitable distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, environmental justice was closer to social work's social justice framework (Rocha, 2018). Its distributive focus, however, sought universal access to environmental goods that often ignored historical and structural inequalities (Dominelli, 2012). Mathias et al. (2023) saw value in procedural justice's prioritisation of marginalised people's leadership and fights for the health and survival of their communities. However, procedural justice added participation but rarely altered power relations, as dominant institutions used grassroots involvement to legitimise their

agendas (Reilly, 1998). Structural approaches such as green social work called for redistributive and recognition justice. Based on Fraser's (1998, 2000) framework, redistributive justice addressed the maldistribution of resources, while recognition justice addressed misrecognition and misrepresentation by correcting the exclusion of vulnerable groups through extending grassroots participation to representation on essential decision-making fora. However, this also faced problems, because of the competing agendas of various ideologically motivated grassroots groups (Gadgil & Guha, 1998; Mathias, 2017).

Together, this body of literature provides a rich normative and theoretical foundation for environmental social work but offers limited empirical evidence of its effectiveness in producing measurable environmental or climate-related outcomes. This distinction between normative aspiration and demonstrated impact is central to assessing claims that social work operates at the frontline of environmental change. This gap between theory and evidence forms the basis for the following section, which examines what would constitute credible evidence of transformative environmental social work.

THE EVIDENCE GAP: WHAT WOULD COUNT AS TRANSFORMATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL WORK?

Thus far we have argued that claims that social work was at the forefront of climate justice, disaster response and environmental advocacy were largely normative and aspirational rather than empirically substantiated. This raises a critical question regarding what kinds of evidence would be required to support such claims. Although professional policy statements and scholarly calls for action have proliferated, systematic evidence demonstrating that social work interventions produced measurable environmental or climate-related outcomes remains scarce. Reviews of the literature consistently pointed to a striking imbalance between conceptual or normative scholarship and empirically grounded intervention studies (Bexell et al., 2019; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Instead, most studies attested social work's lack of prioritisation of, and engagement in, environmental problems and the absence of environmental and sustainability issues in professional education and practice (Bexell et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2022, 2025; De Brabander, 2023; Firang, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2025; Harris & Boddy, 2017; Krings et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2017; Molyneux, 2010; Naranjo, 2020; Papadimitriou, 2023; Rambaree, 2020; Rambaree et al., 2019; Reu & Jarldorn 2022; Wu & Greig, 2022).

The analysis by Bexell et al. (2019) of social work on sustainability and environmental degradation revealed that fewer than one per cent of articles addressed these issues, with most comprising editorials, conceptual discussions or calls to action rather than empirical evaluations of practice. Similarly, Krings et al. (2020) characterised environmental social work as an *evolving disciplinary subfield* primarily concerned with developing and disseminating knowledge, rather than demonstrating practice-based impact.

For social work to be regarded as a transformative environmental actor, its contribution would need to be demonstrated through clearly identifiable forms of empirical evidence. The credible positioning of social work as a transformative environmental actor would require empirical evidence from at least three forms of research. First, it would require intervention studies to examine whether social work-led initiatives resulted in demonstrable environmental or climate-

related outcomes, such as reduced exposure to environmental hazards or enhanced community resilience. Secondly, it would require comparative case studies assessing whether social work involvement altered the effectiveness or trajectory of environmental initiatives relative to those led by other actors. Thirdly, it would require policy and institutional impact studies to determine whether social work meaningfully influenced environmental governance, resource allocation and regulatory processes.

In the absence of such evidence, claims that social work occupies a frontline position in environmental movements remain highly speculative. At present, the available literature provides little basis for assessing the scale, consistency or impact of social work's environmental interventions. The persistence of this evidence gap suggests that environmental social work functions more as a scholarly and ideological project than an empirically validated field of transformative practice.

Our analysis showed that social work's environmental engagements were fragmented, reactive and subordinated to organisational mandates centred on individual and family wellbeing. At best, social work was supportive of broader environmental struggles and contributed indirectly through disaster response, community development and advocacy for environmentally affected populations. As Cannan (2000) observed, many forms of community development and welfare activity intersected with environmental concerns without constituting environmentalism as a political or social movement. Empirical studies further demonstrated that social workers' day-to-day practice rarely incorporated explicit environmental objectives, even where awareness of climate change and environmental injustice existed (Payne, 2023).

Thus, even under a generous interpretation, social work was best understood as a profession influenced by environmental movements rather than an active or constitutive component of those movements. Its contributions, while sometimes valuable, lacked the collective intentionality, organisational coherence and oppositional capacity that defined social movements.

Much of the social work literature included descriptive accounts, drawing variously on empirical research, to set the context (see, for example, Bexell et al., 2019). Others used prior social work literature on the environment for this purpose (see, for example, Chang et al., 2025; Kang et al., 2025; Krings et al., 2020; Rambaree, 2020). Many of these discussions advocated ideologically motivated, non-evidence-based approaches to environmental problems at various levels of intervention (Chang et al., 2025; Drolet & Sampson, 2017; Kaffrell-Lindahl, 2025; Kaffrell-Lindahl & Sewpaul, 2026; Närhi & Matthies, 2018; Rambaree, 2020). They further reinforced the imbalance between normative ambition and empirical validation identified throughout this paper.

There were few intervention studies providing evidence of effectiveness in addressing environmental problems. This further weakened claims that social work was at the frontline of addressing climate change, disasters and environmental justice (Bexell et al., 2019), or that social work was "shifting environmental perspectives from the margins to the core of social work practice" (Kaffrell-Lindahl, 2025, p. 2). In fact, Kaffrell-Lindahl's (2025) small qualitative study of Swedish social workers (n=12) found that awareness of the climate crisis

and environmental impacts and global professional policy imperatives bore little relationship to social workers' daily practice. It confirmed prior studies showing that sustainability and the natural environment remained tangential to mainstream professional social work in Sweden (Chang et al., 2022, 2025). Chang et al. (2022) noted that social workers had difficulties defining, understanding, explaining and recognising sustainability and sustainable development, let alone embodying them in practice. Närhi and Matthies (2018) believed that the incorporation of sustainability into all social work practice domains was complicated and unachievable.

The same applied in Finland (Stamm, 2023) and Italy (Pavani & Ganugi, 2024), as a result of managerialist, crisis-driven casework, with social workers overloaded and agencies understaffed. De Brabander (2023) made similar observations in relation to Dutch social work, where social workers had little time to engage in wider sustainability and climate change issues. European practitioners, educators and students had limited understanding of "the connections between social work and ecological climate issues … [as] profound discussion about an ecosocial approach … and what this involves, is almost absent" (p. 14).

Firang (2020) and Wu and Greig (2022) made similar observations about Canada, where the social work curriculum and professional training had been slow to embrace green social work, noting this deficit jeopardised the integration of "environmental and climate justice and sustainability in social work research and practice in Canada" (Wu & Greig, 2022, p. 1).

Likewise, in the UK, global environmental concerns were "often removed from the everyday concerns of individualistic interpersonal practice … typical of … the role of social work agencies in childcare and safeguarding, and adult care services for … physically disabled, mentally ill and older people" (Payne, 2023, p. 8). Thus, environmental practice was not a priority for British social workers, the public, service users or social service managers and policymakers. Payne (2023) believed that, without concrete evidence of environmental impacts on service-users' lives, social workers could not convince policy makers and agency managers of the importance of environmental interventions. In Australia, Boetto et al. (2020) made similar observations on the challenges for practitioners employed in organisations where environmental sustainability and the natural environment were not their core business and bore little relationship to funding contracts and professional practice.

The growing ideologically driven African literature on the environment called on social workers to engage in decolonising, empowering, culturally responsive practice drawing on local indigenous knowledge. Its focus largely concerned poverty alleviation for vulnerable groups through community and social development, rather than environmental interventions. Nevertheless, as in the UK and Australia, South African social workers were mired in casework (Arkert & Jacobs, 2023). Most worked in public or non-government welfare organisations, where they were concerned largely with individual and family problems, mainly child protection, people with addictions, disabilities and mental health issues. As elsewhere, very few worked in "organisations with a hard-core environmental focus in their practice and service delivery, though they might encounter clients affected by natural disasters" (Jacobs, 2025, p. 9). The same pertained in Malaysia (Jayasooria, 2016),

Against this trend, Naranjo (2024) claimed that South American social workers worked in agroforestry, conservation of protected areas and watersheds, solid and liquid waste management, and disaster and emergency care within a broad conception of sustainable development; they transcended environmental issues linked inextricably to development. However, overall, the literature portrayed environmental social work as a growing field of scholarship lacking sound practice (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Willett et al., 2020). But as Krings et al. (2020) noted, it was difficult to discern whether the increase in publications related to a rise in the demand for knowledge to inform policy, education and practice, or a response to the priorities of international and national professional organisations, despite the lack of empirical research to support policy directives and anecdotal claims relating to practice. Considering the foregoing, Kumar and Suhel's (2024) reference to green or environmental social work as a "futuristic concept" (p. 151) seems most apt.

CONCLUSION

Mathias et al. (2023) believed that, despite ecocentric claims, environmental justice, as a variety of environmentalism, remained the best paradigm for environmental social work, because it highlighted the dilemmas involved in integrating human and non-human interests. While this perspective offers a valuable normative and conceptual framework, this paper has demonstrated that the central limitation of environmental social work lies in the lack of empirical evidence supporting its transformative claims. It has argued that the absence of evidence of environmental practice remains the greatest hindrance to the development of environmental social work, leaving often-cited claims regarding the profession's frontline or transformative role largely unsubstantiated. In this respect, its contribution lies in its distinction between normative aspirations within the literature and the limited empirical basis for assessing practice outcomes. Consequently, social work is best understood as a profession influenced by environmental movements rather than an active or constitutive component of those movements. Its contributions, while potentially valuable, remain indirect, fragmented and mediated through institutional roles, and they lack the collective intentionality, organisational coherence and oppositional capacity that define social and environmental movements. For social work to substantiate claims of a more significant or transformative role, future research must prioritise the development of robust empirical evidence, including intervention studies, comparative analyses and assessments of policy and institutional impact. A more clearly articulated and empirically grounded agenda for environmental social work is needed to enhance the profession's potential to contribute meaningfully to environmental and climate-related challenges.

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