

The clock is ticking: contexts, tensions and opportunities for addressing environmental justice in sport management

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore what environmental justice (EJ) can offer to sport management research and highlights the urgency for sport management scholars interested in environmental and ecological issues to engage with EJ as an important research agenda.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is primarily a position and conceptual paper. Drawing from multidisciplinary literature (e.g. critical human geography, environmental sociology, Indigenous studies and postcolonial studies), it provides an overview of the major conceptualizations of EJ and discusses important premises for sport management researchers to engage with EJ topics.

Findings – EJ offers opportunities for sport management researchers to form stronger analyses on existing racial, socio-economic, and gender-related inequities manifest in the sport industry. The incorporation of EJ can strengthen the emerging sport ecology research in sport management and offer opportunities for sport management researchers to form stronger analyses on existing racial, class and gender-related inequities manifest in the sport industry.

Originality/value – It provides a critical and original intervention to the sport management literature. EJ's emphasis on power and its position at the convergence of social movements, public policy, and scholarship hold important potential for sport management researchers to advance scholarship with "actions," addressing environmental harms and seeking practical solutions for enhancing communities' well-being.

Keywords Ecology, Epistemology, Social movement, Power, Colonialism

Paper type Commentary

Introduction

Gordon Campbell [1] has been quoted as saying that the spinoffs of the Olympics are something that BC can't even imagine . . . These investors and industries are creating major negative impacts on our territories. The territories that we continue to depend on for our traditional food and medicine harvesting. We depend on these glacier areas for our water . . . The Canadian Government is using the Olympics as a big advertisement that our lands are open for business . . . But we want the world to know that our lands are not for sale here in BC. Our lands here are unsundered, unceded indigenous territories - we have never given up our land. (Kanaus Pelki, as quoted in Saunders, 2010)

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As indicated by Indigenous environmental activists of Secwepemc First Nation, contrary to the message spread by the 2010 Vancouver Organizing Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games that lauded the positive social and economic impact of the event, the hosting of one of the largest, most influential sporting events on unceded Indigenous territory and the accompanying environmental risks to the local communities, particularly Indigenous communities, are deemed as problematic and unjust.

Sport is implicated within an inherent contradiction regarding the environment: As a form of leisure, games and recreation, sport is often considered as opportunities to “protect public health, promote healthy lifestyles, conserve nature, enable local community building, and invite environmental education” (Mincyte *et al.*, 2009, p. 109). This benign image, however, serves to dissociate sport as an industry of significant logistical processes that makes it not so “environmental-friendly”: from the pervasive use of limited natural resources in manufacturing sporting goods and spaces (e.g. water for golf courses) to the drastic alterations in natural habitats for constructing sport and recreational venues (e.g. the building of ski trail and lodges); from the conspicuous consumption of apparel, equipment and memorabilia to waste dumping and/or disposal. Sport and recreational events, programs and activities, therefore, not only generate social and economic benefits but also have environmental consequences on local and global communities (McCullough *et al.*, 2020).

As a “globalizing” industry of €450bn (Kearney, n.d.), sport is dependent upon construction, manufacturing, transportation, and consumption at various local and international scales, whose environmental impact affects different communities and populations in profound ways (Casper and Pfahl, 2015), posing risks to people’s right to “live, work and play,” an expression coined in the early environmental justice (EJ) movement (Cole and Foster, 2000). Consequently, questions arise regarding how the cost and benefits associated with the development and growth of the sport industry are unequally distributed to people and communities, reflecting a fundamental understanding of environmental (in)justice concerns. In any given context, the presence of environmental problems does not affect every person equally, nor do all members of the society possess equal power to decide solutions and/or to take actions to solve these problems (Pellow, 2004, 2018; Pulido, 2018; Sze and London, 2008; Walker, 2009). This *unequal and differentiated* positioning means that the heaviest environmental burdens are often fallen upon the marginalized and less powerful communities and populations—this is the central premise of environmental *injustice*. Accordingly, EJ is the *solution* to environmental injustice.

In sport management, while there is burgeoning research that examines various aspects of environmental and ecological issues (McCullough *et al.*, 2020), including the negative environmental impact in different communities (e.g. McCullough *et al.*, 2016), environmental *justice* has yet to be taken up as a topic and/or theoretical framework in this scholarship [2]. If an important mission for sport management research is to enhance the well-being of all members of the global society, particularly with regard to the inequities and inequalities that exist across communities and populations (Chen, 2022; Frisby, 2005; Newman, 2014; Palmer and Masters, 2010; Singer *et al.*, 2022; Thibault, 2009; Walker and Melton, 2015; Zeigler, 2007), as we will argue in this paper, the field will benefit from incorporating EJ as one of its promising agendas. As will be elaborated in later parts of the paper, EJ research in sport management is necessarily at the “crossroads” (Sze and London, 2008) of the environmental movement in sport, policy developments regarding sport, and environmentally relevant scholarship—namely, sport ecology research (McCullough *et al.*, 2020)—and the increasingly prominent agenda of justice-oriented sport management research (e.g. Agyemang *et al.*, 2020; Chen and Mason, 2019; Fink, 2016; Love *et al.*, 2021; Shapiro and Pitts, 2014; Singer, 2005). EJ can be an important site for sport management scholars to utilize multidisciplinary lenses to further the understanding of, and address, the often-interconnected social concerns manifest in and around the sport industry.

In this paper, we first provide a brief review of EJ as a movement and a field of research. Next, we introduce the major paradigms of conceptualizing EJ while drawing from existing

literature in sport ecology and environmental sociology of sport to provide examples of how EJ issues intersect with sport. Next, we highlight two tasks for sport management scholars to develop a robust analysis of EJ conflicts associated with the sport industry. Although they comprise less than 5% of the world's population, Indigenous peoples protect 80% of the Earth's biodiversity in the forests, deserts, grasslands, and marine environments in which they have lived for centuries (UN Environment Programme, 2017). It is particularly important to highlight theoretical interventions from Indigenous environmental movements that challenge mainstream understandings of EJ. Drawing upon this literature, we then discuss some tensions and opportunities for sport management scholarship to meaningfully engage with EJ within the broader context of colonialism and decolonization.

Environmental justice: origins and paradigms

Overall, EJ is an "action" concept that involves efforts in social movements, public policy and scholarship to address urgent environmental crises as well as slower-moving environmental dilemmas (e.g. industrialization and deindustrialization) that disproportionately affect certain populations due to inequitable resources and power imbalance (Sze and London, 2008). It is primarily a social movement that considers "access to a clean and safe environment" as "a protected entitlement and fundamental civil right for all individual and groups" (Floyd and Johnson, 2002, p. 61), with its intellectual and academic dimensions being concurrently developed (Malin and Ryder, 2018; Murdock, 2020). The term "environmental justice" first emerged in response to movements in low-income, racialized (predominantly Black and Hispanic) minorities in the USA in the 1980s (notably the anti-PCB landfill movement in Warren County, North Carolina; see McGurty, 2000) when these communities started to actively resist the disproportionate pollution exposure and challenged both state agencies and corporations' roles therein (Murdock, 2020). Some of the early academic research on EJ identified "environmental racism" as the central concern that rose to prominence in the public sphere and policy discourses. "Environmental racism" describes the disproportionate exposure to environmental pollution that racial minorities face as well as the low level of environmental benefits they enjoy, that is, the "unequal distribution of environmental benefits and pollution burdens based on race" (Sze and London, 2008, p. 1332), notably manifest in industries' *siting* practices driven by the logic of "paths of least resistance" (Bullard, 1990). EJ, therefore, not only represented a new focus of the environmental movement, namely, from land (mis)use to various human dimensions but also developed as an explicit response to the lack of attention of mainstream environmental movement onto race- and class-related issues (Sze and London, 2008).

While early EJ movements and scholarship were primarily concerned with pollution and toxic waste disposal practices that affected low-income communities of color, they have since broadened their scope to address environmental inequalities manifest in a host of other areas such as transportation, access to health care, housing quality, homelessness, land use, water, energy, incarceration, redevelopment of brownfields, militarization, and sustainable development in both domestic and international contexts (Goldman, 1996; Pellow, 2018; Sze and London, 2008). It is increasingly acknowledged that environmental injustice solidifies and reinforces other axes of injustices and inequitable conditions (e.g. gender, age and location) that are already affecting marginalized communities locally and globally (Gaard, 2017; Malin and Ryder, 2018; Murdock, 2020). While environmental racism remains an important concern, in recent decades, newly incorporated theoretical constructs and frameworks such as *settler colonialism* and *intersectionality* further broadened the principles underlying the mobilizations of EJ in the Western hemisphere (Murdock, 2020). Also emerged in this newer wave of EJ scholarship are critiques of Eurocentrism in the knowledge production process (Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020), anthropocentric views of the environment (Schlosberg, 2009), singular-scale and ahistorical analyses that are inadequate to grasp the complex dynamics of environmental

conflicts (Pellow, 2004, 2018), and a lack of questioning the existing power structures, particularly, the state apparatus, in (re)producing environmental injustice (Pellow, 2018).

Paradigms for conceptualizing environmental justice

In this section, we introduce three major paradigms of EJ. Elsewhere, it is also known as the *trivalent* theories and conceptions of EJ (Walker, 2009; Whyte, 2018b). These paradigms are interpretive frameworks that represent different yet interrelated ways of diagnosing/conceptualizing environmental injustice in question, attributing blames, and accordingly, constructing solutions to address the problematic relationships between people and the environment (Taylor, 2000).

The distributive paradigm. The distributive paradigm is perhaps the earliest and most influential paradigm. It identifies environmental injustice as deriving from societal institutions' (including but not limited to environmental agencies, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations) failure to equally protect members of the society for whom they should be responsible (Schlosberg, 2009; Whyte, 2018b). As a result of this failure, certain populations experience disproportionate effects of environmental hazards while having less access to environmental "goods" or amenities such as clean water and air, parks and green space. In other words, the environmental benefits and risks are not equitably distributed.

Furthermore, the unequal/inequitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens occurs in two dimensions: intra-generational and inter-generational. Traditionally, the EJ movement and scholarship have primarily focused on the intra-generational aspect of distribution; that is, the environmental impacts are not equitably distributed among members of the current generation, largely conditioned by factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and notably, geographical/spatial location (Figueroa, 2004). This following analogy can be useful to illustrate this intra-generational inequity: while as collective inhabitants on the earth, we may face the same "storm" of climate change and environmental degradation, but not every one of us is on the same "boat," with similar resource or capacity to withstand the crises (Dengler and Seebacher, 2019). On the other hand, the *inter-generational* maldistribution has been increasingly recognized in recent years (Schlosberg, 2009), particularly informed by Indigenous environmental movements (e.g. Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Parsons *et al.*, 2021; Wildcat, 2009). That is, the environmental degradation of the contemporary era will have profound effects on future generations, as members of the current generation overall are disproportionately consuming and/or depleting finite natural resources, causing environment-related issues and/or crises to be aggravated in the generations to come.

The lens offered by the distributive justice paradigm is highly relevant to examine EJ issues within the sport industry, which often leaves disproportionate negative environmental impacts that draw attention from marginalized communities, whose resistance transformed the issue into potential sites of EJ struggles (Miller, 2016; Mincyte *et al.*, 2009). For example, the development of private sport arenas in North American urban centers can result in increased traffic, aggravated noise and air pollution, and facilitate further gentrification and displacement of primarily low-income, racialized communities (Chen and Davidson, 2022; Sze, 2009). In another recent example, despite the 2016 Rio Olympic Games' high-profile campaign around sustainability, the construction of a new golf course in Rio de Janeiro's ecologically sensitive area, Marapendi Nature Reserve, raised significant concern over its long-term impact amongst local residents and generated grass-roots resistance (Boykoff and Mascarenhas, 2016).

The procedural paradigm. The second paradigm of EJ is the procedural paradigm. Procedural justice concerns fair practices in the institutional *procedures*, including the application, enforcement, and implementation of laws, regulations, and policies that affect the distribution of environmental amenities and hazards. It rests on the premise that democratic and participatory decision-making are both an element of, and a condition for, justice (Young,

2011). Shrader-Frechette (2002) considered procedural justice to be closely associated with free, prior, and informed consent and political equality.

Throughout the environmental movement that aimed to achieve distributive justice, communities and activists have sought to find various solutions that ranged from creating/modifying laws and policies to increasing public awareness about the institutional mechanisms contributing to the maldistribution of environmental benefits and burdens (Figueroa, 2004; Whyte, 2018b). An irony, however, became gradually clear: the people who are most harmed often lack access to participation and influence in environment-related policy and decision-making procedures. As noted by Bell and Carrick (2018), gross inequalities of political authority, power, and influence still remain the norm in environmental decision-making. For example, in Western advanced capitalist settler states such as Canada and the USA, there has historically been a paucity of leaders from racialized backgrounds in agencies responsible for allocating toxic waste repositories—environmental organizations have been predominantly White (Murdock, 2020). Similarly, impoverished communities of color may not have the necessary sources to employ lawyers in expensive environmental lawsuits (Whyte, 2018b). Also, under the law of the settler states, many Indigenous tribes are denied participation in the governing of solid waste disposal on their own territories (Whyte, 2018a). Thus, procedural injustice occurs when people have limited voice and/or capacity to exercise self-determination in decision-making processes that affect their lives, a condition without any morally justifiable reasons (Whyte, 2018b).

Sport scholars have highlighted how marginalized communities have struggled to make their voices heard and counted in the decision-making process of sport-related development that directly or indirectly impact their places to “live, work, and play” (e.g. Kennelly and Watt, 2011). Yoon (2020) observed that under the national rhetoric of “business opportunities,” displaced residents near Mount Gariwang in South Korea had little choice but to acquiesce to the habitat-altering construction of the ski facility for the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympic Winter Games. Furthermore, Millington *et al.* (2022) revealed how some fossil fuel corporations in Canada utilized sport-for-development programmes in Indigenous communities to “redwash” their deleterious resource extraction practices on the homeland of the very same communities. Here, Indigenous Peoples are often not meaningfully consulted and sometimes outrightly excluded from participating in decisions regarding the industrial projects that reproduce the colonial pattern of exploitation and cause harm to their communities’ well-being (Henhawk and Norman, 2019).

The recognition paradigm. The third major paradigm of EJ is the recognition paradigm. As a more recent deliberation within the EJ movement, particularly owing to the increasingly prominent voices from Indigenous environmental movements and environmental movements of the Global South, it recognizes the limitations of both distributive and procedural paradigms (as frameworks largely originated from the USA context) and complements the existing conceptualizations (Schlosberg, 2009; Walker, 2009). Instead of looking for violations of sameness (and thus advocating for *equal* treatment under the legal system), approaches within the recognition paradigm identify a different source of systemic injustice, that is, mainstream institutions’ lack of capacity to acknowledge and/or respect *differences* across different human groups regarding their environmental identities and cultural heritages (Whyte, 2018b). For example, in many Indigenous communities across the world, conceptualizations of human–nature relationships are built on reciprocity, respect and responsibility not only between humans but also extended to the non-human/more-than-human life forms (McGregor, 2009; Schlosberg, 2009). Gilio (2012), for example, describes this distinction as such:

Indigenous epistemologies reflect a different relationship to land, a relationship that does not separate people or culture from the land, nor creates *anthropocentric* hierarchies within nature; simply stated, non-human life forms have agency in a way that they do not in dominant Western cultures. (p. 30, emphasis added)

Alternative ways of conceptualizing and practicing human–nature relationships and organizing social relations have long existed, even though they might have been subordinated and face difficulties in being recognized by contemporary mainstream institutions. A pertinent sport-related example of how EJ manifests within the recognition paradigm is the Snowbowl ski resort at the San Francisco Peak in Arizona, USA. Though not part of any federally recognized reservation, the San Francisco Peaks have long been held as a sacred site for 13 local Indigenous tribes (notably Navajo and Hopi), who have considered the mountains as sacred sites for ceremonies and other important subsistence activities for their communities (e.g. collecting medicines from its plants and soil). In the 1970s, the USA government approved the expansion of the ski resort, which has since faced a strong backlash from local tribes who believe that the mountain should be protected from such development (Sefiha and Lauderdale, 2008). With warmer winter weather and more sporadic snowfall in the area [3], the Snowbowl requested permission from the US Forest Service in 2002 to make artificial snow with reclaimed sewage water in order to maintain a more predictable ski season. While the Snowbowl claimed that the artificial snow would pose little environmental risk, local tribes regarded the project as a blatant disregard for the culture, tradition, physical, and spiritual health of their communities (Sefiha and Lauderdale, 2008). For example, former Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., described the San Francisco Peaks as “the essence of who we are . . . a Holy place of worship,” “a place where we gather and collect our sacred herbs for healing and our way of life ceremonies yearlong”, and warned that the snowmaking with reclaimed wastewater would constitute the “desecration of the essence of our way of life” (as cited in Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010, p. 21). In the following years, the tribes and other allied environmental advocacy groups responded with a campaign and lawsuit against the project but often found themselves working with a settler-colonial legal system embodying values and concepts of the dominant Western society, which struggles to respect and/or affirm Indigenous worldviews and epistemic traditions for meaningful protection and access to land (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019).

As the above discussion shows, different forms of environmental injustice are interconnected and can be mutually reinforced: One group or community not treated with equal respect by power institutions/actors is likely to encounter exclusion in the decision-making process and, therefore, are also likely to experience maldistribution of environmental amenities and hazards. Conversely, a resource-depleted group or community (as a result of distributive injustice) may not be able to fully participate effectively in decision-making procedures and, therefore, encounter difficulty in having their voice heard and demands recognized by other members of the society (Bell and Carrick, 2018). These distinct but inter-related paradigms are important conceptual tools for sport management researchers to identify and theorize environmental (in)justice within the sport industry.

Situating sport management within environmental justice

EJ scholarship should involve analyzing and diagnosing conflict, attributing blames and accountabilities, and seeking solutions to resolve the conflicts. As noted by Pellow (2004), environmental injustice occurs

when historical and contemporary social forces intersect to position various stakeholders in a state of power imbalance with regard to environmental resources. These conflicts are, in turn, shaped by all affected groups, and can be mitigated or exacerbated when the power imbalances are reduced or increased. (p. 523)

Given that the production, distribution, and consumption of various sport “products” have implications on EJ, this paper contends that for sport management scholarship to be more socially responsible, researchers can actively incorporate EJ as a theoretical/interpretive tool within our field with the goal to contribute to the mitigation of the “power imbalances” noted by Pellow (2004), in both social movements and public policy development. The “action” aspect of

EJ coalesces well with the practical focus of sport management in informing managerial and organizational practices. However, to properly map, diagnose, or analyze an EJ conflict might not be as straightforward as it seems, as the three paradigms have identified different causes of environmental injustice (e.g. the inequitable distribution, the lack of fair procedure in decision-making, and the absence of adequate recognition of cultural-ecological perspectives). Here, we draw from [Pellow's \(2004\)](#) work to elaborate on two important tasks for sport management scholars to analyze specific conflicts regarding EJ in sport management in the settler-colonial state. The first task is to situate each sport-related EJ conflict within the macro-historical and micro-local context. The second task is to develop a nuanced analysis of the key stakeholders involved, particularly, the power and conflict dynamics therein.

History and context matter

While many contemporary environmental problems have transnational origins and solutions, conflicts regarding EJ are always temporally and spatially situated. Therefore, research on EJ should foreground the context wherein conflicts arise. [Harvey \(1993\)](#) noted how an understanding of political economic structure is crucial to analyses of environmental issues. Similarly, when exploring, understanding, and addressing environmental injustice present in the sport and recreational industry, it is important to consider the history of a particular community setting and develop a nuanced understanding of issues and place-based perspectives emanating from distinct epistemic traditions and locales. After all, “justice” may entail different meanings across time and space. As EJ scholars have argued, while (capitalist) environmental destruction operates in heterogeneous mechanisms, its unjust consequences manifest *more* in places affected by colonialism and the periphery of the world system ([Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020](#)). Therefore, one of the first questions for sport management researchers interested in EJ to consider is: How have the histories and processes of colonialism, global capitalism, systemic racism, and other forms of oppression such as heteropatriarchy shaped the context under examination, including how EJ is construed by different stakeholders therein?

Foregrounding the context of settler colonialism. In a study addressing the increasing environmental degradation associated with outdoor recreational sport and the challenging task of preventing and redressing the environmental damage, [Trendafilova and Chalip \(2007\)](#) acknowledged the value of immediate actions to address short-term issues but more importantly, proposed long-term strategies at the societal level: to use sport's special subculture to gradually shift the norm around environmental practices in different *local* contexts. Building upon their useful suggestion, we argue that for scholars located within settler states, the broader structure of settler colonialism and its implication on the mainstream conceptions of “outdoor environment” should be considered as an integral part of the “norm shifting” strategies: within settler states, outdoor sport and recreational activities take place on territories where Indigenous Peoples face land dispossession and forced relocation, and in many cases, Indigenous communities still maintain strong material and spiritual ties with places seen by settler sport organizations or athletes as “natural” sites for activities. Without foregrounding this historical background, it is difficult to comprehend the conflicts regarding the proper use of outdoor space located on Indigenous territory.

For example, in 2019, the Government of British Columbia, Canada, reached an agreement with Squamish Nation to transfer parcels of Crown land back to the First Nation in exchange for the latter's support for a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project. This represented a rare victory for the Squamish Nation, who had been fighting for decades to assert its sovereign rights and title in its territories. The parcel of land to be transferred included the “Petri-fying Wall,” a world-renowned rock-climbing area in Southwestern British Columbia. Many rock climbers were reported to feel left out of the process of consultation, and ultimately worried that they could no longer use the trail as the tribe reclaimed the land ([Lucas, 2019](#)). However, as one Squamish

Nation's spokesperson responded, the future use of the land would be primarily subject to the needs of the community, whereas outside visitors, including the rock climbers, "need to respect Squamish Nation's history and culture and understand the context in which they are asking for consultation" (as cited Hennig, 2019, para. 19). This presents a great opportunity for the outdoor sport organizations and other stakeholders to not only engage in critical self-education on sport, recreation, and the environment in the context of colonialism, but also to consider how their current and future practices can be shifted towards justice by (re)creating meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities.

Mapping stakeholders with varying powers in EJ landscape. There are a variety of stakeholders that can be identified as having something to gain or lose in EJ issues related to the sport industry. They have varying powers in influencing environmental practices in sport and also are affected differently. Given the distributive and procedural approaches to EJ, it is important for EJ scholars in sport management to first identify the major stakeholders in any given EJ conflict before proceeding to explore solutions. While we outline these stakeholders with broad categories below, it is important to note that these categories can be fluid and warrant closer analyses in each unique context (see the next section).

The first group are the "corporate" stakeholders in the sport industry, which are with significant institutional and/or financial power. They include the owners, investors, and elite managers that oversee the operations of professional sport franchises and recreational facilities. As is well documented in the sport ecology literature, the operations and maintenance of professional sport facilities, programs and staging of events generate environmental externalities (McCullough *et al.*, 2020). Also included in this group are the sport apparel and equipment manufacturing corporations that create environmental impact through the process of material production (Subie *et al.*, 2009). Another influential set of stakeholders in this group are corporations from other industries that provide sponsorship and/or endorsement for sport organizations, events or individuals with the purpose of associating with environmentally friendly discourse or obtaining "social license" to operate (see Miller, 2016). After all, environmental concerns "have moved from the margins of 'liberal' agendas to mainstream media . . . their currency has accelerated in corporate headquarters, marketing departments, and advertising storyboards" (Mincyte *et al.*, 2009, p. 104). These corporate stakeholders have one commonality: their fundamental interest is closely associated with the continuous economic growth of the sport industry (e.g. more events, more production, more travel, and more consumption), which is contradictory with the reduction of environmental externalities derived from sport-related activities, a contradiction that advancement of "green" technologies cannot readily resolve (Millington and Wilson, 2015). This poses a threat to EJ in sport especially given that sport's symbolism, imagery, stories, and positive association with the environment are often absorbed and deployed as part of the discursive strategies by corporate developers to maintain legitimacy (Sze, 2009).

The second group with strong institutional power is the state, including various levels of national, regional, and/or municipal government whose various branches are responsible for the provision of public sport and recreational spaces and services, as well as the legislation and enforcement of regulations and policies not only directly related to the sport industry and the environment but also other industries that might affect the space wherein sport and recreational activities are taking place (Floyd and Johnson, 2002; Kellison *et al.*, 2017; Taylor, 2009). Drawing from Critical Race Theory, Kurtz (2009) encouraged EJ scholars to problematize the "deep and durably racial character" of the state in reproducing environmental injustice (p. 701). In addition, sport is often closely associated with certain branches of government, most notably the military, which generates considerable environmental externalities. For instance, as the USA continues its quest for "security" within and beyond its own borders, particularly in the post-9/11 era, it maintains the largest military budget, far exceeding any other country in the world. A recent study at Brown

University found that the U.S. Department of Defense is the single largest consumer of fossil fuels in the world and one of the world's top greenhouse gas emitters (Crawford, 2019). As militarism remains a perpetual feature of the mainstream sporting culture in countries like the USA (Butterworth, 2017), what possible, effective means might be for sport organizations to disentangle from rampant militarism is a question that warrants attention from sport management researchers interested in EJ.

Another group of powerful stakeholders is supra-national organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), international multi-sport governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and single sport governing bodies such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and FIA (Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile). These supra-national actors play a significant, often symbolic role in mediating the environment-related discourse, including the creation of high-visibility environment-related campaigns and initiatives that affect the sport industry (Cantelon and Letters, 2000; Karamichas, 2013; Lenskyj, 1998). Lastly, the media and the science/academic community have also played and will continue to play, important roles in developing, framing/shaping, and delivering messages about environmental (in)justice that has a significant influence on the public's views (Hopke, 2012; Ramos, 2015).

Stakeholders from the private and public sectors may form powerful growth coalitions united around a common goal. As discussed in the stadium-finance literature, growth coalitions often consist of wealthy business owners, prominent political leaders, and other influential actors. Once organized, they leverage their public influence to promote mutually beneficial endeavors, such as garnering local support to fund and construct major stadium projects (Delaney and Eckstein, 2007). Citizens and groups who oppose a growth coalition's agenda often experience significant challenges in overcoming the financial, reputational, and organizational strength of the growth coalition (Beaver, 2001). In the 1980s, Lightning, a predominately Black, working-class neighborhood near downtown Atlanta was effectively forgotten when state officials began purchasing properties to make way for the Georgia Dome, itself replaced by Mercedes-Benz Stadium in 2017 (Blau, 2019). For decades, the neighborhood existed among Atlanta's most noxious facilities, including the city's garbage incinerator and an antiquated power plant. Despite public outcry, neighborhood residents were afforded few protections from these facilities' harmful pollutants. It was not until city developers began exploring the downtown area for commercial development—which would ultimately include constructing the city's convention center and Georgia Dome—that much of the industrial infrastructure was decommissioned. Looking back, Timothy McDonald, a prominent clergyperson in Lightning, argued that the erasure of Lightning illustrated the uneven power dynamics between stakeholders and the need for rebalancing: "We should learn from Lightning. The lesson, for me, is how to give voice, which will lead to power, to neighborhoods" (para. 149).

A proposed mechanism for giving "voice . . . to neighborhoods" is the community benefits agreement (CBA), a mutually-beneficial exchange between private developers and public stakeholders. For example, the CBA may include assurances from the developer that a stadium-construction project will give preference to minority-owned contractors, utilize a local workforce or revitalize a community park (deMause, 2022). In exchange, civic leaders, legislators and community groups will view the project more favorably, thereby increasing the likelihood of its legislative approval (Wolf-Powers, 2010). While CBAs have the potential to enhance EJ reforms, in practice, they are often imperfect solutions. For instance, examples of stadium projects in the Bronx (Thompson and Bunds, 2022) and Atlanta (McGehee *et al.*, 2018) demonstrate that when the probability of a project's approval is already high, developers may have little incentive to engage in a CBA. Additionally, the CBA itself can be problematic: as Lavine and Oder (2010) have discussed regarding the Atlantic Yards (Brooklyn) arena CBA, groups selected to represent the community may have direct conflicts of interest with the developer, and the CBA itself can suffer from "relatively weak oversight and enforcement measures" (p. 316).

Though perceived to possess less institutional power, the fourth group of stakeholders nevertheless constitutes an important basis for EJ movements in sport. The first subgroup includes the communities that are most affected by environmental hazards as well as the activists, advocacy, and civil or non-for-profit groups that utilize sport as a site of resistance and opportunity to amplify EJ concerns and messages, including more equitable distribution of environmental amenities and harms, more equitable access to information and decision-making processes, and more recognition for alternative epistemologies that challenges mainstream notions of environmentalism. The student-led protest that took place during the Harvard–Yale football matchup in November 2019 was a good example of how high-profile sport events were utilized as a platform to deliver uncomfortable yet urgent messages about EJ. While a major demand expressed by the protesting students was for the two prestigious institutions to divest from fossil fuel corporations, the students also urged the schools to cease their investment in hedge funds that held Puerto Rico bonds, which prevented the hurricane-ridden island to pay in infrastructure and basic service (Bogage and Knowles, 2019). Elsewhere, communities that are often disproportionately affected by environmental harms have similarly utilized sport as a platform for messages. Sport and recreational events/festivals led by Indigenous communities (Ferreira and Camargo, 2014; Skogvang, 2021) have become important platforms for sharing Indigenous cultural and ecological values and strengthening inter-community relationships.

The second subgroup includes workers directly involved in the sport industry: athletes, coaches, event staff, laborers, and manufacturing workers of sport facilities, equipment, and products. Sportworkers have become more adept in utilizing their high visibility to garner public attention toward racial, social, and environmental injustices. A recent example is US basketball player Kyle Kuzma, whose advocacy for his hometown Flint, Michigan, gave exposure to the underlying systemic causes for the persistent “water crisis” that disproportionately affects the local low-income, African-American residents (Rollins, 2018).

Highlighting conflict dynamics beyond us vs. them. While race and class have traditionally been the primary focus of EJ scholarship, more recently, especially influenced by feminist thoughts from the Global South, scholars are advised to develop an even more sophisticated view that takes other dimensions of social stratification such as gender and age into consideration (Sze and London, 2008). In examining EJ conflicts within sport, it is helpful for sport management researchers to focus on the specific social stratifications that play a significant role in conditioning the case in question. As noted above, there can be a variety of stakeholder influences in any given EJ-related conflict or campaign, and it is necessary for sport management researchers to consider the complex dynamics of stakeholders, which are themselves constituted by individuals and groups of various social statuses and identities. Existing literature has shown that who constitutes the “we” in any given EJ conflict is not necessarily clear-cut and that even within the EJ movement, there remains great diversity regarding the rationales of commitment (Wheaton, 2007).

Pellow (2004) advised EJ research to be cautious of a simple “us vs. them” analysis, as alliances may emerge to achieve unexpected outcomes. In some instances, seemingly disparate groups may ally under a common mission. Such was the case in 2013, when the Atlanta Tea Party Patriots, a conservative political organization, joined the Sierra Club, the nationwide environmental group, to campaign [unsuccessfully] against the Atlanta Braves’ move from its downtown ballpark to a new site in suburban Cobb (Bluestein, 2013). Other cases, however, may be more exploitative in nature. For example, Pulido (2018) noted the risk of co-optation of EJ discourse by powerful, elite actors and explained how the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) adopted EJ language in its institutional workings yet engaged in creating environmentally harmful lobbying and law-making processes. In examining the Atlantic Yards project that included a proposed basketball arena in Brooklyn, New York, Sze (2009) documented how corporate actors effectively mobilized discourses of EJ

to garner support from some sections of the residents that were to bear the impact and thus fend off oppositions from local environmental activists. In doing so, [Sze \(2009\)](#) highlighted the importance for EJ scholars to attend to the complex dynamics of power and interest alignment that go beyond “race or class” under sport-related urban development.

Another important case in point is the protection of Trestles, a world-renowned surfing site at San Onofre State Beach in southern California ([Gilio, 2012](#); [Gilio-Whitaker, 2019](#)). There, the Acjachemen/Juaneños, local Indigenous people, recognize parts of the Beach, the San Mateo Creek watershed, and Camp Pendleton Marine Base as “Panhe,” an ancestral site of cultural and spiritual significance ([Gilio, 2012](#)). Around 2006, a six-lane toll road was proposed to meet the long-time need for traffic mitigation in Orange County. While the local environmental groups became aware that the construction would be damaging to the San Mateo watershed, their concern gained much greater momentum when two other groups, the surfing community, and the native Acjachemen community, joined forces to form a coalition against the proposal. The surfing community worried that the disturbance caused by the construction (highway pillars anchoring in bedrock, disrupting the creeks’ flow, washing silt downstream, and changing the topography of the ocean bottom) would irreversibly affect the wave quality. The Acjachemen tribe, on the other hand, feared that the construction would result in the desecration of their sacred site ([Gilio, 2012](#)). As groups with different motives formed a strong coalition to pressure the state government [4], the toll road project was first rejected and eventually re-routed ([Kwong et al., 2016](#)). Indigenous environmental scholar and surfing researcher [Gilio-Whitaker \(2019\)](#) observed that the presentation of Panhe as a Native American sacred site on publicly owned lands (as designated as an “archaeological resource” deserving of protection) was crucial in the California Coastal Commission’s decision to reject the construction. However, this framing was not without limitations: it assumes the site’s significance to all “Americans,” not just the Acjachemen people, and, therefore, represents a discourse of absorption and homogenization, coherent with the settler states’ desire to erase Indigenous history and presence ([Gilio, 2012](#)). Notwithstanding the shortcomings of the process, this example demonstrates that seemingly less powerful groups have the agency to shape EJ struggles and that there is considerable value in forming strategic coalitions amongst groups of different statuses, affiliations, and interests ([Pellow, 2004](#)).

No social justice without environment justice: tensions and opportunities for sport management research

Thus far in this paper, we have demonstrated that different yet interrelated conceptualizations of EJ co-exist and that many micro-level issues and/or conflicts that concern EJ cannot be readily comprehended without accounting for the various histories and processes of the context, the existence of a multiplicity of stakeholders, as well as the specific alignment of power and interest of the communities involved. In this section, we highlight how these important theoretical and methodological premises of EJ provide important opportunities for sport management research to deepen the latter’s commitment to addressing injustices. These premises necessarily propel sport management research to consider what roles management and/or organizing of sport activities can play in the EJ movement and how sport can be mobilized for achieving EJ goals. In [Table 1](#), a list of preliminary, and by no means exhaustive, questions are provided for various sub-disciplines of sport management to further explore the intersections between the field and EJ.

Because of EJ’s peculiar location at the “crossroads” of social movement, public policy, and academic research, it demands solution-oriented, policy-relevant research ([Sze and London, 2008](#)). This demand aligns well with the emerging sport management scholarship that encourages the deployment of methodologies that embody critical pedagogies and value reciprocal researcher–community partnerships such as participatory action research

Areas of research	Preliminary questions
Organization, management, leadership	<p>Given that more corporations have sought to address environmental concerns, what are the effective organizational and managerial strategies for an environmental justice campaign in the sports industry?</p> <p>When environmental concerns in the sport industry need to be addressed, how is the notion of organizational justice manifest, if at all, in different (sport) organization's interactions with its stakeholders?</p> <p>How can sport organizations restore and repair relations within themselves and with neighboring communities? What are the limitations of a typical firm-centric stakeholder approach to explain the deeply ecological and relational approach inherent in many Indigenous cosmologies? How to overcome these limitations?</p> <p>Which stakeholders outside the sport industry are likely to form alliances with EJ advocates in the sport industry?</p> <p>What are the types of leadership within sport organizations that can help to enhance environmental justice actions? What are the limitations therein?</p>
Theory and methodology	<p>What are the ways in which frameworks such as historical materialism, eco-socialism, Critical Race Theory (CRT), settler colonialism, Black, Indigenous, and third-world feminism, queer theory, and environmental justice can be in productive conversation and contribute to the theorization of (in)justice in the sport management literature?</p> <p>What are the action-oriented and/or place-based research methodologies that can be responsibly deployed to explore environmental justice issues in sport management?</p>
Marketing and consumer behavior	<p>How, if possible, can EJ be incorporated within the marketing strategies of different sport organizations? What are the tensions in that process?</p> <p>How, if possible, can sustainability-related marketing activities in the sport industry serve to advance EJ as opposed to greenwashing or perpetuating existing environmental injustice?</p> <p>Is "politicized" consumption or other market-based protests of sport goods and products recognized as a mechanism amongst sport fans regarding environmental justice concerns?</p>
Communication and media	<p>How is EJ discourse being mobilized by different stakeholders in sport? How can EJ discourse be more effectively mobilized to enhance EJ projects and efforts that center or revolve around sport? How can EJ organizations recognize and resist the deployment of EJ discourse by corporate stakeholders?</p> <p>How are environmental justice issues in sport communicated in the media, if any, and particularly, how "science" has been used by various stakeholders in their communicative strategies?</p>
Facility and event management	<p>What does it mean to host environmentally just sporting events? Amongst many stakeholders involved, whose voice is heard and whose is not?</p> <p>How can the development of new sport facilities be aligned with environmental justice concerns raised by communities that are most impacted by the project?</p>
Law and regulation	<p>How can EJ (all three paradigmatic frameworks) be more effectively achieved through legislation in specific contexts? What are the unintended consequences?</p> <p>How can Indigenous legal frameworks regarding the environment be recognized and respected in the development of sport facilities in settler colonial states?</p>

(continued)

Table 1.
Some preliminary
questions for
environmental justice
research in sport
management

Areas of research	Preliminary questions
Political economy	How can the sport industry's imperative of growth for profit reconcile with the demand of less environmental impact, particularly in ecologically vulnerable regions of the world? What are the examples of sport organizations in the Global North to participate in the divestment movement, and ethically deploy their high-profile platform to amplify environmental perspectives that have been subjugated so far?
Finance	How can sport organizations and events leverage their important role to encourage corporations in pursuing environmentally just business strategies? What is the real cost associated with marginalized communities affected by environmental injustice due to sport-related development, including the emerging alliance between sport and crypto-business?
Human resource management (activism/advocacy)	What are the opportunities, challenges, and limitations for athletes and other workers in sport organizations to connect racial and economic injustice with environmental justice within sport?
Sport for development	How have sport for development (SfD) projects addressed the conundrum of receiving funding from the fossil fuel industry that might be actively producing negative environmental consequences for the communities that SfD seeks to support?
Corporate social responsibility	How can sport organizations go beyond CSR initiatives to lend financial and infrastructural support to non-traditionally "environmental" organizations (Ranganathan and Bratman, 2021)?

Table 1.

(Shaw and Hoeber, 2016). Incorporating EJ as a research agenda in sport management, however, is not without challenges. The very first challenge for all scholars who engage in EJ topics is to be able to withstand the potential critiques that one's research is not "objective" enough (Sze and London, 2008), given that the underlying assumption for much sport management scholarship is still to serve, instead of challenge, the capitalist mode of production in the "industry" (Chen, 2022; Newman, 2014). In addition, for sport management researchers keen to develop reciprocal relationships between the academic world and the social movement sphere, there can be multiple, competing demands from both "worlds." However, as Sze and London (2008) emphasized, this mutually informing praxis is precisely why EJ is an important scholarly endeavor. The following section further elaborates on some tensions and opportunities for sport management research to meaningfully engage with EJ.

Transcending (intra)organizational justice

As discussed above, a fundamental pillar of EJ embedded within all three paradigms is its focus on *power* as well as the consequences due to inequitable power relations that manifest in racial, class, gender, and epistemological terms (Pulido, 2018). From the perspectives of historically marginalized communities, EJ encompasses labor rights, land rights, housing, waste disposal, public health, incarceration, and other social justice concerns (Kurtz, 2009; Ranganathan and Bratman, 2021; Sze and London, 2008). For sport industry to address environmental injustice, the process inevitably intersects with class, racial, and gender dimensions of injustice embedded within capitalist social relations. EJ, therefore, provides important opportunities for sport management scholars whose research concerns a single axis of power relations to consider how these unjust relations often manifest in environmental terms and conversely, how disproportionate environmental consequences compound existing race, class, or gender-related oppressions—after all, sport and recreational

activities take place in physical space and are always materially situated in a given *environment*.

One area that is properly situated at the convergence of EJ and the sport management literature is organizational justice (OJ). Within business management and organizational studies, the OJ literature is extensive but primarily focuses on how perceptions of justice, especially different cultural interpretations of justice, affect relationships between employees and employers *within* organizational settings and has rarely been associated with external stakeholders. However, as organization studies scholar [Whiteman \(2009\)](#) pointed out, justice extends far beyond the employer–employee relationship within organizations and should instead be situated in various complicated stakeholder relations, which are conditioned by unequal power dynamics and different cultural understandings. Similarly, OJ research in sport management has traditionally been focused on internal dynamics (employees) within an organization (e.g. [Burton et al., 2017](#); [Hums and Chelladurai, 1994](#); [Kerwin et al., 2015](#); [Mahony et al., 2010](#)). EJ provides an important opportunity for sport management researchers to extend OJ literature towards accounting for multiple stakeholders, that is, the inter-organizational dimension of justice. Instead of being confined to the basic assumptions of (intra)OJ and primarily concerned with the *outcomes* from the focal organization's perspective, sport management scholarship on EJ can position itself to explore how sport organizations' actions affect other organizations/communities in environmental/ecological terms.

Transcending epistemological limitations and nation-state borders

As highlighted by the Indigenous environmental movements and the recognition paradigm of EJ, the transformation of inequitable power relations cannot be achieved without challenging dominant epistemologies—systems of knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions that shape human society's actions towards the environment. Notably, sport management scholars, [Sartore-Baldwin and McCullough \(2018\)](#) identified anthropocentrism and anthroparchy as beliefs underlying contemporary sport organizations' environmentally harmful practices and advocated for more eco-centric approaches to managing and organizational procedures. Moreover, given the dominance of EJ research produced within Anglophone, Global North institutions, scholars and activists writing from non-Western epistemic traditions and locations have critiqued its limitation in understanding and addressing environmental issues in the “Southern” contexts ([Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020](#)). For example, there is a significant limitation to addressing EJ *only* within a nation-state context: As environmental externalities are not confined to any geographical region, temporary equitable distribution of environmental benefits and harms in a location in the Global North through development may still mean inequitable consequences for communities elsewhere. It is widely acknowledged that fossil fuel corporations in the Global North are primarily responsible for global climate change, leading to increased vulnerability of communities in the South. This historical inequity has been described as “ecological debt” ([Simms, 2009](#)), yet institutions in the Global North continue to benefit from these inequitable relations.

Thus, another opportunity/challenge posed by EJ to sport management resonates with the existing literature ([Chen and Mason, 2018](#); [Singer, 2005](#)) and concerns more expansive ways to reckon with the dominant Euro-Western epistemologies that, globally speaking, have historically contributed to the construction of both sporting spaces and environmental solutions that are only amenable and accessible to a limited few. It propels justice-oriented sport management scholars to consider: How can sport organizations play a part in mediating the “ecological debt” ([Simms, 2009](#)), go beyond CSR initiatives to engage in reparation ([Ranganathan and Bratman, 2021](#)), participate in the divestment movement ([Szto, 2019](#)), reflect upon anthropocentric practices ([Sartore-Baldwin and McCullough, 2018](#)), and deploy their high-profile platforms to amplify epistemologies that have been subjugated thus far?

Transcending superficial recognitions of difference: land restitution and decolonization (or extinction)

While diverse identities have become a significant part of mainstream social justice discourse and movement, Whyte (2018b) argued that in recent EJ struggles, acknowledgement of cultural and ethnic differences tends to be *superficially* deployed in a way that prevents substantial rectification of the injustices perpetuated, especially in the case of Indigenous Peoples in settler-colonial states (Chen and Davidson, 2022). A starting point for some sport organizations has been through the form of public statements (e.g. public address announcements prior to a game, social media posts) acknowledging the “local Indigenous Nations or communities whose traditional territories the stadium or team now occupies” (Ali-Joseph *et al.*, 2022, p. 4). Still, when delivered clumsily or merely superficially, these land acknowledgments “can have detrimental consequences for sport organizations and the Indigenous communities [they are] meant to empower” (p. 7).

In contrast to tokenized and superficial recognition that served to preserve the political-economic status quo, genuine recognition, as Whyte (2018b) insists, is deeply and necessarily *ecological* because Indigenous Peoples’ cultural practices and enactment of political self-determination depend upon and thus require particular sets of ecological processes and access to land and water ecosystems (e.g. availability of medicinal plants, adequate baselines of natural resources and microbiomes that sustain habitats for food sources). Therefore, without meaningful practices of land restitution, state and/or corporate recognition of cultural differences can run hollow. This illuminates an important tension for justice-focused sport management researchers in settler states like the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand: How can sport management scholarship effectively challenge the management and organizational practices rooted in the logics of settler colonialism (Chen and Mason, 2019), and contribute to the Indigenous environmental movements towards decolonization, that is, the restitution of Indigenous land and regeneration of Indigenous communities, relationships, and knowledges (Estes, 2019; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Whyte, 2018a)? While this process may involve much unsettling and discomfort, it is beneficial to heed the advice from Indigenous Peoples: In restoring the relationship among humans and in between human and nature, argued Gilio (2012), the process of decolonization is a “two-way” street that will benefit both settlers and Indigenous Peoples alike in the long run.

Conclusion

Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte (2018b) commented on the significance of today’s EJ movement as such: “Our actions today are cyclical performances; they are guided by our reflection on our ancestors’ perspectives and on our desire to be good ancestors ourselves to future generations” (p. 160). If some of us within the field of sport management were to undertake a respectable mission of becoming “good ancestors,” the incorporation of EJ on its increasingly multi-disciplinary, justice-oriented agendas is an essential and robust step.

This paper reviews EJ movement and maps the major paradigms of conceptualizing EJ, with the goal of showcasing the opportunities for sport management scholarship to engage with EJ as an important research agenda within the emerging sport ecology literature. Drawing from a multidisciplinary body of literature, we highlight that EJ offers an important conceptual tool that further broadens the scope of intersectionality analysis within the sport industry (Olushola-Ogunrinde and Carter-Francique, 2020; Palmer and Masters, 2010; Walker and Melton, 2015), illuminating the commonalities of struggles across seemingly disparate issues in different places that affect different populations. Concurring with EJ scholars Sze and London (2008), who argued that EJ scholarship must center around its genesis—a critical analysis of *power* in the maldistribution of harms and opportunities related to the environment (most notably associated with race and class)—we encourage

sport management scholars, educators, and students to embrace a multidisciplinary approach to connect EJ with other justice-related issues in sport. In doing so, sport management may make a modest contribution to the EJ movement, thus aligning the field's current praxis more closely to becoming "good ancestors." Lastly, we recognize that many examples discussed in this paper are from the North American context, specifically arising from the struggles of Indigenous Peoples on this continent. This illuminates the limitation of any author: we all write from a certain locus of enunciation, and our observation of issues in the world is constrained by that. We do hope, though, that these examples are nevertheless useful because of the rich histories of the EJ movement and vibrant tradition of theorization on this continent. This should serve as an invitation for dialogues from scholars whose research concerns environmental movements on other continents and geopolitical contexts.

Notes

1. Gordon Campbell was the Premier of British Columbia, Canada, when the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games were held.
2. As exceptions, see the recent volume edited by Kellison (2022) and the commentary by Murfree (2022).
3. A 2018 local news report revealed that with warmer winters, the resort currently cannot operate without artificial snow (Woods, 2018).
4. The participants of this coalition include United Coalition to Protect Panhe, the Sierra Club, the Surfrider Foundation, the California Cultural Resources Preservation Alliance and other environmental and social justice groups (Gilio, 2012).

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