

*Collecting Human–Environment Relations: An Ecological Approach to Material Culture in Oceania*

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The burgeoning interest in material culture has hitherto largely side-lined the aspect of concrete “materialness.” Yet concreteness renders objects empirical evidence that links material culture to ecology and offers insight into material aspects of human–environment relations. Relevant themes include organic matter as components of objects, objects as tools for environmental transformation, or experiential resonances between ecology and use. Focusing on Oceania, I explore this ecological dimension of material culture in the context of a co-edited volume, to be published as a peer-reviewed open-access book by ANU Press in their Asia–Pacific Environment Monographs series.

My own contributions are the bulk of the editorial work and three full-length chapters. Two of these rely on my ethnographic field research in Papua New Guinea, which included the study of subsistence practices and ethnobotany as well as a large collection of material culture. One chapter explores this material from an ethnographic angle, tracing the wealth of concrete relations between artisans and plant resources that are evident in the processes of making and using objects. The other chapter assumes a methodological angle, presenting artefact collections as a tool for accessing a wealth of ecological evidence on subsistence.

The third chapter is the introduction to the volume. It provides a thematic synopsis, frames the topic conceptually, and explores the wider relevance of the project, beyond its contributions to the ethnography of Oceania and material culture studies. It shows how attending to object materialities gives a voice to the people who make and use these objects, thus expanding ethnographic repertoires; it indicates how the focus on concreteness resonates with the natural sciences and the crafts and thereby carries interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary potential; and it highlights how the conjunction of objects and human–environment relations dovetails with the resource and sustainability concerns of the Anthropocene.