## Power, Participation, and Silence: EIAs as Speech Acts in Urban Advocacy

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) are often viewed as technical tools for evaluating ecological risk, but they also shape democratic decision-making (Barnard-Chumik 2020) (Barnard-Chumik, Cappe and Giang 2022) (Cashmore and Richardson 2013) (Cashmore, Bond and Cobb 2008). They determine which voices are heard, which land connections are acknowledged, and which knowledge is valued. This paper analyzes an EIA for a development project on Calgary's Paskapoo Slopes, a site of cultural and ecological importance. The EIA's narrow wilderness focus silenced community calls to preserve the area as public space.

This case raises concerns about exclusion in decision-making and the ethics of impact assessment professionals. Presenting outdated concepts—like the disproven "balance of nature"—as scientific truth can reinforce unfair moral assumptions and obscure commons-based environmentalism (Barbour 1996) (Sagoff 2011) (Kapustka and Landis 1998).

Using speech act theory (Austin 1975) and neo-Gramscian perspectives (Lukes 1974 (2005)), this analysis shows how EIAs, by masking diverse environmental values behind a false sense of ecological necessity, not only silence opposition but also reshape democratic engagement. To make stakeholder participation more inclusive and ethical, we must reconsider both EIA design and the responsibilities of those who create them.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) shape not only what is evaluated but also what counts as nature, value, and valid concern. Scientific language in EIAs is not neutral—it becomes a site of contest, where dominant environmental views prevail, and others are dismissed (Blacker 2022). One such view, focused on "wilderness" and measured through surveys, continues to define environmental harm. Though based on outdated ideas of ecological balance, it supports development decisions and discredits alternatives—especially those grounded in community use, memory, and care for shared space.

The ethical concern lies in how scientific authority, paired with a narrow ecological frame, is used to political ends (Blacker 2022). This paper draws on speech act theory (Austin 1975), power analysis (Fraser 2022) (Fricker 2007), and environmental justice (Martínez Alier 2002) to explore these dynamics.

EIAs are more than reports; they shape environmental discourse (Cashmore and Richardson 2013) (Barnard-Chumik 2020)As performative acts (Austin 1975), they don't just describe facts—they help construct them. By legitimizing some arguments and filtering others (Fricker 2007), EIAs define what counts as knowledge (Blacker 2022), reinforcing Lukes' (1974 (2005)) third dimension of power: excluding opposing views so thoroughly they can't be considered.

## The Political Nature of EIAs: Hegemony and the Structuring of Advocacy

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, EIAs function as tools of hegemony, reinforcing dominant socio-environmental systems under the guise of neutrality (Blacker 2022). As Cashmore and Richardson (2013) argue, EIAs do more than administrative work—they reproduce power dynamics. By defining environmental legitimacy in ways that align with state and corporate interests, EIAs frame local, alternative claims as unscientific or obstructive (Townsend and Townsend 2020) (Murray, Wong and Singh 2018) (Ashforth 1990).

This filtering is especially evident in cities, where "second-generation urban wilds"—ecosystems shaped by both nature and human activity—are assessed through frameworks that privilege "pristine" wilderness. As a result, community advocates for these hybrid spaces are misrecognized (Fraser 1990) as "NIMBYists" rather than legitimate environmental stakeholders. These processes of delegitimization silence alternative values and render the exclusion of certain groups from environmental decision-making appear natural.

## EIAs and Deliberative Democracy: Constraints on Rhetorical Agency

Dissent is marginalized in EIAs through their structure of discussion. Nancy Fraser (1990) shows how institutional participation favors dominant norms, shaping what can be said. EIAs privilege technical expertise over lived experience, and Austin's (1975) concept of illocutionary force explains how they produce binding statements that authorize or dismiss arguments. When a concern is labeled "insufficiently scientific," the EIA acts as a gatekeeper, excluding alternative viewpoints. This exclusion creates hermeneutic injustice (Fricker 2007), where communities lack the interpretive resources to frame their concerns as legitimate.

## The Role of Science in Legitimacy Claims

EIAs do more than document conditions—they actively shape them. By establishing scientific and policy frameworks, they determine which landscapes matter and whose concerns count. While science is important, it does not alone define acceptable environmental change (Beanlands and Duinker 1983). EIAs blend ecological data with values set by regulators, developers, and policymakers. In wilderness-based assessments, prioritizing "wilderness" marginalizes landscapes with mixed species, dismissing urban wilds and framing their advocates' concerns as illegitimate.

### The Role of Science in Legitimacy Claims: Socio-Political Selection of Value

ElAs do not operate through neutral inquiry but through selection processes that shape legitimacy (Murray, Wong and Singh 2018) (Beanlands and Duinker 1983). The *Matrix of Legitimacy Determination* categorizes impact judgments along two axes:

#### Socio-Political Consensus on Value

- Strong consensus: Broad agreement on an environmental factor
- Weak consensus: Competing or fragmented views

#### **Evidence-Based Scientific Risk Assessment**

High scientific support: Strong empirical evidence
Low scientific support: Limited or weak evidence

These axes yield four categories:

Scientific-Political Alignment (High support, strong consensus)

Scientific Disruption (High support, weak consensus)

Symbolic Legitimacy Claims (Low support, strong consensus)

Marginalization of Alternative Claims (Low support, weak consensus)

In wilderness-based EIAs, *Symbolic Legitimacy Claims* dominate—scientific tools affirm preexisting socio-political values that prioritize wilderness, marginalizing urban wilds and mixedspecies ecosystems, as example the Calgary Open Space Plan (City of Calgary: Parks 2002-3). Without strong scientific or political backing, advocates for alternatives are cast as unscientific or irrelevant. The matrix reveals how EIAs determine which environmental concerns are validated and which are dismissed.

## Applying the Matrix: Symbolic Legitimacy Claims and the Silencing of Commons Advocacy

The 2015 public hearing on Calgary's Paskapoo Slopes shows how symbolic legitimacy claims shape, limit, and discredit certain forms of environmental advocacy. A four-part content analysis of the hearing transcript reveals how a botanical survey—commissioned by developers—functioned as both technical evidence and a performative act. It redefined standards for responsible environmental speech, establishing new epistemic and moral boundaries, suppressing community-based values, and promoting a narrow, wilderness-focused environmentalism aligned with development goals.

The biophysical survey, which exceeded regulatory requirements, cataloged plant communities and ecological features (City of Calgary: Parks 2002-3). While claiming scientific credibility, its focus on pre-colonial wilderness limited relevance to spaces resembling untouched nature. It excluded urban green spaces with ecological and social importance shaped by human interaction. These areas—valued by locals and inhabited by moose, deer, and other species—were also accessible across ages and mobility levels (Calgary 2015). This selective valuation demonstrates how scientific authority can support development agendas while sidelining public concerns.

The survey's symbolic legitimacy claim silenced diverse advocacies, particularly commons-based environmentalism (Calgary 2015). It shaped decision-makers' focus, credibility judgments, and language use—echoing Lukes' second and third dimensions of power, which control perceptions of legitimacy and narrow the space for dissent (1974 (2005)).



## 4.1 Threshold Analysis 1: Environmental Narratives (Figure 1)

#### Figure 1 Environmental Philosophy of Advocates for Preservation

The first part of the analysis categorizes the environmental positions voiced by stakeholders. Figure 1 outlines arguments from those advocating for the preservation of the greenfield site, emphasizing resistance to the loss of shared green space, local stewardship, and skepticism toward the project's environmental efficiency claims. These concerns align with commons-based environmentalism and resonate with Joan Martínez-Alier's *environmentalism of the poor* (2002), where cultural and use-based values challenge narrow, technocratic assessments.

In contrast, development proponents framed their support as conditional—expressing willingness to preserve wilderness only if it could be proven to exist (City of Calgary: Parks 2002-3)—and emphasized balancing economy and ecology. This shifted the burden of proof onto preservationists, requiring them to demonstrate the site's wilderness-like character, while sidelining arguments based on commons usage or urban ecological justice. The botanical survey reinforced this frame by establishing a discursive threshold of "naturalness," dismissing areas shaped by human activity. Without interpretive resources to challenge this standard, commons-based advocates were unable to position their concerns within a legitimate environmental paradigm.

## 4.2 Threshold Analysis 2: Valuation Frameworks and Uptake by Decision Makers (Figure 2)

	Advocates	Council	Applicants	Majority Value
	(N=356)	(N=39)	(N=48)	Threshold ≥ 15%
Symbolic 1	20.22%	10.26%	6.25%	Advocates
Moralistic 2	18.26%	35.90%	33.33%	AII
Naturalistic 3	16.29%	0%	6.25%	Advocates
Humanistic 4	13.76%	10.26%	6.25%	No
Aesthetic 5	11.24%	12.82%	18.75%	Applicants
Utilitarian 6	8.43%	0%	10.40%	No
Strategic Ecologistic/	8.15%	24.6%	22.90%	
Scientific 7				Council, Applicants
Authentic	2.00%	6.00%	0%	
Ecologistic/Scientific 8				No
Dominionistic 8	0.84%	0%	0%	No
Negativistic 9	0.56%	0%	0%	No
	1.00	1.00	1.00	

#### Figure 2 Stakeholder Valuation of Site Compared

The second analysis examines how preservation advocates' valuations failed to register as intelligible to decision-makers. Using Kellert's framework of environmental values (Wilson and Kellert 1993), it compares how developers, advocates, and decision-makers valued the site. Figure 2 shows that while advocates emphasized symbolic, naturalistic, and cultural values across the entire site, decision-makers focused primarily on scientific values validated by the biophysical survey. Guided by the survey's findings, they concentrated on areas labeled "ecologically important" and dismissed the significance of flat, accessible, or socially connected landscapes.

The survey thus did more than inform—it reframed the discussion. It acted as a legitimacy filter, steering attention toward arguments that aligned with its categories. This illustrates Steven Lukes' second dimension of power (1974 (2005)), where framing shapes which preferences count. It also suggests an early form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), in which alternative knowledge sources are rendered unintelligible or less credible due to a lack of interpretive resources— structurally excluding ways of knowing tied to community experience and care.

### 4.3 Threshold Analysis 3: Naming the Site and Epistemic Authority (Figure 3)

The third analysis examines how naming and terminology shifted following the survey's presentation. Afterward, advocates ceased using potentially powerful terms aligned with alternative environmental philosophies—such as "commons" or "environmental justice"—suggesting those interpretive frameworks were unavailable to them. Evicted from using "remnant wilderness," they turned instead to less potent language like "open space," or adopted technically inaccurate terms such as "All ESA," inconsistent with the evaluative standards already presented.

This shift illustrates *hermeneutic injustice* (Fricker, 2007): once the site was described as degraded or insignificant, advocates lacked a recognized vocabulary to articulate their environmental connection. Though some argued that "the whole site is an ESA," they struggled to justify this claim

outside the dominant botanical framework, relying instead on commons-based attachments that had already been marginalized.

Lexical Choice	Advocates (N=60)	Applicants (N=20)	Council (N=12)	Majority Use Threshold >20%
Green Space/Natural	26.78	5	0	Advocates
Place				
All ESA	20.67	0	8.33	Advocates
Wildlife Habitat	13.33	0	8.33	No
Wilderness	13.33	5	0	No
Biodiverse	8.33	5	0	No
ESA Areas	8.33	40	16.67	Applicants
Disturbed Portions	5	30	25	Applicants,
				Council
Experiencing Use	1.67	10	33.33	Council
Pressure				
Areas that are Just	1.67	10	8.33	No
Land				

**↔** 

Figure 3 Naming the Site, Comparison of Stakeholders and Decision Maker Clarification Seeking

# 4.4 Threshold Analysis 4: Historical Narratives and the Problem of Wilderness Norms (Figure 4)

The final analysis examines how stakeholders addressed the site's human history (Hobbs, Higgs and Hall 2013) (Hobbs, Arico, et al. 2006). Preservation advocates emphasized responsible uses such as community cleanups and low-impact recreation, while development supporters focused on ecological degradation (Calgary 2015). Figure 4 shows that development advocates referenced the site's human-altered past more than preservationists. This suggests that preservationists avoided discussing human impact, acknowledging the "Cult of Wilderness" norm, which required ecological "purity" for protection (Cronon 1995) (Martínez Alier 2002). Had they framed their relationship as commons stewardship, they could have emphasized community involvement (Martínez Alier 2002). Instead, their silence reflects structural misrecognition, undermining their

#### case (Fraser, 1990).



#### Figure 4 Historical Narratives

#### Conclusion

The Paskapoo Slopes hearing illustrates how Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) practices silence advocacy. The botanical survey defined nature and value in ways that marginalized commons-based environmentalism, denying recognition to community-driven perspectives. This underscores the need for EIA reform to protect free speech in decision-making. Scientific discourse must be critically examined to prevent reinforcing exclusionary norms, such as the "Cult of Wilderness," applied inappropriately to urban contexts. When scientific legitimacy is aligned with narrow moral frameworks, it becomes a tool of exclusion, sidelining diverse environmental values. Reform should ensure social use, shared memory, and stewardship are acknowledged in decision-making.

The suppression of commons-based environmentalism is furthered by outdated ecological concepts of "balance," which clash with current scientific understanding. This misrepresentation contributes to epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), perpetuating a false dichotomy between nature and human influence. Rethinking stakeholder engagement in EIA frameworks is crucial. Decision-making must incorporate epistemic diversity, integrating local knowledge based on lived experience. Reform requires higher standards of reflexivity and accountability, avoiding outdated ecological metaphors that distort scientific understanding and suppress community stewardship.

#### Key Recommendations:

- 1. Redefine Ecological Value: Broaden the definition of ecological health to include anthropogenic landscapes and community-managed green spaces (Hobbs, Higgs and Harris 2009).
- 2. Train Practitioners: Ensure professionals understand the ethical implications and community accountability and consider how "harmless" it is to erase the complexity of real ecological relationships. This includes using outdated ecological concepts that depoliticize commons-upholding urban environmentalism, making it unavailable for political support.
- 3. Promote Transparency: Increase transparency in the use of scientific evidence and draw clear boundaries between findings of open-ended scientific inquiry and those based on a pre-existing socio-political selection of value.

These reforms aim to create a just and inclusive environmental governance model, reflecting the complexities of urban ecologies and diverse environmental engagements.

[1968]

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