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Space, discourse and environmental peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT
The concept of environmental peacebuilding is becoming increasingly prominent among peacebuilding scholars and practitioners. This study provides a brief overview about the various discussions contributing to our understanding of environmental peacebuilding and concludes that questions of space have hardly been explicitly considered in these debates. Drawing on discourse-analytic spatial theory, I discuss how the social construction of scale, place and boundaries are relevant for environmental peacebuilding processes and outcomes. This theoretical approach is then applied to the Good Water Neighbours project, which aims at improving the regional water situation and at building peace between Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians. The results suggest that discursive constructions of space are important in facilitating, impeding or shaping environmental peacebuilding practices. Analyses of environmental peacebuilding, but also of peacebuilding more general, are therefore encouraged to draw more strongly on the findings of spatial theory.

1. Introduction
Environmental issues have received increasing attention by peacebuilding scholars and practitioners in recent years. This is indicated by a recent UN guide on natural resources for conflict mediators,1 several edited volumes that document and reflect on efforts to integrate resource management into post-conflict peacebuilding,2 and academic as well as public concerns that environmental change facilitates conflict and thus undermines peacebuilding efforts.3 While a large literature has focused on the links between the environment, conflict and security,4 one can distinguish at least three (partially overlapping) strands of scholarship which reflect on the relationship between the environment, peace and cooperation.

Firstly, based on the seminal work of Ostrom,5 a broad literature has investigated how common-pool natural resources can be managed in an ecologically and socially sustainable way.6 Such management contributes to the prevention of ‘the kind of violence that erupts due to the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of ecosystems or the devastation of livelihoods based on natural resources’.7 Studies have for instance found that cooperation over natural resources is facilitated by the participation of local communities, by the availability of conflict-resolution mechanisms and by the use of strategies like

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side payments or issue linkage. Recently, questions and approaches developed by the literature on the commons have been used to develop guidelines for peace-enhancing natural resource management in regions struck by armed conflict. Examples include the provision of sustainable livelihoods or building trust through common environmental management.

Secondly, the environmental peacemaking literature emphasises that environmental problems can undermine livelihoods, which in turn stimulates grievances and reduces opportunity costs for participating in armed conflicts. However, the environmental peacemaking literature takes a wider perspective by asking ‘whether environmental cooperation can trigger broader forms of peace’. It is hypothesised that environmental problems provide opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefits, especially because many environmental problems cross political borders, require long-term engagement, have not been securitised and are also addressed by epistemic communities which provided authoritative knowledge.

Once initiated, environmental cooperation might spill over to other policy areas or facilitate the creation of trust, empathy and mutual understanding. In general, there are few consensual findings on the environmental peacemaking approach. While some studies provide support for its premises, others remain sceptical.

Finally, disaster diplomacy scholars are interested if ‘disaster-related activities induce cooperation amongst enemy countries’ or groups. Reduced opportunities for elites to continue conflicts, international attention as well as public solidarity with the affected (adversary) groups are common explanations for the occurrence of disaster diplomacy. At present, disaster diplomacy research largely agrees on four results: disasters can have a significant impact on diplomacy in the short term; disasters are less relevant for diplomacy in the medium- to long-term; the success of disaster diplomacy is dependent on the presence of scope conditions such as democracy or pre-existing negotiations; and disasters can also catalyse armed conflicts.

Referring to insights and approaches from all three streams of literature, I understand environmental peacebuilding as including ‘all forms of cooperation on environmental issues which simultaneously conceptually aims at or de facto achieves the transformation of relations between hostile parties towards peaceful conflict resolution’. In this context, peace refers to ‘a continuum ranging from the absence of violent conflict to the inconceivability of violent conflict’. This definition focuses on the impact of environment-related cooperation on (non-)violent interactions between social groups. Other dimensions of environmental peacebuilding, such as environmental dimensions of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) or revenue sharing from natural resource extraction, are set aside for the moment.

This article adds to the emerging research on environmental peacebuilding by highlighting an issue which has so far received insufficient attention: the role of space in environmental peacebuilding. In order to do so, I will connect spatial theory to environmental peacebuilding research and demonstrate the utility of this endeavour by analysing a water cooperation project in Israel and Palestine.

Insights produced by spatial theory have been fruitfully adapted by a number of research fields related to environmental peacebuilding, such as political ecology or environmental governance. A growing literature on geographies of peace has begun to explore how space has been discussed and used, but also contested for peace, while several recent conflict analyses have successfully drawn on insights from spatial theory. Similarly, spatial concepts
such as ‘frictional encounters’ or the ‘local-local’ also feature prominently in the literature on post-conflict peacebuilding. Central to these debates is the insight that space and scale are ‘socially produced and contingent on political struggle’. Most studies on environmental peacebuilding, by contrast, conceive space as an exogenously given property of socio-environmental systems or as a mere ‘container of society’ which structures social action. Here follows two examples.

Firstly, nearly all authors agree that the mismatch between political borders and biodiversity hotspots or water bodies is an important incentive for environmental peacemaking. But in several cases, such as the river dispute between Turkey, Syria and Iraq or the groundwater conflict between Israel and West Bank Palestine, the delineation of the water body and hence its overlap with political borders is strongly contested and subject of discursive changes over time. Consequentially, eco- and hydro-system boundaries do not simply influence but are simultaneously constructed by social interactions, and thus cannot be treated as objective (and static) givens in an analysis of environmental peacebuilding.

Secondly, Ali and Mason et al. show how environmental cooperation on one scale (e.g., international agreements) can trigger conflict on another scale (local villages), while Bichsel and Ratner et al. discuss the interactions between trans-local conflict systems and local environmental peacebuilding efforts. While certainly valuable, such analyses ignore how social actors are not just reacting to, but strategically manipulating the multi-scalar contexts they face. Governments might frame a problem as local or international in order to (dis-)claim responsibility, while environmental organisations can try to upscale an issue when legal or public support seems to be greater on the national or international level (or vice versa downscale it to the regional/local level).

The goal of this article is to demonstrate the utility of spatial theory for analysing processes and outcomes of environmental peacebuilding. The paper also contributes to the growing literature on geographies of peace, which highlights that ‘peace is inherently spatial’ and calls for more research on the scales and places of peace movements. In order to do so, I will proceed as follows. In the next section, I will discuss some core categories of spatial theory that are relevant for the study of environmental peacebuilding. Afterwards, I will present the results of a discourse analysis of an environmental peacebuilding project between Israeli and Palestinian communities and briefly compare these results to the dominant national discourses. The findings indicate that intersubjective constructions of space are important in shaping processes and outcomes of environmental peacebuilding. The implications of this analysis for further research on and practices of (environmental) peacebuilding are discussed in the final section.

2. Spatial theory: scale, place and boundary

The basic premise of spatial theory is that ‘[s]pace is a social construct’. This premise can be, and has been, interpreted in two major ways. From a Marxist or political ecology perspective, (material) space is constructed through processes of capitalist expansion and restructuring, and to a lesser extent through resistance against capitalist dynamics. Examples include the simultaneous production of developed economic centres and underdeveloped peripheries in a globalised economy or the transformation of hydro-landscapes and water supply systems around urban areas. With regard to environmental peacebuilding, Duffy’s
analysis on how the establishment of so-called peace parks transforms border areas and spaces of communal resource management is particularly relevant.44

Within this paper, I will focus on a constructivist reading of the premise that space is a social construct. ‘In this view, the importance of certain ideas and phenomena, such as certain scales, and the ways in which they are routinely perceived and thought about, are shaped by societal discourses.’45 That is, space is not an objective, material entity, but a representation which is (often implicitly) negotiated within and constructed by social groups, although ‘there are very material consequences when specific scalar formulations are successfully disseminated.’46 In order to refine the term, spatial theorists distinguish between various dimensions of space.47 Three of these are particularly relevant with regard to environmental peacebuilding.

Firstly, scale refers to the vertical organisation of space or the ‘level at which relevant processes operate.’48 Prominent scales include the local, the national and the international, but the Nile river basin, the city of Tokyo or the European Union are scales as well. MacKinnon emphasises that all political projects have scalar aspects (politics of scale), while actors can use the various scales in a strategic or instrumental manner (scalar politics).49 McCarthy shows how environmental NGOs, which are often crucial actors in processes of environmental peacebuilding, strategically employ different scalar politics (often simultaneously), ranging from the defence to the redefinition of established scales.50 Drawing on Towers, one can conclude that the (administrative) boundaries established by regulatory practices of the state do hardly coincide with the politics of (ecosystem) scale of environmental movements.51 Other studies have highlighted how scalar concepts such as local environmental problem, transboundary river basin, indigenous territory or national security have shaped water-related conflict and cooperation.52

Secondly, places are the concrete material and social relations which crystallise around certain spatial locations. Supposedly natural characterisations of certain places, such as ‘important watershed’, ‘vulnerable to pollution’ or ‘water scarce’ are far from objective and often crucial in facilitating certain practices of conservation or water management.53 Harris and Alatout have demonstrated how constructions of the Middle East as a water-scarce or water-rich place have changed in the Israeli discourse between 1948 and 1957 and how these changes facilitated a shift in the scale of water management from the local to the national scale.54 But social constructions of place can favour dynamics of (violent) conflict as well. For instance, the characterisation of places as resource rich or as not controlled by the government can provide important incentives to gain control over these places.55 Collective identities and concepts of collective security also often reference certain places.

Thirdly, boundaries cut through and divide space in its horizontal dimension, that is, they demarcate territories. ‘Boundaries and their meanings are historically contingent’ and constitutive of ‘sociospatial identities.’56 This is in line with social identity theory, which highlights that identities are relational and can only be constituted through reference to an other.57 A common though not the only way to delimit the self from the other is to parcel space by constructing (rhetorical and material) boundaries.58 If the other is constructed in negative terms, spatial delineations and moral distinctions may combine to produce a ‘geography of evil’,59 which complicates peacebuilding efforts. However, the other can also be conceived in more positive ways.60 It is important to note here that different groups, such as government officials, scientists or local inhabitants, do not necessarily perceive boundaries in a similar
way.61 This applies to the course, but also to the characteristics (political, social, natural) and meaning (e.g., protective, obstructive) of a boundary.

This short overview did not intend to portray the rich debates which have been going on in the spatial theory literature. Instead, it is biased towards those concepts and approaches which have proven useful to understand intergroup conflict and cooperation as well as environmental governance and politics, and which therefore also seem to be useful for the study of environmental peacebuilding. More specifically, analyses of environmental peacebuilding should ask (a) which scales of regulation, meaning and action are constructed as meaningful by the actors involved in (and opposed to) environmental peacebuilding, (b) how such actors make sense of (relevant) places and their ecological and socio-political characteristics, and (c) how they conceive the characteristics and meanings of political and ecological boundaries.

In the next section, I will discuss these questions and demonstrate the relevance of a spatial theory perspective on environmental peacebuilding by analysing the discourse of the participants of an Israeli–Palestinian environmental peacebuilding project. I will also contrast these discourses with the dominant national discourses in both societies. Before doing so, I will provide some information on the context and the methodology of the discourse analysis.

3. Spatial theory and the Good Water Neighbours project

3.1. Context and methodology

Water is one aspect of and deeply embedded into the wider structures of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.62 The main water bodies in the region are the shared underground aquifers. The mountain aquifer is shared between Israel and the West Bank, while the coastal aquifer is located below Israel and the Gaza Strip. The Jordan River, to which Israel and the West Bank are riparians as well, is important, too. The distribution of water from these shared water bodies as well as their governance is disputed.63 The 1995 interim peace agreement contains several water-related arrangements, but the definite solution of the water issue has been postponed to final status negotiations, which have not been concluded yet.64 Currently, Israel withdraws larger quantities of water from both aquifers and also uses a considerable amount of water from the Jordan River, while Palestinians have no access to the latter at all.65 Israel is able to massively influence water infrastructure development in the West Bank through the Joint Water Committee and the military occupation, while Palestinians have very little opportunity to affect Israeli water policies.66 Palestine is demanding a change of this status quo, while Israel is reluctant to agree to this demand without further conditions being fulfilled.67

Within this conflictive atmosphere, several efforts to cooperate on water resource were initiated by civil society actors since the 1990s.68 Such cooperation has been criticised for being ineffective or even for marginalising Palestinian positions and obscuring/depoliticising water-related inequalities.69 Other authors, however, have emphasised the potential of such projects to realise environmental peacebuilding and reconciliation between both parties.70 The Good Water Neighbours (GWN) project of EcoPeace (until 2015 known as Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME)) is often highlighted as particularly successful.71 In 2013, nine communities from Israel, nine from the West Bank, one from the Gaza Strip and eight from
Jordan collaborated within this project to conserve and improve shared local water resources. In the process, GWN aims to dampen disputes over water, to create concrete benefits for the cooperating parties, to improve local livelihoods (including the water situation of the Palestinians), to build mutual trust and understanding, and eventually to establish a shared regional identity. In order to realise such a multidimensional strategy of building peace through environmental cooperation, a broad range of activities is conducted within the GWN project. These include exchanges between the communities, environmental education, lobbying for cross-border conservation areas, the initiation of water infrastructure projects benefiting all sides and the prevention of construction work in ecologically sensitive areas. In this study, I focus on the GWN project in Israel and Palestine because water cooperation is especially remarkable in the context of, and provides a stark contrast to, the intense conflict and the severe water-related tensions between both countries.

In order to reconstruct the conceptualisations of scale, place and boundary dominant in the discourse of the (professional and volunteering) GWN activists from Israel and Palestine, I drew on the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) and especially the methodological guidelines proposed by Keller. To create a corpus for the discourse analysis, texts were collected from the GWN homepage as well as from several project reports publicly available. These texts were complemented by 38 semi-structured interviews with 25 Israeli and 19 West Bank–Palestinian GWN activists conducted during two months of field research in spring 2013. Interview partners were selected according to the snowball sampling method. The locations of the interviews are reported by Figure 1. Most interviews were conducted in English; for some interviews, I was accompanied by a translator.

When analysing the corpus, I drew on Keller’s distinction between phases of macro-analysis, which were used to get an overview about the data and to formulate hypotheses, and phases of micro-analysis, during which particular utterances were analysed in greater detail in order to falsify or modify hypotheses. Utterances for the micro-analysis were selected according to existing hypotheses and the principles of minimal and maximal contrasting. For the micro-analysis, I utilised the coding procedure developed by Grounded Theory, that is, I assigned several codes to a specific utterance and reflected on their use in accompanying memos. I alternated phases of macro- and micro-analyses until initially flexible codes became more elaborated and could be related to each other. The preliminary results were discussed with several interview partners and reviewed in case of disagreement.

The next section reports the results of the discourse analysis along the categories of scale, place and boundary. Quotes from interviews and reports are cited in the original English wording. The results are also compared to the spatial implications of the dominant discourses in both Israel and Palestine.

### 3.2. Results

#### 3.2.1. Scale

As a textbook widely used by (and published on the website of) the GWN project puts it, water and its adequate management are ‘crucial for the development and advancement of human culture’ in the Middle East. But water is not only considered to be important for humans living in Israel and Palestine, but also as essentially transnational in nature. Phrases like ‘water […] has no border’ (interview, 26 May 2013, Bethlehem) were articulated in nearly every interview conducted. Within the GWN discourse, strong water interdependence
between the states of the Middle East, and especially between Israel and Palestine, is thus claimed. This is true for small rivers and shared aquifers, but also for large water bodies such as the Jordan River or the mountain aquifer, as an Israeli GWN activist highlighted:

> Because the current situation where you have failure in cross-border management, that is how we see, is also something that negatively, you know, affects the public in Israel. If you get sewage from [...] Palestinians living in the West Bank, that is not treated, it is untreated [...] that it percolates into the shared mountain aquifer. Interview, 30 April 2013, Tel Aviv

Consequentially, the establishment of integrated water management institutions to which all riparians of a certain water body have equal access is considered as crucial for solving the region’s water problems in the GWN discourse. The fragmentation of water management along political borders is considered counterproductive. In the words of a GWN activist from Tzur Hadassah (Mate Yehuda district) who worked successfully with the Palestinian village of Wadi Fuqin to prevent sewage spillovers from the Israeli settlement of Beitar Elite:

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**Figure 1.** Locations of the interviews (communities cooperating with each other are represented by the same shapes) (adapted from Ide/Fröhlich 2015: 663).
The issue in this particular place is that, of course, so we are in the state of Israel, we have the laws and rules and management of the Israeli government and of Mate Yehuda district council. Wadi Fuqin, the village, is a Palestinian village, it is under civil Palestinian authority […] But between Beitar Elite and Wadi Fuqin and between Wadi Fuqin and Tzur Hadassah, or Israel, the green line, what do we have? Area C […] its under the civil administration of the army […] We have four authorities taking care of, for instance, a sewage spill or an environmental problem […] There is a management problem over here. Interview, 5 May 2013, Tzur Hadassah

The scalar reference of the GWN discourse is thus the respective water body and its catchment area. Water is considered as a resource that obscures conventional administrative or national boundaries and can only be adequately managed at the ‘basin scale’. In combination with the insistence that water is important for the livelihoods of all inhabitants of the Middle East, a gap between the actual scales of water management (nation states and their administrative units) and the scale considered relevant by the GWN discourse (water basin) becomes apparent.

The significance of this construction of scale becomes obvious when compared to the dominant discourses in the Israeli and Palestinian societies. Here, the ‘scale of meaning’ is clearly a national one. Water is considered crucial for either the realisation of an independent and viable Palestinian state or for the security and identity of a Jewish Israeli state. Similarly, the proposed ‘scale of regulation’ is a national or subnational rather than a transnational one, at least when it comes to the substantive management of key water resources such as the mountain aquifer or the Jordan river. The claim in the dominant Israeli and Palestinian discourses is that water resources should be under national control, while water-related interdependence and the potential for mutually beneficial cooperation play only a minor role.

Within the GWN discourse, the scales of regulation and meaning are constructed considerably more transnational and inclusive, thus facilitating cross-border water cooperation and wider processes of reconciliation. In addition, the GWN discourse puts much more emphasis on bottom-up processes, and thus a local scale of action, for successful water management. Combined with some scepticism against top-down approaches because national-level ‘politicians do not really know what is going on ground’ (interview, 21 May 2013, Um Reihan), this encourages local forms of activism and cooperation.

3.2.2. Place
When it comes to place(s), so-called neighbours’ paths are quite prominent in the GWN discourse. Neighbours’ paths are walking, hiking and/or driving routes which connect the ecologically important/vulnerable locations of several partnering GWN communities. In theory, the paths are transnational, but in practice they only connect the locations within one GWN community since the partnering communities are separated by borders.

According to the GWN discourse, the neighbours’ paths ‘showcase the mutual dependence on shared water resources and highlight the need for cross-border cooperation in protecting those resources’. Although each GWN community refers primarily to (parts of) its own neighbours’ paths and the specific meanings attributed to it, the neighbours’ paths have an important symbolic function in the GWN discourse as a whole. They are simultaneously concrete (through their local presence) and abstract (through their presence in every GWN community) places illustrating mutual water interdependence, thus reinforcing the relevance of water interdependence, hydro-scales and transnational cooperation. Several GWN communities also offer guided tours of their neighbours’ paths, which illustrates that they are...
considered as places which are well-suited to illustrate the ideas and meanings of the project to externals.

Apart from the neighbours’ paths, the Middle East in general is conceived as a water scarce and dry place. This is far from obvious as the northern parts of Israel and the West Bank receive high levels of rainfall and large underground aquifers secure water supply in the rain-scarce summer months. Until 1948, the idea of Israel as a water-rich place was also prominent in the Zionist discourse, while Palestinians still criticise the depiction of the West Bank as lacking natural water resources. In the GWN discourse, by contrast, water scarcity is conceived as a defining, probably even eternal feature of the region:

The summers in Israel are very hot and dry. And I think since, since ever it was, it was a great deal here to keep the water. And to manage, to manage all the water […] So, there is a constant lack of water here. Interview, 13 May 2013, Jerusalem

Furthermore, the region is described as ‘especially vulnerable to groundwater pollution due to its hydrological characteristics.’ Portraying Israel/Palestine as a place which is vulnerable to and already suffers from water scarcity and water pollution implies that finding sustainable solutions to these problems is urgent and essential. Since in the logic of the GWN discourse such solutions can only be transnational, the necessity to cooperate about shared water resources is further underscored.

By contrast, the degree of natural water scarcity is heavily contested between the dominant Israeli and the dominant Palestinian discourse. And although the Israeli discourse acknowledges natural water scarcity, traditional (or hard) security issues are considered to be much more pressing and important to deal with. The dominant national discourses also lack shared references to real or symbolic places, such as the neighbours’ paths. And while water is nowadays increasingly discussed in economic and technical rather than security-related terms in Israeli due to improved desalination and waste-water recycling options available, no major de-securitisation of water relations with the Palestinians have yet taken place. In this context, the dominant Israeli discourse still highlights that Israel is vulnerable because a significant portion of the mountain aquifer originate outside of its territory. While Israeli GWN activists would not claim this physical/hydrological description wrong, notions of one-sided dependence and vulnerability play hardly a role in their discourse.

3.2.3. Boundary

As discussed above, water management structured along national boundaries is supported by both the Israeli and the Palestinian dominant national discourse. In accordance with its emphasis on basin scales, the GWN discourse highlights the relevance of watershed boundaries for meaningful political action. As stated by one Israeli GWN activist: ‘we all live from that, the same groundwater. It is all connected even if we do not like them [...] So nature is stronger than human political issues’ (interview, 8 May 2013, Tzur Hadassah).

Both national discourses also highlight the importance of national borders for territorial integrity and national security and thus attribute positive meaning to national-political boundaries. This is contested by the GWN discourse. As discussed above, the political fragmentation of the region is considered as a major problem for the integrated management of (transboundary) water resources. Israeli and Palestinian GWN activists furthermore emphasise that political borders, and especially national ones, complicate cross-border cooperation and the everyday life of many Palestinians:
The army or whatever, the security forces are not so friendly all the time. Sometimes they permit, get permission, sometime they do not. […] But if they arrange a group [for visiting the partner community in Israel], sometimes the army does not let them to go. Sometimes, they have to wait many hours on the border. Interview, 5 June 2013, Emek Hefer

Several authors argue that boundaries are important for creating (sociospatial) identities by constructing a delineation between the self and the other. Of course, identities are not necessarily shaped by or overlapping with political borders or geographical boundaries. In the Palestinian GWN discourse, for instance, Israel is portrayed as a place where ‘good people’ (civil society activists and ordinary citizens) and ‘bad people’ (settlers and conservative politicians) coexist. As a Palestinian GWN activist from Wadi Fuqin told me while talking about cooperation with the Israeli town of Tzur Hadassah:

… there are good people in Tzur Hadassah and the people of Wadi Fuqin want to be connected. They do not want to be separated […] Netanjahu and his government are very, very difficult and they do not want peace. Interview, 22 May 2013, Wadi Fuqin

Israeli GWN activists also frequently blur the boundaries between both groups, for instance by emphasising that both groups are ‘son of the earth’ (interview, 2 May 2013, Tzur Hadassah) and share a common ecosystem. However, spatial boundaries and social identities are also sometimes fused in the Israeli GWN discourse. This is particularly the case when Israel is associated with development and good (water) management practices while Palestine is associated with underdevelopment and bad organisation.

The ambiguousness of the developed-underdeveloped dichotomy becomes apparent in the following characterisation of Palestinians by an Israeli GWN activist: ‘yah, and they are less developed economically. So, you know the, all the dealing with environmental issues is parallel to economic situation’ (interview, 6 May 2013, Afula). One the one hand, such statements (while certainly not wrong) highlight a certain superiority of (developed) Israelis vis-à-vis (underdeveloped) Palestinians. On the other hand, it is also emphasised that several water problems the West Bank faces are typical for less developed countries and not caused by a supposedly irresponsible or incompetent character of the Palestinians.

More relevant in a discussion about environmental peacebuilding is that the Israeli GWN discourse entangles national boundaries and social identities by portraying the West Bank, in contrast to Israel, as a place of weak organisation and bad management. To quote a rather extreme example:

So, the Palestinians have a very difficult, have a very big difficulty to operate construction plant for sewage, sewage construction plant. They do not have the, the culture for this, the habit for this, they do not have the how to, to collect taxes to maintain the, the projects. Interview, 5 June 2013

When compared to Palestine (and most other countries of the world), Israel is indeed characterised by a superior water management system. But focusing on the lack of work ethos and know-how not only downplays the structural obstacles Palestinians face when managing water, but also mirrors a tendency of dominant Israeli discourses to portray Palestinians in general as backwards and incapable.

Overall, the GWN discourse in both Israel and Palestine is much more reluctant than the dominant national discourses to combine spatial delineations with stereotypical representations. But the progressive/capable vs. backwards/incapable dichotomy in the Israel GWN discourse reflects confrontative structures of dominant Israeli discourses, undermines trust and thus might complicate peacebuilding efforts. Indeed, one GWN activist told me that a
shared water infrastructure project failed because Israelis lacked confidence in Palestinian water management, while Palestinians were unwilling to locate the relevant infrastructure primarily in Israel (for reason of confidentiality, no further details are provided here).

### 3.2.4. Discussion

Studies on environmental peacebuilding frequently highlight that ‘cross-border environmental issues can generate a sense of common regional identity’ or that ‘interest groups can make use of mutual ecological dependence across territorial borders to facilitate cooperation’. By doing so, they conceive space as exogenously given or an objective container of social processes. However, the analysis presented above shows that the meaning of (hydrological/ecological and political) boundaries, the adequate scales for managing environmental problems, and the ecological constraints and environmental characteristics of certain places are socially constructed. Treating space as an exogenous variable can distort the academic study of environmental peacebuilding by obscuring these processes of social construction.

Based on other analyses of the GWN project, for instance, one might conclude that the scarcity of water and the depletion of shared water bodies, which is caused by and affects both sides, are important drivers of the GWN project. But why then do only some communities along the Israeli–West Bank border engage in such forms of cooperation (especially since the GWN communities analysed show considerable variation in terms of geography, economy, history and political culture)? Why does cooperation on water issues remain so complicated and so rare between the governments of Israel and Palestine? Based on my analysis, one part of the answer certainly is that relevant scales, places and boundaries are conceived by the GWN activists in a rather similar and cooperation-enhancing way, while the dominant national discourses construct space in a confrontational and mutually exclusive way: the social construction of space matters for the outcome of environmental peacebuilding processes.

Examples of the cooperation-enhancing elements of the GWN discourse include: the preference of hydrological over national scales of meaning and regulation, the importance allocated to local scales of action (and the associated bottom-up processes), the reference to places with a shared symbolic meaning, the description of the Middle East as a place suffering from natural water scarcity and pressing pollution problems, and the negative rather than positive connotation of national political borders. The associated sociospatial identities are also less frequently structured along traditional national boundaries and less exclusive than those provided by the dominant discourses.

### 4. Conclusion

This study suggests that contested and changing social constructions of space are important in facilitating, impeding and shaping environmental peacebuilding practices. Different discourses on – rather than different exogenously given characteristics of – scales, places and boundaries influence (but do not determine) the simultaneity of environmental peacebuilding and water-related conflict between Israel and Palestine. Consequentially, scholars should pay more attention to questions of space when they conceptualise and analyse environmental peacebuilding. In order to bring research on environmental peacebuilding and spatial
theory closer together, several tasks for future studies remain, four of which are discussed in the remainder of this section.

Firstly, the discourses of other environmental peacebuilding initiatives\textsuperscript{103} should be compared to each other and to those of the GWN project in order to gain a more general understanding of the relationship between discourse, space and environmental peacebuilding. GWN operates in a context where water is symbolically very closely connected to land and sovereignty over a national territory (and its adequate boundaries).\textsuperscript{104} It would be interesting to research cases where the links between water (or other natural resources), territory and national identity are weaker or just different.

Secondly, the social construction of space as a material entity in and through environmental peacebuilding practices has not yet been systematically explored. From such a political ecology perspective, Duffy has highlighted how transboundary conservation areas transform space and thus privilege some actors over others.\textsuperscript{105} The GWN project is also actively reconstructing space in a very material way, for instance when the construction of parts of the separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank is prevented or when neighbours’ paths are created.\textsuperscript{106}

Thirdly, processes of environmental peacebuilding can produce new forms of exclusion and marginalisation.\textsuperscript{107} It is therefore crucial to analyse practices (but also theories) of environmental peacebuilding like the GWN project from a more critical angle. What kind of peace do they promote, and for whom? Which actors and ideas are marginalised in the process of constructing transnational scales and ecosystem boundaries?\textsuperscript{108} Similarly, how are (or how can) so far marginalised actors be empowered by environmental peacebuilding?\textsuperscript{109} Such questions are the most promising to investigate by studies which trace the changes of spatial discourses (and the associated practices) over time.

Fourthly, researchers should transcend the field of environmental peacebuilding and investigate the social construction of space in peacebuilding more generally. Controversies about the nature of the local in peacebuilding\textsuperscript{110} or the local appropriation of international peacebuilding discourses,\textsuperscript{111} for instance, already touch upon questions of scale and socio-spatial identities, but researchers rarely draw on insights from spatial theory in these debates. Such a research agenda could also profit peacebuilding practitioners by showing which actors and discourses highlight which scales, places and boundaries, and how this impacts interactions between former/potential conflict parties as well as between various peacebuilding actors (governments, NGOs, UN forces). Eventually, how space is socially constructed, and whether relevant actors agree about this construction, is likely to be an important factor for peacebuilding efforts.

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Notes

1. UNDPA and UNEP, *Natural Resources and Conflict*.
5. Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*.
16. Akçali and Antonsich, “Nature Knows No Boundaries”; and Reynolds,”Unpacking the Complex Nature of Cooperative Interactions,”
20. Ide and Scheffran, *Climate Change*, 16.
22. Bruch et al., *Goverance, Natural Resources*; and Young and Goldman, *Livelihoods, Natural Resources, and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding*.
32. Harris and Alatout, “Negotiating Hydro-Scales, Forging States”; and Zeitoun, *Power and water in the Middle East*.
34. Mason et al., “Linkages Between Sub-National and International.”
35. Bichsel, “It’s About More Water.”
37. Engels, “Contentious Politics of Scale.”
38. Tarrow, _The New Transnational Activism_.
43. Harvey, _Spaces of Capital_; and Swyngedouw, “Power, Nature, and the City.”
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