

CONSTRUCTING SCARCITY:  
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF NATURAL RESOURCE JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

The subject of natural resource scarcity has occupied the minds of social scientists since the 17th century. Scarcity is a difficult concept to define and yet more difficult to predict. It is partly subjective, partly physical and generally relative to people's incomes and expectations. This research examined how resource scarcity is communicated through magazine journalism. To do this, I looked to Kenneth Burke's "master tropes" as tools for analyzing how writers use language to construct the concept of scarcity as it applies to two resources in particular: oil and water. Several recurring tropes emerged from this analysis. These took the form of common metaphors and synecdochic substitutions. The meanings of these tropes were fluid and sometimes contested, but commonalities do appear. The tropes writers used, especially those regarding oil, show a fixation on the supply of a resource as opposed to an examination of consumption and use. We also see in the common tropes a wide range of social effects attributed to scarcity, perhaps at the cost of scrutiny of scarcity's causes, as well as a consideration of social phenomenon other than scarcity that might be at play.