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## **Environmental Politics**

**by Bradley B. Walters**

### **Introduction**

People value the environment because their livelihood and quality of life depend on it. As threats to the environment grow, so too do efforts to protect those values. Environmental politics is concerned with the way people organize themselves and structure behavior to protect their interests in the environment. It considers the dynamics of social movements, institutions and government policy-making, and the way these interact. As an academic subject, environmental politics is relatively young and interdisciplinary, with significant contributions coming from history, political science, geography, sociology, anthropology and environmental science. While clearly influenced by traditional political studies, environmental politics is unique in a number of respects.

### **Ecology of Environmental Politics**

The ecology of environmental problems poses unique challenges to politics. Notable among these is the trans-boundary nature of environmental phenomenon. In short, ecological processes do not respect political boundaries: coastal nations share the same ocean waters and mobile fish stocks; rivers traverse state boundaries; and the air and atmosphere disperse pollutants widely and distantly from their origin. Much apathy and political conflict emerges from the frequent mis-match between such trans-boundary environmental concerns and existing political structures and jurisdictions. The benefits of economic development typically accrue to

one jurisdiction, yet the environmental costs of such development are often passed-on to other jurisdictions, in the form of fouled air, polluted waters and dumped wastes, providing little incentive to regulate pollution at its source. Furthermore, governments may be less compelled to impose regulatory costs on polluting industries within their own jurisdictions when it can be shown that local pollution problems result, in part, from outside sources.

The environment is also extremely complex and continuously changing, due to myriad human and natural influences. This makes it difficult to assess environmental problems and a challenge to act on them. In virtually no other political field does science play such a central role: the evolution of environmental politics has been closely linked to advances in scientific understanding about the environment and our interactions with it. Yet, the complexity of the natural environment and human societies that shape it, combined with our inability to study most environmental changes under rigorous and controlled conditions, greatly limits what scientific research can tell us. The resulting uncertainties create considerable space for political maneuvering and often justify inaction, especially where the costs of action are potentially large.

Such complexity also has academic consequences for the study of environmental politics. Theoretical models, often borrowed from traditional social science disciplines, tend not to stand up well when applied to understanding the highly dynamic and context-laden field of environmental politics. Experience has shown that political engagement in environmental causes is unpredictable and waxes and wanes with time, and progress varies from incremental to revolutionary depending on changing contexts and opportunities. As one seasoned political analyst astutely observed, “the whole history of international environmental action has been of arriving at destinations which looked impossibly distant at the moment of the departure”

(Brenton, 1994, 251). For these reasons, the study of environmental politics remains strongly anchored in the historical and comparative analysis of case studies.

### **The Environmental Movement**

The emergence of significant political concern for the environment is often dated to the late 1800s, when governments in Europe and North America began to invest in institutions and policies aimed at conserving natural resources. This “early conservation movement” witnessed the birth of national parks systems in North America and the creation of a professional cadre of bureaucrats trained in forestry and wildlife management at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As well, the first non-government, environmental groups (ENGOS) formed during this period, and the earliest international environmental agreements concerning the management of trans-boundary rivers and migratory wildlife were negotiated in North America and Europe.

This political momentum slowed during the War and Great Depression years, but picked-up with voracity in the 1960s. Unlike the early conservation movement, the defining issues of the “modern environmental movement” were pollution and toxics. Advances in scientific research and events like London’s “killer smog” of 1954 and the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 gave the public reason for concern. And society was changing in ways that made it especially receptive to such messages. The post-war economic boom created additional environmental stresses, but the explosion in affluence also meant that material concerns were less pressing for many people. Investments in education and other quality of life concerns expanded and there emerged vibrant counter-culture and civil protest movements against the status quo. These various factors came together in the 1960s, triggering an unprecedented rise in public concern and political activism over the environment. Government responses between

1968 and the mid-1970s were especially impressive: omnibus environmental agencies were established and a complex array of policies were put in place in many countries to combat pollution, improve waste management, and conserve natural resources.

Concurrent with these changes was a dramatic proliferation and expansion of ENGOS such that, by the mid-1980's, their influence had become pervasive in both domestic and international environmental politics. In fact, it is to the international scene that political actors have turned much of their attention in the last 20 years. Global environmental issues like biodiversity loss, ozone depletion and climate change have emerged and increasingly dominate environmental discourse and politics. Since the groundbreaking United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment was held in 1972, national governments have met with growing frequency under the guise of international fora to consider a range of environmental problems. International agreements to regulate production of ozone depleting chemicals, trade in hazardous waste, or ship-based marine pollution are just a few examples of multi-national environmental cooperation that has, in turn, increasingly shaped policy development at the domestic level in many countries.

### **Policy Responses**

Governments have responded in various ways to environmental problems. In the 1960s and 70s, the preferred strategy was based on strict regulatory interventions, often referred to as “command and control”, whereby environmental standards are set and enforcement is backed by the threat of sanctions. Such approaches typically relied on the deployment of best available technology and practices and were often cited as inflexible and unduly costly for regulated interests. They also proved successful for the management of many environmental problems.

However, the competitive pressures of globalization combined with government downsizing beginning in the 1980s created pressure to develop regulatory strategies that were more flexible and less costly to industry. Governments have since explored a wider range of strategies, including market-based approaches that differentially tax or subsidize some practices over others; performance-based standards that enable regulated industries to achieve set targets on their own terms; and voluntary approaches that encourage progress through information-sharing and recognition of industry leadership.

The courts have also become an important battle ground for environmental politics in the last 10-20 years. Frustrated over perceived back-peddling by governments on environmental commitments, ENGOs have been using the courts to pressure governments to implement existing environmental laws and more aggressively prosecute industry offenders. As well, the courts have become arbitrators of critical constitutional issues, including questions of federal-state/provincial jurisdiction, aboriginal rights, and citizen rights to a clean environment.

Regulatory influences have also migrated significantly into the market place. Brought on by a mixture of consumer, government and ENGO pressures, many companies have come to realize the benefits of marketing “green” products and a green image to the public. To the extent that specific cases of such marketing reflect legitimate environmental progress or simply “green-washing” is debatable. But it is clear that environmental and related health concerns are increasingly important in consumer decision-making. Eco-labeling schemes that certify quality standards for such things as recycled content and organic foods have been adopted by many governments. As well, ENGO’s regularly use consumer boycotts as a strategy to change government and industry policies and some, like the Forest Stewardship Council, have even

developed their own consumer standards for specific products.

### **Inequality and the Environment**

The unequal distribution of political power and its consequences in society has long been a central concern in political studies. Such perspectives entered environmental politics relatively recently (early 1980s), but they have been quick to take root and their influence continues to grow. Environmental “justice” issues highlight the unequal distribution of environmental impacts borne by different members of society. Thus, for example, some studies have shown that polluting industries and toxic waste sites are more likely to be found adjacent to lower-income and minority residential areas. Patterns like this are seen to reflect the relative powerlessness of certain members of society who are unable to prevent the local siting of noxious industries or relocate to cleaner areas.

Not surprisingly, this kind of Marxist-structuralist thinking has proven attractive to many analysts of environmental problems in the global south. That wealthier countries may be “exporting” their environmental problems to the Third World was literally confirmed by research of the toxic waste trade in the 1980s. More complex is the consequence of differences in power that countries and regions bring to international environmental negotiations.

Perhaps the greatest scrutiny has been leveled at Third World governments, themselves. Domestic corruption, cronyism and incompetence are frequently cited as causes of environmental mis-management in these countries. They are also seen as contributing to the ongoing political and environmental marginalization of the rural poor and, especially, indigenous peoples. Often characterized as environmental stewards, indigenous and other rural peoples have become the focus of international concern and campaigns which aim to protect local rights to

land while enhancing resource conservation. While the relationship between local empowerment and conservation is often a dubious one, it has considerable political appeal and so is likely to remain central to the discourse on Third World environmental politics for some time.

### **Globalization and Non-state Actors**

While claims about the demise of the nation state are premature, it seems likely that the influence of non-state actors will continue to grow in environmental politics. In no other field of politics has the non-profit, non-government sector become so influential. Many ENGO's today control large operating budgets, are staffed by experienced and highly trained professionals, and are global in reach. These and other ENGOs exert influence on the course of public policy from the local to international levels of governance. Whether this be in the form of providing clean drinking water to rural villages, scrutinizing the environmental practices of multi-national companies, or representing the environment's interest at United Nations conferences, ENGOs are no longer content to assume a peripheral role in environmental politics. Instead, they demonstrate an increasing willingness to bypass state structures altogether,... "picking-up where government action stops--or has yet to begin" (Princen *et al.*, 1995, 54).

The influence of the private, for-profit sector in environmental politics will likewise continue to grow. The world has witnessed a ten-fold increase in absolute trade during the last forty years and the economic size of larger multi-national companies sometimes exceeds the gross domestic product of nations in which they invest. In this highly competitive global economy, domestic governments strive for ever more cost-effective and business-friendly regulatory strategies. Market-based and voluntary approaches for greening industry are widely embraced, even if their effectiveness is not always evident. At the same time, pressures to

harmonize standards and regulations internationally are likely to continue to grow. The reconciliation of trade and investment liberalization with environmental conservation has become one of the defining challenges in environmental politics.

Managing the environmental impacts of business investment and trade will be especially difficult for many Lesser Developed Nations (LDCs). Multi-national, private sector investments in many regions of the Third World now dwarf those of the bi-lateral and multi-lateral aid agencies. Less affluent nations are understandably eager to entice foreign-based companies to invest in them, but weak institutions and lack of political will decrease the likelihood that environmental regulations are followed. On the positive side, multi-national companies often bring with them more advanced and cleaner production processes that gradually displace dirtier, domestic industries. Either way, the pace of economic change in many LDC's is astonishing and overwhelming in its impacts. Environment and development challenges facing countries like China and India are unprecedented and of growing concern for the global community. The industrialized north can no longer assure its own environmental future without the effective participation of these and other nations of the global "south" in future environmental agreements.

### **Securing Our Environmental Future**

These and other concerns will redefine environmental protection increasingly as a security issue. Competition over scarce resources like water, oil and arable land will grow and, with greater affluence to spend on militarization, increase the specter of regional and possibly global conflict. The possibility of calamitous events associated with global climate change may hasten periods of great economic and political instability, as is now occurring in Indonesia. Whether the global community fractures or comes together in response to (or in anticipation of) such change may well be one of the next great tests of our multi-lateral governing systems.

Either way, environmental concerns will garner an increasing share of our political efforts in years to come.

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