

Environmental Politics – Regulating Nature and Human Interactions?

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Guest editorial: *Pacific Geographies* Vol 40

Environmental politics is a wide-ranging field of enquiry with the common basis that it is concerned with analysing the regulation of interactions between nature and humans – if indeed such a distinction is useful. As there are many human-nature interactions in various social, historical, political and economic contexts, at and across different scales, with differing outcomes, it is a challenging and complex field of research. My aim with this editorial is to (briefly) combine the contributions in this special issue with wider thematic developments in the field of environmental politics as a way of introduction.

At the inception of environmental politics as a research interest, politics was squarely at the core of the field. Researchers were interested in analysing the institutionalising of environmental concerns within political parties and the formation of new (green) parties that were embedded in environmental movements and their ideologies. While historically, this has happened in the global North, the contribution by Erhat Sünaldi analyses how the recently created green party in the Philippines has evolved from environmental movements. He suggests that an increasing understanding of the links between sustainable livelihoods and environmental quality have negated Inglehart's (1977) thesis that societies are first and foremost concerned with basic materialist needs of existence before engaging with moral or philosophical needs.

Although the formation of new political institutions (and their stance on environmental issues) is clearly of continued importance for environmental politics, the role of the nation-state and national institutions is changing and has become a point of interest for scholars of environmental politics. Neoliberal state re-structuring has led to a transfer of power to regional and subnational institutions; at the same time the focus has changed from government via political institutions to governance networks involving a multitude of different actors (e.g. national, regional and local state institutions, quangos, NGOs, public-private partnerships and elites). This in itself raises a number of issues in terms of accountability and democratic decision-making as non-elected actors (e.g., elites, firms, special interest groups etc.) are increasingly involved in policy and planning processes.

In contrast, some national governments continue to maintain 'big government' and have retained state-owned companies in strategic industries. Jessica Graybill, for instance, demonstrates how the Russian government has renegotiated oil and gas extraction contracts with transnational corporations to the benefit of state-owned regional firms in order to circumvent possible environmental impact assessments as prerequisites for international investment. The 'target' for environmental protests has thus changed from transnational corporations to the national government leading to 'multiple politicized actions'.

The location of power within wider environmental political economy has clear implications for environmental justice. This academic field of interest has emerged from social movements against environmental decline in the 1980s (particularly in the US) and focuses on the unequal social and

geographic distribution of environmental impacts, who has access to a clean environment and who is excluded from environmental decision-making. Environmental justice approaches also offers insights into how society and individual actors think, act and talk about environmental concerns. In that vein, Aoyama and Hudson analyse the responses to the industrial mercury poisoning in Minamata, Japan in the 1950s as background for understanding the 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima following an earthquake and tsunami. They posit that Japan has not heeded lessons from the 'negative heritage' of environmental justice in Minamata and that Japanese society's unchanged culture of modernity has contributed to the recent nuclear disaster in Fukushima.

Fukushima can also be seen as an example of non-traditional security challenges, where the security of a nation-state is not threatened by military might but by non-traditional sources such as diseases, pollution, immigration, poverty, environmental disasters etc. Nature, especially, is a key factor for national security as it is often the cause or facilitator of non-traditional security issues, but access to resources (e.g. water) is also a key source of political and military challenges to a nation-states' sovereignty. Andrea Haefner, for instance, focuses on the Mekong region as a transnational river system which crosses China, Myanmar/Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos and suffers from environmental degradation thus posing a non-traditional, environmental security risk. She discusses how non-traditional security risks have developed from unsustainable economic practices in the subregion that have led to deforestation and land degradation, followed by floods and landslides and finally by the displacement of people, diseases and famine. Nation-states of the region view the importance of the river in different ways: China and Laos see the Mekong as a promising source of hydropower to satisfy the increasing energy demand of continued economic development or to export power to neighbours (respectively), whereas Vietnam (downriver) is concerned about the salinization of rice paddies.

The subregional contribution by Haefner demonstrates the need for transboundary environmental issues to be addressed across different geographical scales and including a variety of actors. This need for a transboundary approach is further highlighted by a local case study of the wider Mekong region presented by Claudia Kuenzer in her research note on Tonle Sap in Cambodia. She highlights the local challenges faced by the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia that are often caused by development upstream in the wider Mekong region. Both these contributions, Haefner from a subregional perspective and Kuenzer from a local perspective demonstrate the need for cooperation when dealing with non-traditional security threats.

This special issue is only able to provide a brief glimpse of some thematic contributions set in the Asia-Pacific region, but the subject is of key importance for the future, so I hope this special issue will provide a stimulus for further discussions on human-nature interactions within the remit of *Pacific Geographies*.