

REVIEW ESSAY

Climate Change and Global Environmental Governance



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- Elizabeth R. DeSombre, *Global Environmental Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
James Gustave Speth and Peter M. Haas, *Global Environmental Governance* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006).
Pamela S. Chasek, David L. Downie, and Janet Welsh Brown, *Global Environmental Politics*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006).
Richard E. Saunier and Richard A. Meganck, *Dictionary and Introduction to Global Environmental Governance* (London: Earthscan, 2007).

Global environmental governance has emerged as a hot topic in scholarly circles. The manifest inadequacy of international policy cooperation in response to transboundary pollution problems and the need for better management of shared natural resources has led to a flurry of academic writing. Scholars in environmental studies, political science, international relations, and law are now critically analyzing the structure and effectiveness of the international environmental regime and efforts to address climate change, declining fisheries, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, the spread of toxic chemicals, and other issues. These problems have also captured attention in the public arena. Al Gore won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to focus the public on the “climate crisis.” His book *An Inconvenient Truth* and related movie have won numerous awards. Adding to this arc of interest, a number of scholarly books that seek to illuminate the institutions, legal structures, and politics that shape global-scale environmental policymaking have been released over the past several years.

The logic of collective action in the international environmental arena is clear. Absent cooperation, the spillover of pollution from one country onto its neighbors or into the shared space of the global commons, as well as the over-exploitation of shared natural resources, promise not just environmental degradation but also economic inefficiency, political instability, and diminished social welfare. Ecological interdependence, expanded economic interlinkages, and tensions at the trade-environment interface have also made envi-

ronmental cooperation an important element in the process of establishing the terms of engagement for international commerce.¹

The world community's failure to stem the buildup of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere and resulting fears that the world is suffering the effects of climate change—global warming, sea level rise, increased intensity of windstorms, changed rainfall patterns, and other problems—add urgency to the quest for a better-functioning international environmental regime. All of the books surveyed in the following paragraphs find negative trend lines with regard to environmental cooperation, with the exception of efforts to phase out chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other chemicals that destroy the ozone layer.

Understanding which international environmental efforts are effective—and why—thus takes on a degree of urgency among issues of global policy-making. Unfortunately, these recent books, while beginning to explore the contours of this important question, do too little to help us understand how to move forward and build a more effective international environmental regime. Nevertheless, the works reviewed provide an important starting point for this critical inquiry.

Elizabeth DeSombre's *Global Environmental Institutions* offers a thorough tour of the existing structure of environment-related international organizations. As part of the Global Institutions Series, edited by Thomas Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, the book provides a useful history of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), although some of the details of her analysis have been disputed.² DeSombre illuminates the governance, financing, and scientific efforts of UNEP and also reviews the Earth Summits,³ which have helped structure the international community's thinking about environmental challenges over the past forty years. She explores the key issues and accomplishments of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

DeSombre highlights a number of UNEP successes, including the Regional Seas Programme and the Mediterranean Action Plan it produced. Her thematic chapters on species and conservation, oceans, the atmosphere, and transboundary movement of hazards all provide valuable case studies of the international community's response to particular environmental challenges. She delves into the international treaties and their implementing institutions with clarity and insight. For a student new to the field of global environmental governance, DeSombre helps sort out COPs, MOPs, and POPs.⁴ She explains the challenges of funding and highlights some of the other issues that have emerged with regard to global-scale environmental cooperation. Unfortunately, she does not take up the critical issues in much depth. Her review of the work of the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change covers less than two pages,⁵ and her discussion of the

Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol similarly receive very light treatment.⁶

As an introductory text, DeSombre's book offers a useful way into the complex subject of global environmental governance in general and the institutions that shape this field in particular. Her final chapter, "Emerging Issues and Future Directions," provides some analysis of the critical challenges that must be overcome to achieve greater success on climate change and other issues. She puts a spotlight on the need for consistent funding, a greater degree of public participation, and the potential value of a world environmental organization. While she mentions (largely in the introductory chapter) issues like the problem of free riding, the longtime horizons of some international harms, the difficulty of policymaking under conditions of uncertainty, and the disjuncture between the costs and benefits of international cooperation, there is little depth to this discussion. For example, DeSombre dismisses calls for a world environmental organization as "not politically realistic."⁷ She devotes, however, not even a paragraph to explaining the statement. Nor does she take up suggestions that have been advanced for a global environmental mechanism that would represent a new, networked approach to global governance.

One has the sense that DeSombre knows a great deal about the subject of global environmental governance. But the reader is left with a wish that she had shared a little more of her insight as to why the current regime is dysfunctional and what might be done about it.

Gus Speth and Peter Haas offer another introductory text with their 2006 book *Global Environmental Governance*. These knowledgeable authors provide a wide-ranging history of international efforts to respond to environmental challenges arising at the international level. Their text is full of "fun facts" and useful charts. They use text boxes to explain key concepts such as global governance, the global commons, and the precautionary principle. They spice up their story with "soundings" from newspapers that demonstrate the policy relevance of the issues and concepts they have introduced. One does worry, however, that some of these soundings will be dated by the time a reader gets to them. Is it really that relevant that the United States weakened the consensus for action at the 2005 Group of 8 (G8) summit?

The strength of the book lies in setting the Rio Earth Summit in historical context and tracing the progress of efforts to promote sustainability from Rio on to the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. The authors offer a very useful breakdown of the key elements of the Rio Declaration and a thoughtful analysis of Agenda 21. Their critique of the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development highlights many of the reasons why that summit failed to make any progress on the pivotal issues that global environmental institutions needed to address.

Speth and Haas also explain why the global effort to protect the ozone layer has been relatively successful. One wishes they had spent as much time

dissecting the reasons for the failure of the international efforts to address climate change. Likewise, it would have been interesting to have such broad-gauge authors offer an agenda for how global environmental governance needs to be reformed to be more successful in the future.

Instead of providing a vision of what a refined international environmental regime might look like, their concluding chapter largely centers on the need to end “rampant consumerism.”⁸ Their passion for an alternative to economic globalization as the only solution to our problems is clear. While some readers will share the authors’ decision to throw in their lot with “bioenvironmentalists and social greens” who want “deeper and more difficult changes”⁹ not only to the international environmental regime but to society itself, others may wish they had spent more time developing a “reformist”¹⁰ agenda that would blaze a trail forward in a more grounded fashion. Nevertheless, for those looking for an introduction to global environmental governance, Speth and Haas provide a valuable starting point.

The fourth edition of *Global Environmental Politics* by Pamela Chasek, David Downie, and Janet Welsh Brown shares Speth and Haas’s concern about a “dominant social paradigm that justifies essentially unlimited exploitation of nature.”¹¹ They dig deeper, however, into the difficulties that economic globalization presents for environmental protection. And they unpack the political and policy complexities of moving to a regime centered on sustainable development.

Global Environmental Politics explores the “actors” that shape efforts to promote environmental cooperation at the global scale. In particular, the authors go beyond a focus on governance and discuss nonstate actors, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and corporations. For example, they develop a very useful template arraying the various roles that environmental groups and other NGOs can play in shaping international environmental efforts. They also offer mini-case studies of eleven key environmental issues and review why international cooperation has been difficult to achieve in each case. They focus, in particular, on the “veto power” that arises in the international context where any one country can decline to go along with an emerging consensus. One wishes that the authors had discussed further the concept of sovereignty and the challenges it represents.

Nevertheless, the Chasek, Downie, and Welsh Brown book explains in greater depth than any of the other books under review the obstacles to international environmental cooperation and the factors that have produced success in some circumstances. The authors divide their analysis into four theories of global environmental governance: (1) structural, (2) game theory, (3) institutional bargaining, and (4) epistemic communities. With its more theoretical structure, *Global Environmental Politics* will serve the purposes of a more advanced student interested in digging into the nitty-gritty of the international environmental regime. The text is dense in parts, but the patient reader will be rewarded with an enormous amount of detail and substance. Where else will

you find a flow chart that maps the process for adding new chemicals to the Stockholm Convention, which regulates persistent organic pollutants?¹²

Global Environmental Politics deploys a number of useful educational techniques. Key concepts are broken out in bold type for easy identification. At the end of each chapter, the authors have provided a set of discussion questions. And their chronology of important events in global environmental governance offers a quick tour of the critical issues that have been addressed in the international environmental regime over the past 200 years.

Richard Saunier and Richard Meganck's *Dictionary and Introduction to Global Environmental Governance* provides a quirky, exhaustive, and interesting perspective on the concepts, language, and jargon that shape discussions of the international environmental regime. The book opens with an essay that seeks to parse the term "global environmental governance" and each of the words that make up this phrase. While the "chaos theory" that the authors seek to introduce becomes a bit esoteric and hard to follow, their fundamental point that there is no consensus on definitions of key concepts is undoubtedly true. This leads to the inescapable conclusion that part of the problem in moving international environmental cooperation forward has been the lack of an agreed-upon foundation for concerted action. They note that policymakers have been careless in their use of critical terms like "precautionary principle," "sustainable development," and even "environment." Beyond the problems of rhetoric, the authors echo the words of Denis Goulet, who observed that there is an "inherent conflict between the technical, political, and ethical rationalities" of development.¹³

While the opening essay may not resonate with all readers, the "dictionary" element of this book will prove to be useful as an academic resource for many students and scholars working in the international environmental arena. From the *Aarhus Convention* (on access to information) to *zoning*, the authors provide insight on hundreds of terms that underpin the world of global environmental governance. In doing so, they demonstrate that an entire language has grown up in this sphere. Anyone who cares to make a contribution to scholarship or policymaking in the international environmental regime needs to know the terms, abbreviations, and concepts that are reviewed. As a reference work, Saunier and Meganck's book will find a place on many shelves. Where else can one get a quick perspective on the Codex Alimentarius? And rather than providing long and technical discussions, the authors distill the concepts down to their essence, describing the Codex Alimentarius, for instance, as an "international food code."¹⁴

The level of detail that the authors achieve is remarkable. Not only do they discuss the G8 (the group composed of the eight largest industrialized countries, who meet annually for an economic summit) and the G-77+China (the coalition of developing countries that works as a bloc in international negotiations—now numbering 135 members), but they also offer nineteen

other “G-something” entries, from G3 to G-90.¹⁵ However, some of the definitions offered seem wide of the mark. The discussion of “sustainable development,” for example, makes reference to the Brundtland Commission and *Our Common Future* but then focuses on societal “needs” and “limitations”—a focus that does not seem to be particularly helpful in providing guidance to the uninitiated, nor especially complete for the scholar who seeks greater depth.¹⁶

Perhaps the best example of the unevenness of this book can be found in the appendixes to the dictionary. The authors provide an exhaustive and enormously useful seventy-five pages of acronyms.¹⁷ Indeed, the book is worth buying for this list alone! But the bibliography that follows is a scant ten pages and includes a number of obscure books and articles while leaving out many of the more fundamental texts that have shaped thinking in the global environmental governance arena.

In sum, the books reviewed all provide useful support for students and scholars trying to make sense of global environmental governance. Their lack of deep analysis of the challenges of this sphere, the shortcomings of the current institutional structures, and the right path forward, however, is notable. There is clearly much more work to be done by scholars in helping to explain:

- The challenges of sovereignty in a world of interdependence.
- Why states should bear the transaction costs of constructing international agreements, and when the benefits will exceed the burdens of doing so.
- How to overcome the divergent values that make it difficult to agree on burden sharing with regard to issues such as who will reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- What to do about deep disagreements that arise over what equity and fairness require from countries at different levels of development.
- How to ensure the effectiveness of international environmental cooperation efforts.
- What mechanisms to employ to promote compliance and how best to enforce international agreements.
- How to address the tensions between globalization and environmental protection and the push for trade liberalization in a context where environmental protection may be at risk.
- What “good governance” requires in terms of the international policymaking process.

Future work should focus on moving beyond descriptions of international regimes to deeper analysis of the principles, mechanics, and theoretical foundations of global environmental governance. Important scholarship that contributes to this dialogue has been published in the form of articles, and it would

be useful if some of this work were now folded into thoughtful books for the more casual reader and the student entering the field.¹⁸ ☉

Notes

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1. For a further exploration of this idea, see, among others, Daniel C. Esty, *Greening the GATT: Trade, Environment and the Future* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1994); Daniel C. Esty and Carolyn Deere, *Greening the Americas: NAFTA's Lessons for Hemispheric Trade* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

2. Maria H. Ivanova, *Can the Anchor Hold? Rethinking the United Nations Environment Programme for the 21st Century* (New Haven: Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, 2005).

3. These Earth Summits include the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg—which are considered the founts of global environmental governance agreements.

4. COP: Conference of the Parties to a Convention; MOP: Meeting of the Parties (for a Protocol); POP: Persistent Organic Pollutants (Stockholm Convention).

5. Elizabeth R. DeSombre, *Global Environmental Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 118–119.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 121–124, 164–166.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

8. James Gustave Speth and Peter M. Haas, *Global Environmental Governance* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006), p. 140.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Pamela S. Chasek, David L. Downie, and Janet Welsh Brown, *Global Environmental Politics*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006), p. 38.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

13. Denis Goulet “Three Rationalities in Development Decisionmaking,” *World Development* 14, no. 2 (1986): 301–317.

14. Richard E. Saunier and Richard A. Meganck, *Dictionary and Introduction to Global Environmental Governance* (London: Earthscan), p. 82.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 139–144.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 288–363.

18. Some examples of relevant articles are Ken Conca, “Environmental Governance After Johannesburg: From Stalled Legalization to Environmental Human Rights?” *Journal of International Law and International Relations* 1, nos. 1–2 (2005); Maria H. Ivanova, “Looking Forward by Looking Back: Learning from UNEP’s History,” in Lydia Swart and Estelle Perry, eds., *Global Environmental Governance: Perspectives on the Current Debate* (New York: Center for UN Reform Education, 2007); Thomas Bernauer, “The Effect of International Environmental Institutions: How

We Might Learn More,” *International Organization* 49, no. 2 (1995): 351–377; Steven Bernstein and Maria Ivanova, “Institutional Fragmentation and Normative Compromise in Global Environmental Governance: What Prospect for Re-embedding?” in S. Bernstein and L. W. Pauly, eds., *Global Governance: Towards a New Grand Compromise?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Ken Conca, “Greening and UN: Environmental Organizations and the UN System,” in T. G. Weiss and L. Gordenker, eds., *NGOs, the UN, and Global Governance* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996); Loraine Elliott, “The United Nations’ Record on Environmental Governance: An Assessment,” in F. Biermann and S. Bauer, eds., *A World Environment Organization* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Peter Haas, “Addressing the Global Governance Deficit,” *Global Environmental Politics* 4, no. 4 (2004): 1–15; Maria Ivanova, “Responsibility to Protect: The Foundations of Global Environmental Governance,” in Ajit Banerjee and Kamallesh Sharma, eds., *Reinventing the United Nations* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007); George F. Kennan, “To Prevent a World Wasteland: A Proposal,” *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 3 (1970): 401–413; Peter H. Sand, *Lessons Learned in Global Environmental Governance* (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 1990); James Gustave Speth, “A New Green Regime: Attacking the Root Causes of Global Environmental Deterioration,” *Environment* 44, no. 7 (2002): 16–25; Oran Young, “Global Environmental Change and International Governance,” in I. H. Rowlands and M. Greene, eds., *Global Environmental Change and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Oran Young, “International Organizations and International Institutions: Lessons Learned from Environmental Regimes,” in S. Kamieniecki, ed., *Environmental Politics in the International Arena: Movements, Parties, Organizations and Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).