1 Introduction: The environment and international relations

The question of when, if, and how well national governments cooperate to address shared environmental problems, from climate change to biodiversity loss to international trade in hazardous wastes, to name but a few, is central to the relationship between international relations theory and the environment. For many years now, the tools of political science, and specifically of the discipline of international relations, have been applied to the complex set of questions around global environmental change and global environmental governance. At the same time, insights from this body of work have informed and shaped our broader understanding of the workings of international politics, and the emphases and directions of specific theoretical approaches within the academic discipline.

However, if there is one thing that the global politics of the environment have taught us, it is that traditional political science and international relations approaches have limits when applied to problems of such political, scientific, and social complexity as those associated with global environmental change. A whole spectrum of perspectives, approaches, and tools from many different disciplines help explain the nature of the global environmental crisis and offer possible solutions. Some of these perspectives have their origin in the world of practice and policymaking, others in other social science disciplines. Many of these perspectives lie well outside the traditional disciplinary parameters of international relations theory, but are becoming more central to debates within the field of international – or global – environmental politics.[1] This book, therefore, analyzes the politics of global environmental governance – its shape, its history, its performance,

[1] The definitive distinction between "international" and "global" environmental politics (IEP and GEP) has yet to be drawn. In general, the term "IEP" tends to be used when the work or approaches under investigation derive most directly from international relations theory; "GEP" is a broader, and potentially more interdisciplinary term, allowing for broader sets of theoretical and methodological approaches. While they can be used interchangeably, "GEP" is becoming the more common term as the field itself evolves.

and its possible future – through a broad theoretical lens, in the process identifying a field of study that itself is starting to shape the way we understand international politics as a whole.

Outline and themes

Three questions guide political science inquiry into the global environment. First, what are the political causes of global environmental change? Can they be related to collective action problems, as states have little incentive to control the shift of pollution or resource depletion across national borders (and sometimes a positive incentive to allow it)? Or are they shaped more by the structures of a global – and globalizing – capitalist economy, which prioritizes economic growth and free market capitalism over environmental sustainability? Second, what factors account for the rise of global environmental concern, and the ways in which critical actors perceive environmental problems? Why has such concern fluctuated over the years? How do we handle scientific and political uncertainties about global environmental change? Last but not least, what constitutes global environmental governance, and what explains the shape, emergence, and effectiveness of such governance institutions and arrangements? It is this third question, informed by perspectives on the first two, which this book seeks to address.

In many ways, international relations theory helps to illuminate the answers to these questions. With its focus on the roles of power and national interests, of international institutions and rules, and of norms and ideas in international cooperation, it provides powerful leverage in explaining why and how we see the global environmental governance institutions we do, and why some are more successful than others. In other respects, international relations theory (at least in conventional terms) is not enough. For example, the state-centric focus of much international relations theory has traditionally omitted the roles and activities of non-state actors – of environmental movements, corporations, even scientists – in influencing existing, and even creating their own, governance institutions. This focus is now clearly changing.

More fundamentally, some scholars question the viability and worth of existing global environmental governance architectures, and argue for dismantling and rebuilding the ways the global community manages environmental problems. Others argue that we have been too blinkered in how we identify and categorize institutions and practices of global environmental governance, and urge attention be paid to politics across scales and issue areas that have not been traditionally part of the global policy agenda. In short, studies of international environmental politics

and governance are dynamic and evolving, creating an exciting field of study that is applied to some of the most urgent environmental, economic, and social challenges of our time. Understanding these dynamics offers critical insights into the opportunities for, and barriers to meeting, these challenges.

This book, therefore, traces the evolutionary arc of global environmental governance since it first emerged as a coherent system in the early 1970s up to the more contested and disillusioned years of the early twenty-first century, focusing both on the evolution of governance institutions and on how the study of global governance has changed. It addresses how international relations theory has been analyzed and assessed, and has itself been challenged by the emergence of global environmental politics as a serious arena of scholarship within – and outside – the discipline. In particular, this book identifies and assesses different *modes* and *sites* of global environmental governance: state, or government-led environmental cooperation and the creation of multilateral environmental agreements; the emergence of a multitude of "non-state" governance initiatives, such as eco-certification schemes; and how global *economic* governance, from trade to development aid, has become a critical site of environmental governance.

This chapter introduces the various scholarly approaches within the broad field of international environmental politics. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce global environmental issues, or problems, and actors in international environmental politics respectively. Chapters 4 through 7 focus on the different sites and modes of global governance and its intersection with the environment. Chapters 4 and 5 address international environmental cooperation, or diplomacy: the negotiation, implementation, and impacts of multilateral environmental agreements. Chapter 6 turns to global economic governance – particularly of trade, finance, and aid – and how it increasingly engages with environmental issues. Chapter 7 describes "non-state" global environmental governance: governance institutions and arrangements set up not by nation states, but by non-state actors. Chapter 8 – the concluding chapter – addresses debates over where global environmental governance is going, and how it can be best designed (or designed at all) to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.

Global environmental governance: A narrative arc and critical debates

Defined most simply, global environmental governance consists of efforts by the international community to manage and solve shared

environmental problems.[2] In an article published in 1970 in the influential policy journal *Foreign Affairs*, George Kennan – one of the architects of the post-World War Two world order – wrote about his own vision of global environmental governance, then in its nascent stages (Kennan 1970). Recognizing that "the entire ecology of the planet is not arranged in national compartments; and whoever interferes seriously with it anywhere is doing something that is almost invariably of serious concern to the international community at large," he argued that the existing patchwork of national and international agencies were not up to the task of coordinating and managing the world's environment. He continues:

> One can conceive, then, by an act of the imagination, of a small group of advanced nations, consisting of roughly the ten leading industrial nations of the world, including communist and non-communist ones alike … constituting themselves something in the nature of a club for the preservation of natural environment, and resolving, then, in that capacity, to bring into being an entity – let us call it initially an International Environment Agency … This entity, while naturally requiring the initiative of governments for its inception and their continued interest for its support, would have to be one in which the substantive decisions would be taken not on the basis of compromise among governmental representatives, but on the basis of collaboration among scholars, scientists, experts … true international servants, bound by no national or political mandate, by nothing, in fact, other than dedication to the work at hand.

Kennan was writing with full knowledge of, and indeed in order to advise, the upcoming United Nations sponsored Conference on Humans and the Environment (UNCHE), to be held in Stockholm in 1972. At that point in time, the UN was looking to expand its role into managing global environmental problems. By bringing together government representatives from 114 countries, it hoped to lay the groundwork for an architecture of global environmental governance that would serve the planet for decades to come.

Kennan's vision represents a highly technocratic form of global environmental governance: governance through impartial expertise rather than through the politics of conflict and compromise. The system of global environmental governance that emerged post-Stockholm, however, was far more political, and decentralized. Since 1972, global environmental governance has consisted primarily of the negotiation and implementation by nation states of international (multilateral) environmental treaties and agreements on an issue-by-issue basis, often coordinated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), established at Stockholm.

[2] For a discussion of the concept "global governance," its theoretical antecedents and applicability to contemporary world politics, see Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006.

In other words, the dominant driving force of global environmental governance since 1972 has been not technocracy, but international diplomacy.

More than 140 multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) have been created since 1920, over half of these since 1973 (Haas 2001a, p. 316). If one also counts treaty amendments, protocols, and other changes to existing agreements, this number could be far higher: "three or more governments have agreed on legally binding environmental commitments over 700 times" (Mitchell 2003, pp. 434–5). Highlights include binding agreements over ozone layer depletion, the protection of biological diversity, the trade in hazardous wastes, and the trade in endangered species. The most high-profile, and contentious, negotiating process has been over climate change and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Its fluctuating progress is demonstrative of many of the challenges of international environmental cooperation. For example, although it entered into force in 2005, it has suffered from the active withdrawal of the US, and criticism from the environmental community for being too weak to seriously address greenhouse gas emissions.

These multilateral environmental agreements, or regimes, together comprise the dominant mode of contemporary global environmental governance. Yet today the dominance of both the practice and the study of international environmental cooperation is challenged by two different narratives. The first is one of failure. James Gustave Speth, former director of the World Resources Institute, and Dean of Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, offers a representative view:

> [The] rates of environmental degradation that stirred the international community [a quarter century ago] continue essentially unabated today. The disturbing trends persist, and the problems have become deeper and truly urgent. The steps that governments took over the past two decades represent the first attempt at global environmental governance. It is an experiment that has largely failed (Speth 2004, pp. 1–2).

This perspective draws on the perceived weaknesses of existing treaty arrangements (Susskind 1994), the intractability of disputes between Northern (rich) and Southern (poorer) countries (Agarwal *et al.* 1999), the "summit fatigue" that has resulted from the proliferation of international meetings around MEAs (VanDeveer 2003), and the extent to which global economic governance regimes "trump" their environmental equivalents (Conca 2000). The diplomatic process set in train at Stockholm in 1972 has essentially stalled (Conca 2005a), and new tools and institutions are needed to address these ever more critical problems at the global level.

A second narrative argues that we have too narrow a view of what counts as global environmental governance, and that we need to look beyond the standard international relations repertoire of inter-state cooperation and diplomacy (Conca 2005a, 2006; Wapner 2003). By examining non-traditional actors – environmental activists, community groups, international organizations and even multinational corporations, other modes of governance, such as forest certification schemes, transnational advocacy networks, and actions across scales – from local to global – we see a picture of global governance that is far more multi-faceted, contentious, and potentially more democratic than the dominant model of international environmental diplomacy. This perspective challenges the position of nation states as the primary agents of global governance – and ultimately argues that a more democratic, or participatory, vision of global governance may help us reach a more environmentally sustainable world. By broadening our field of vision, as students, scholars, or practitioners, we can attain a more complete understanding of the various forces driving – or pushing against – effective global environmental governance.

Following the insights from this second debate, this book focuses on three existing modes and sites of global environmental governance: international environmental cooperation (state-led global environmental governance; Chapters 4 and 5), non-state global environmental governance (including eco-certification schemes, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and even socially responsible investment initiatives; Chapter 7), and global economic governance (Chapter 6). "Sites" of governance are not literal locations, but rather arenas of governance within the broader structure of global governance in which actors interact and make decisions. "Modes" of governance are ways of crafting and implementing environmental regulations and initiatives – whether it be through the negotiation of treaties or the development of private-sector led voluntary certification systems.

We have already outlined the basic shape of "state-led" governance. The term "non-state governance" refers to a range of governance activities created, implemented and managed by non-state actors: civil society actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector actors – corporations and business associations – who may or may not work in partnership. In Chapter 7, we examine forest certification schemes as a leading example of non-state governance, as well as other examples. Given the general disillusionment with the effectiveness of international environmental diplomacy, many activists, analysts, and members of the private sector are embracing these schemes as a way to bypass the cumbersome process of international cooperation. Scholarly

interest in these non-state regulatory regimes revolves around the ways in which they are building authority and legitimacy, even while bypassing national governments – traditionally the sole holders of these governance properties (Cashore *et al*. 2004), and their ultimate effectiveness, especially given their voluntary nature (Espach 2006).

Decisions and rules about trade, foreign investment and global capital movements, and development, particularly in an era of rapid globalization, have serious impacts on the state of the global environment. So, increasingly, forums such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank have had to take on issues of environmental and social impacts of their decisions, and how to respond when their rules conflict with global rules and norms about environmental protection.

I have chosen in this book to focus on arenas of global environmental governance that are characterized by a relatively high degree of institutionalization, and which operate from the global level. The concluding chapter touches on less visibly institutionalized modes of global environmental governance that are emerging onto the international scene. In the meantime, we begin this journey by sketching the scholarly perspectives and debates, both within and outside international relations theory, that guide our understanding of these developments.

Scholarly perspectives on international environmental politics

The emergence of the environment as an area of study within international relations scholarship mirrored real world political developments. Many early works in the field appeared in the early 1970s, but during the 1990s, the field began to come into its own. Books, journals, university courses, list-serves, and conferences – all the hallmarks of a successful academic discipline – now provide forums for ongoing debates within the field. In some ways, the field began as a subset of international relations theory, whereby the politics of the global environment provided a useful set of cases for developing and testing hypotheses about the nature and durability of international cooperation. Now, however, the field has grown in scope to embrace many different social science perspectives and methodologies. The following sections of this chapter discuss the relationship between international relations theory, social science theory, and the global environment, addressing the following themes:

- How the basic tools of, and perspectives within, international relations theory help us understand the dynamics of global environmental change and governance.

- How the study of global environmental governance – and particularly the study of international environmental cooperation – has contributed to the study of international relations.
- How the study of global environmental problems and politics have generated new perspectives on global environmental governance that draw on a full range of social science traditions.

International relations and environmental politics

Theory provides a way of thinking about and analyzing the world in systematic ways. It helps us describe, explain, and predict real world events. The broad field of international relations, with its focus on interactions among nation states, has generated many theoretical approaches, concepts, and tools for understanding international environmental politics.

Most essentially, international relations theory is concerned with the dynamics of international conflict and cooperation among nation states. In the aftermath of World War Two, many scholars in the field focused on the dynamics of the Cold War between the East (the Soviet Union) and the West (the United States and Western Europe). This period also saw a growing interest in international political economy (IPE) – the economic interactions among nation states, including trade and financial relations, issues of debt and dependency, the role of international organizations and international law in managing both the global economy and collective security – and, ultimately, the global environment.[3]

Works explicitly on international politics and transboundary environmental problems began to appear in the 1970s (e.g. Pirages 1978; M'Gonigle and Zacher 1979). Over the 1980s and 1990s the field itself consolidated around two trends. First, the 1970s and 1980s were active decades on the international political scene. The 1972 Stockholm Conference ushered in a flurry of diplomatic activity coordinated by the new United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Treaties – on trade in endangered species, on ozone-depleting substances, on hazardous waste trading, ocean dumping, biodiversity, climate change, and so on – were being mooted, signed, and often ratified by nation states, providing a new and fertile field of study for political scientists.

Second, many international relations theorists had shifted towards closer study of international cooperation – the intentional coordination of policies and adjustment of behaviors among nation states to address collective

[3] For some more general discussions of the evolution of international relations theory, see Rowlands 2001, Gilpin 2001, Karns and Mingst 2004, Burchill *et al*. 1996, and Baylis and Smith 1997. On theories of international cooperation, see O'Neill *et al.* 2004.

problems – as a durable and influential phenomenon (e.g. Keohane 1984; Krasner 1983). These scholars questioned a dominant assumption of the discipline: that cooperation among rival states was purely transitory and reflective only of state interests. Interest surged in conditions facilitating the formation of international governance regimes, their functions, durability, impact, and how they managed to overcome collective action problems associated with cooperation under anarchy. In turn, emerging structures of global environmental governance provided a rich set of cases for the study of international cooperation. To quote an early and influential statement of the global environmental problematique from an international relations perspective:

> Can a fragmented and often highly conflictual political system made up of over 170 sovereign states and numerous other actors achieve the high (and historically unprecedented) levels of cooperation and policy coordination needed to manage environmental problems on a global scale? (Hurrell and Kingsbury 1992, p. 1).

Three traditions within the mainstream of the field – realism (or neorealism), liberal institutionalism, and cognitivism, based respectively on power, institutions, and ideas – provide insights into problems and politics of international environmental cooperation. They share, in many ways, perceptions of the international context, or system, and the identity of key actors, but differ extensively in the emphasis they give to different explanatory variables. The key common factor they share is that the international political system is *anarchic*, and that the primary actors within this system are *sovereign nation states*. By "anarchy," international relations theorists mean the absence of a sovereign world government: nation states answer to no higher authority than themselves. They do not mean that the system is chaotic, nor do they have a strong connection to classical political theories of anarchy, or "self-governing" communities. Within this system, states – or countries – are considered sovereign territories: governments rule over their citizens, territory, and resource base, and except under limited circumstances, interference from other states is considered an act of war.[4]

Realist and neorealist theorists of international politics hew most closely to these basic assumptions (Waltz 1979; Keohane 1986; Powell 1991). For these theorists, international anarchy is unmitigated: states have little or no incentive to work together to solve joint problems, and their attitudes towards each other have been conditioned by a history of international conflict, not one of international cooperation. They are motivated primarily by rivalry and the pursuit of relative power, most particularly

[4] For more on the concepts of anarchy and sovereignty, see Milner 1991; Krasner 1988; Spruyt 2002.

power in military or economic terms. In fact, it is this pursuit of relative gains, vis-à-vis other states, that drives interactions between them. This makes lasting cooperation – other than the formation of strategic military alliances – extremely unlikely, except when cooperation is driven and maintained by one single, powerful state, or hegemony, for as long as it is willing and able to do so. For example, the US in the post-World War Two years took on this role, setting up and maintaining the global free trade regime (e.g. Kindleberger 1973; Snidal 1985). For realists, state actors – being the ones that hold the reins of military and economic power – are the only actors who matter. Other types of international actor – international organizations, NGOs, etc. – are purely peripheral.

Liberal theorists – or, in their latter-day variant, neoliberal institutionalists – see a slightly different sort of world, one that is more amenable to cooperation (Baldwin 1993; Keohane 1984; Krasner 1983; Keohane and Nye 2001). They posit that states are, in fact, far more interdependent than most realists, or neorealists, recognize. In a world where countries depend on one another for mutual peace and prosperity, there is a strong incentive to work together to achieve joint, or absolute, gains for the international community. Strong variants on liberal theories in international relations do, in fact, see a very important role for international law in creating an international community of nation states and other actors, rather than a world occupied by autonomous and rivalrous states (Bull 1977).

For theorists in the neoliberal institutionalist tradition, anarchy is a problem in that the absence of a sovereign authority makes it easy – and desirable – for states to cheat on mutual agreements. Thus, a single state can free-ride on an international agreement, and receive the benefits from it without paying any costs of adjustment. Under this scenario, no state cooperates, hoping instead to free-ride on the actions of others. Therefore, neoliberal institutionalists look for ways to mitigate these problems. They see international cooperation succeeding when states can work together to realize joint gains, and when institutions are set up that can monitor compliance, increase transparency, reduce the transactions costs of cooperation, and prevent most, if not all, cheating. They assign non-state actors, such as the United Nations, or non-governmental organizations important roles in fostering such transparency, and making durable cooperative agreements much more likely.

The third approach, "cognitivism" (sometimes called constructivism), introduces ideational and normative elements into the equation.[5] Both

[5] Cogntitivist approaches are often divided into "weak" and "strong" variants. Weak cognitivism, or constructivism, fits more into the "explanatory" school of theory than its relative,