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ENVIRONMENTAL DILEMMAS AND POLICY DESIGN

According to the logic of collective action, mere awareness of the causes of environmental degradation will not motivate rational agents to reduce pollution. Yet some government policies aim to enlist citizens in schemes of voluntary cooperation, drawing on an ethos of collective responsibility. Are such policies doomed to failure? This book provides a novel application of rational choice theory to a large-scale survey of environmental attitudes in the Netherlands. Its main findings are that rational citizens are motivated to cooperate towards a less polluted environment to a large extent, but that their willingness to assume responsibility depends on the social context of the collective action problem they face. This empirical study is an important volume in the development of a more consistent foundation for rational choice theory in policy analysis, which seeks to clarify major theoretical issues concerning the role of moral commitment, self-interest and reciprocity in environmental behaviour.

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Preface

This book has grown out of a research project commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Environmental Affairs in 1994. The brief of the project was to form a survey database of citizens' responses to environmental collective action problems, in order to report on the effectiveness of 'self-regulation policy' in the environmental policy plans of the Netherlands. This type of policy, which exists to the present day, seeks to regulate behaviour in areas of everyday life such as waste collection, private car travel, or economizing on household energy, by obtaining voluntary compliance to environmental goals of reducing pollution, rather than securing compliance through legal compulsion or financial incentives.

Self-regulation policies depend on the challenging notion that government can persuade citizens to overcome *environmental dilemmas* of the kind that the standard logic of collective action for large groups of rational individuals predicts will arise inevitably. Voluntary cooperation to reduce pollution would thus be ruled out on that logic, unless citizens could be made to act irrationally.

To respond to this challenge, our research design aims to combine theoretical insights into motives and preferences underlying rational choice in environmental dilemmas with empirical methods of survey research, in a way appropriate to assessing the chances and limits of self-regulation policies. In the course of writing the book, and in discussion with numerous colleagues, we have been aware that the results generated within our theoretical perspective on rational choice need to be interpreted with some care. Hence readers will find a detailed programmatic overview, as well as a description of the policy setting, in the first two chapters.

From the start of the project, we have been fortunate to receive many critical responses and concrete suggestions for improving various aspects of the

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research. We are particularly indebted to Kees Aarts, our co-author of the original report (which appeared in Dutch in 1995), not least for his expert efforts in designing the questionnaire. (See Aarts, Pellikaan and Van der Veen, 1995. The original dataset is available from the authors, at <pellikaan@fsw.LeidenUniv.nl>.)

We are grateful to our Dutch colleagues who have taken the time to comment on various drafts and presentations of preliminary results and have suggested important clarifications: Jos de Beus, Cees van der Eijk, Henk van de Graaf, Loek Groot and Kees Schuyt (University of Amsterdam), Marius de Geus, Herman van Gunsteren, Galen Irwin, Jan de Keijser, and Hans Oversloot (University of Leiden) and Martin van Hees (University of Groningen).

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Finally, we have benefited greatly from the patience and the excellent advice of Robert Goodin, the editor of this series, and from the support of John Haslam of Cambridge University Press. While it hardly needs to be mentioned in the face of these many and diverse responses over a long period of time, we alone must take responsibility for the final product.

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