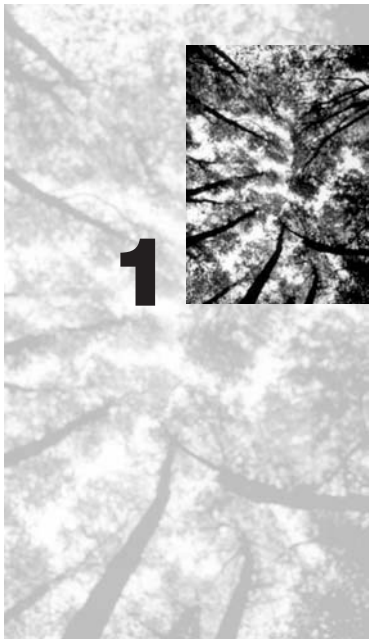

1 Introduction

The environment has been on the political agenda since the late 1960s. Much has happened in that time, but is the planet better off? According to one popular heuristic measure of the state of the environment – the **ecological footprint** – things are bad and getting steadily worse.[1] The global ecological footprint of humanity is a measure of the amount of nature it takes to sustain a given population over the course of a year. This global footprint first exceeded the Earth's biological capacity in the late 1970s, since when it has risen steadily, overshooting by almost 40 per cent in 2005 (Venetoulis and Talberth 2006: 12). Moreover, this alarming figure disguises huge disparities among the nations; for example, the per capita footprint (in global hectares) of the USA (108.95) is about seventy times that of Ethiopia (1.56) (Table 1.1). It would be wrong, however, to draw the conclusion that nothing has changed over the last forty years; in practice, the picture is much more complicated, as is illustrated by the following examples.

Ecological footprint: A measure of the amount of nature it takes to sustain a given population over the course of a year.

In April 1986 the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded, with catastrophic human and environmental consequences stretching from the Ukraine across much of the Northern Hemisphere. Chernobyl appeared to be the deathknell for the nuclear industry, as most governments stopped commissioning any new nuclear power-stations. Remarkably, twenty years later the nuclear industry is back in favour, with the first new nuclear reactor in the EU for over a decade being built in Finland, the French and British governments planning a new generation of nuclear reactors, and President Bush offering financial incentives to anyone willing to build the first nuclear power stations in the USA in a generation. Ironically, the contemporary justification

Table 1.1 Ecological footprint estimates, 1961–2001 (global hectares per capita, rounded)

	Ecological footprint	Biological capacity	Ecological balance
USA	109	20	−89
France	66	11	−55
Germany	52	8	−44
Italy	41	8	−33
Sweden	66	26	−40
UK	62	10	−52
Kuwait	155	8	−147
China	12	8	−4
India	4	6	2
Ethiopia	2	9	7
Nepal	2	8	6

Source: Venetoulis and Talberth (2006: 11–13).

for nuclear power is the 'green' claim that it is a carbon-free solution to climate change.

The lifestyle choices of many people are increasingly shaped by environmental considerations: they purchase organic products, recycle drink containers, cycle to work and invest their savings 'ethically' and take 'ecotourist' holidays. Yet global capitalism and consumerist lifestyles grow ever more demanding on the environment. Most people in the industrialised world seem to want more goods, to take cheap flights, to drive their cars and they are wedded to a 'throwaway' culture that results in landfill sites piled high with plastic bottles and obsolete computers.

Citizens have joined environmental groups in their millions, signed petitions and marched on demonstrations. The environmental lobby has become an important actor in national and international politics, while the dramatic stunts of eco-warriors have become a familiar part of the political repertoire. But entrenched business interests and technocratic elites continue to exercise far greater influence over most key policy decisions. Green parties are now an established feature of party politics in many European countries, and have even joined coalition governments in several countries, whilst established parties of all persuasions have adopted a greener rhetoric. However, electoral politics remain dominated by traditional materialist issues, such as the state of the economy, taxation, public order and welfare policy. Governments everywhere have introduced a wide range of environmental protection policies and regulations, and most countries are formally committed to the principles of **sustainable development**, but priority is still almost always given to economic growth over environmental protection. Efforts to build

Sustainable development: The ability of the present generation to meet its needs without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

international co-operation to address global environmental problems such as **climate change** have become a central concern of international diplomacy, yet the USA has refused to agree to make even the limited and inadequate emissions reductions contained in the Kyoto Protocol, and rapidly industrialising major powers such as China and India have not been required to make any commitments.

Climate change: Any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or to human activity.

Whilst there is no doubt that environmental issues have had a big impact on contemporary politics, the frequency with which governments adopt a business-as-usual response to environmental problems raises the cynical thought that perhaps nothing much has really changed. This puzzle is one of many challenges confronting environmental politics, which has rapidly become an established subject of political enquiry.

The rationale behind this book is that environmental politics is a distinctive subject that is worthy of study both in its own right and also for the challenges it poses for the wider discipline of politics. Environmental politics is a wide-ranging subject with three core components:

1. the study of political theories and ideas relating to the environment;
2. the examination of political parties and environmental movements;
3. the analysis of public policymaking and implementation affecting the environment at international, national and local levels.

The broad aim of this book is to provide an introduction to environmental politics that covers all three aspects of this rapidly expanding subject. The primary focus of the book is on environmental politics in the industrialised world. It is the affluent industrialised countries of Europe and North America that are largely responsible for causing contemporary environmental problems and it is essential that they take the lead in solving them. Much of the substance of environmental politics – ideas and theories, parties and movements, policy initiatives – is rooted in the industrialised world too. Although North–South issues and development themes regularly surface in the book, for reasons of substance, practicality and space, the book has a primary focus on advanced industrialised countries. The rest of this introduction identifies the distinctive features of environmental politics and explains the structure of the book.

So, in what ways is environmental politics distinctive? One distinguishing characteristic is that it has a primary concern with the relationship between human society and the natural world. This human–nature relationship connects the extraordinarily diverse set of issues encompassed by environmental politics, which include wilderness preservation and nature conservation, air, water and land pollution, the depletion of scarce resources such as fish stocks, rainforests and endangered species, the use of nuclear power and biotechnology, and 'global' problems such as **biodiversity** loss, climate change and **ozone depletion**. Traditionally,

Biodiversity: The number, variety and variability of living organisms; sometimes refers to the total variety of life on Earth.

Ozone depletion: Depletion of ozone in the Earth's upper atmosphere which leaves the surface of the Earth vulnerable to harmful ultraviolet radiation.
Holism: The view that wholes are more than just the sum of their parts, and that wholes cannot be defined merely as a collection of their basic constituents.

many of them were (and often still are) treated discretely as separate policy problems. The increasing tendency to conceptualise these problems as 'environmental' reflects the emergence of an environmental discourse, or way of thinking about the world, which has given coherence and political significance to the notion of 'the environment' (Dryzek 2005). Underpinning this discourse is a **holistic** perspective which, rather than examining individual issues in isolation, focuses on the interdependence of environmental, political, social and economic issues and the way in which they interact with each other.

At this point it is important to provide some historical context because the emergence of this wider environmental discourse is a relatively recent development. Of course, many of the problems that we now regard as environmental, such as pollution, deforestation and land degradation, are not new. In the classical world, Plato, Lucretius and Caesar all commented on the problem of soil erosion (Wall 1994a: 2–3). The collapse of the Mayan civilisation hundreds of years ago can probably be attributed to deforestation and soil erosion (Ponting 1992). Much later, however, it was the industrial and scientific revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that really created the conditions for contemporary concern about the environment. In particular, the process of industrialisation contributed to environmental degradation by accelerating resource consumption, urban development and pollution. One of the earliest examples of what we would now call environmental legislation was the 1863 Alkali Act in Britain, whilst in the USA the first legal action against air pollution occurred in 1876 in St Louis (Paehlke 1989: 23). The first wave of concern about environmental issues can be traced to the emergence of conservation and nature protection groups in the latter part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, reflecting a growing middle-class interest in the protection of wildlife, wilderness and natural resources (Lowe and Goyder 1983). Several leading pressure groups, including the Sierra Club in the USA, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK, and the Naturschutzbund Deutschland in Germany, date from this period. The **conservationist** movement established a firm base through the twentieth century as most countries saw a gradual accumulation of policies affecting various 'environmental' issues, ranging from the regulation of industrial pollution to the creation of national parks. Nevertheless, it was not until the emergence of '**modern environmentalism**' – the wave of popular concern about environmental issues that swept across the developed world during the 1960s – that the environmental discourse became widespread (Pepper 1996) (see Box 1.1).

Conservationism: An approach to land management that emphasises the efficient conservation of natural resources so that they can later be developed for the benefit of society.
Modern environmentalism: The emergence, from the late 1960s, of growing public concern about the state of the planet, new political ideas about the environment and a mass political movement.

1.1 Evolution of environmental issues

First generation: preservation and conservation (pre-1960s)
Protection of wildlife and habitats
Soil erosion
Local pollution

Second generation: 'modern environmentalism' (from 1960s)
Population growth
Technology
Desertification
Pesticides
Resource depletion
Pollution abatement

Third generation: global issues (late 1970s onwards)
Acid rain
Ozone depletion
Rainforest destruction
Climate change
Loss of biodiversity
Genetically modified organisms

Preservationism: An approach based on an attitude of reverence towards nature, especially wilderness, that advocates the protection of a resource from any form of development.

The rise of modern environmentalism highlights a second distinctive feature of the environment as a political subject: unlike most other single issues, it comes replete with its own ideology and political movement (Jacobs 1997: 1). An awareness of historical context is again important, for neither a green ideology nor an environmental movement existed before the late 1960s. Modern environmentalism differed from the earlier **preservationist** and conservationist movements in two important ways (McCormick 1989: ch. 3). First, it was driven by the idea of a global ecological crisis that threatened the very existence of humanity. The atomic age had brought home the fragility of planet Earth. This perception was nurtured by a series of well-publicised eco-disasters, notably the massive oil spillages from the wrecked *Torrey Canyon* tanker off the Cornish coast in 1967, the blow-out of an oil platform at Santa Barbara, California, two years later, and the mercury poisoning of Minamata Bay in Japan. Following Rachel Carson's 1962 best-seller, *Silent Spring*, which alerted the world to the dangers posed by the synthetic chemicals used in pesticides such as DDT, advances in scientific knowledge were increasingly catapulted out of the laboratory into the public arena. Fierce public debates about the consequences of population growth, technology and resource depletion encouraged people to think increasingly in global terms about the environment (Ehrlich 1968; Commoner 1971; Meadows et al. 1972).

Secondly, modern environmentalism was a political and activist mass movement which demanded a radical transformation in the values and structures of society. It was influenced by the broader 'politics of affluence' and the general upsurge in social movement protest at that time. Modern environmentalism came of age on 22 April 1970 when millions

of Americans celebrated and protested on Earth Day; still the largest environmental demonstration in history. The burgeoning environmental movement certainly helped to popularise the environmental discourse. Governments set up environmental ministries and agencies and introduced swaths of new legislation to protect the environment. The watershed 1972 UN Stockholm conference, which examined how a range of global environmental problems affected human life, marked the entry of the environment onto the international agenda. Thus, by the early 1970s, the component parts of environmental politics had started to take shape: the appearance of new political ideas and ways of thinking about the environment; the rise of a mass environmental movement; and the creation of a new policy agenda.

These three core components of environmental politics provide the framework for this book, which is divided into three parts to reflect the distinctive contribution made by each area of study: ideas; parties and movements; and policy.

Part I explores different ways of thinking about the environment. A major theme of the book is to explore whether there is now a sufficiently comprehensive and distinctive view of environmental issues to talk in terms of a green political ideology, or '**ecologism**' (Dobson 2000). In particular, green political thought offers two important insights. One is the belief that we need to reconceptualise the relationship between humans and nature, which prompts many important questions about which parts of nature, if any, have value, on what basis that value may be attributed and whether such value is equal to that of humans. A further critical insight is the conviction that the Earth's resources are finite and that there are ecological **limits to growth** which, unless we change our ways, will be exceeded sooner rather than later. Radical greens draw the conclusion that we need a fundamental reassessment of our value systems and a restructuring of existing political, social and economic systems in order to achieve an ecologically sustainable society. Part I assesses this claim that ecologism is a distinctive ideology. Chapter 2 provides an introduction to environmental philosophy by exploring ethical questions about how humans ought to think about and act towards nature. Chapter 3 outlines and analyses the green political programme and assesses the relationship between green ideas and other political ideologies.

Ecologism: A distinctive green political ideology encompassing those perspectives that hold that a sustainable society requires radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world and our mode of economic, social and political life.
Limits to growth: The belief that the planet imposes natural limits on economic and population growth.

Part II turns to the question of how we get to a sustainable society, with a focus on collective action. Environmental activism is now a very broad church. Green parties have become established in several countries and there are many 'environmentalists' operating within established political parties. Beyond parties, the contemporary environmental movement now

encompasses mass-membership pressure groups such as the Sierra Club, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, thousands of local grassroots groups and radical protest groups such as Earth First!. Whether by directly influencing the policy process or indirectly raising public consciousness about environmental issues through media campaigns and protest activities, the environmental movement has become a significant political actor and agent of change. In Chapter 4 the rise of green parties is examined in the context of the claim that they represent a '**new politics**'. A range of structural and institutional factors is explored to explain why green parties have achieved electoral success in some countries, but failed elsewhere, with a particular focus on Germany, France and Britain. Chapter 5 investigates the impact of environmental issues on party politics. It looks first at the way green parties, notably the German Greens, have dealt with the transition from pressure politics to parliamentary respectability and then into government; secondly, it assesses the impact of environmentalism on established parties, through case studies of Germany, Britain and the USA. Chapter 6 explores the development and achievements of environmental groups, particularly in the USA and Britain, using the dynamic tension between the large, mainstream environmental lobby and grassroots action as a means of exploring some central questions of green agency, or how to achieve political change.

New politics: The view that since the late 1960s the rise of postmaterial values, a new middle class and new social movements has changed the political agenda and led to a realignment of established party systems.

Finally, Part III is concerned with environmental policy; specifically, it examines progress towards the implementation of sustainable development. Whilst governments may be deaf to the radical message of ecologism, many have been influenced by the alternative **policy paradigms** of sustainable development and **ecological modernisation**, which offer the promise of protecting the environment by reforming capitalism. As a result, radical ideas like the '**precautionary principle**', and innovative policy instruments such as **eco-taxes**, have begun to appear on the policy agenda. At an international level, the search for solutions to global environmental problems has engendered unprecedented efforts to secure widescale international co-operation between independent sovereign states to solve problems such as ozone depletion. However, policymakers have discovered that environmental issues pose distinctive and pressing problems. Chapter 7 explores the environment as a policy problem, identifying its distinguishing characteristics and outlining

Policy paradigm: A framework of ideas and standards that specifies the nature of a problem and the policy goals and instruments needed to address it.
Ecological modernisation: A policy strategy which aims to restructure capitalist political economy along more environmentally benign lines based on the assumption that economic growth and environmental protection can be reconciled.
Precautionary principle: The principle that the lack of scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.
Eco-tax: A tax levied on pollution or on the goods whose production generates pollution.

Traditional policy paradigm: An approach to the environment that treats each problem discretely, gives priority to economic growth and results in reactive, piecemeal and tactical policies and end-of-pipe solutions.

the **traditional policy paradigm**, which has proved unable to cope with the range and intensity of contemporary environmental problems. The resilience of this traditional paradigm is explained by the structural power that capitalism gives to producer interests and by the segmentation of the policy process, but the chapter also explores a range of policy models and frameworks that can help make sense of environmental policymaking and show how change is possible. Chapter 8 analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the alternative policy paradigms of sustainable development and ecological modernisation, and the remaining chapters evaluate how far they have been implemented. Chapter 9 looks at the emergence of international co-operation between nation states intended to address problems of the global commons, with detailed studies of climate change and ozone depletion.

Regulation: Any direct ('command and control') attempt by the government to influence the behaviour of businesses or citizens by setting environmental standards (e.g. for air quality) enforced via legislation.
Market-based instrument: A policy instrument that internalises into the price of a good or product the external costs to the environment of producing and using it.

Chapter 10 examines the relationship between globalisation, trade and the environment, and assesses the impact of three key institutions: the World Trade Organisation, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union. Chapter 11 investigates progress towards greener government by examining how far environmental policy considerations have been integrated into routine policymaking processes. Chapter 12 analyses the strengths and weaknesses of different policy instruments, concentrating on the key debate between the competing claims of **regulatory** and **market-based instruments**, with particular studies of climate change policies in the energy and transport sectors.

Throughout Parts II and III an informal comparative approach is employed. It is informal in the sense that it makes no attempt to follow a rigorous comparative methodology; but it is comparative in that it uses examples and case studies from several different countries, mostly from Europe, the USA and Australasia, to illustrate the arguments.

Another key theme of the book is that environmental politics, in addition to being a distinctive and fascinating subject worthy of study in its own terms, is important because it challenges established political discourses, political behaviour and policy agendas. Thus the growing significance of environmental politics has seen political philosophers extend mainstream theories of justice to consider whether non-human nature or future generations of humans have interests or rights or are owed obligations. Political ideologies, including conservatism, liberalism, socialism and feminism, have had to respond to the environmental challenge, giving rise to several new hybrid concepts, such as ecosocialism and ecofeminism. Where green parties have achieved electoral success, they have destabilised long-standing party alliances and voting patterns. The growing legitimacy and influence of environmental groups has frequently disrupted established policy networks

and challenged the influence of producer interests over the policy process. The sustainable development paradigm forces governments to rethink the way they make policy. Traditional Realist accounts of international relations struggle to account for the growth of co-operation and collective action to prevent environmental degradation. The book will show how the rise of environmental politics has therefore been responsible for a widespread re-examination of established assumptions, interpretations and beliefs about contemporary political ideas and behaviour.

Conversely, core political ideas inform our understanding of environmental politics. Concepts such as justice, democracy and equity are central to green political theory. For example, an analysis of the green commitment to participatory democracy can draw on a rich literature on democratic theory and practice. The political science literature on new politics and **postmaterialism** offers important insights about the development of the environmental movement. The study of environmental policymaking is incomplete without concepts and frameworks drawn from the public policy literature, such as agenda-setting theory or policy network analysis.

Postmaterialism: The theory that, as material affluence spreads, 'quality of life' issues and concerns tend to replace material ones, fundamentally changing the political culture and values of industrialised countries.

Some familiar political dichotomies also resurface. Is the state or the market more effective for achieving environmental policy outcomes? Are centralised or decentralised political structures better at dealing with environmental problems? Most importantly, in debating how to achieve a sustainable society, greens confront the familiar dilemma of reformism versus radicalism. Should environmental activists pursue an evolutionary reform of the capitalist system by getting elected to parliament, or should they seek nothing less than a radical transformation of the system? Should groups adopt conventional or unconventional forms of protest? Is collective action (through green parties and pressure groups) or individual action (by changing lifestyles and **green consumerism**) more effective? In returning to some of these themes in the concluding chapter, I argue that, as the environment has become an increasingly mainstream issue, so the centre of gravity in environmental politics has shifted from a *radical* rejection of contemporary society and a relatively *narrow* concern with ecological issues, to a *reformist* acceptance of capitalist liberal democracy accompanied by a *broader* **social justice** agenda.

Green consumerism: The use of environmental and ethical criteria in choosing whether or not to purchase a product or service.
Social justice: The principles that should govern the basic structure of a society, focusing on the distribution of rights, opportunities and resources among human beings.

Further reading and websites

Ponting (1992) is a very readable environmental history of the world. Grove (1995) offers a fascinating account of the early history of environmentalism

as part of colonial expansion. Wall (1994b) provides an interesting anthology of early green writings. For a history of the rise of environmentalism, see McCormick (1989). Good assessments of the state of the environment can be found in the annual publications by the World Resources Institute (http://www.wri.org/), the numerous United Nations Environment Programme reports (http://www.unep.org/), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessments (http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx) and, for Europe, the excellent European Environment Agency reports (see http://www.eea.eu.int). There are countless books outlining and seeking to explain the environmental crisis, including McMichael (1995), Pickering and Owen (1997) and Lester Brown's annual State of World reports (e.g. Worldwatch Institute 2006) for new developments.

NOTE

1 The ecological footprint is just one of many measures of the environmental impact of human activities. By comparing the ecological footprint of human activities with the biological capacity of the Earth, the footprint metric indicates whether our use of crop lands, forest lands, pasture lands, built space, fisheries and energy is sustainable. Whilst the methodology of measurement is open to criticism and is being continuously refined (Venetoulis and Talberth 2006), it does provide a useful heuristic device for assessing the sustainability of human use of natural resources. See Wackernagel and Rees (1996) and Chambers et al. (2000).