

Forums

Researching Global Environmental Politics in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This forum article highlights three major research trends we have observed in the journal *Global Environmental Politics* since 2000. First, research has increasingly focused on specific and formal mechanisms of global environmental governance, contributing to more elaborate and refined methodologies that span more scales and levels of analysis. Second, research increasingly has concentrated on the rise of market-based governance mechanisms and the influence of private actors, reflecting a broader shift among policymakers toward liberal approaches to governance. Third, over this time empirical research has shifted significantly toward analyzing issues through a lens of climate change, providing valuable insights into environmental change, but narrowing the journal's empirical focus. These trends, which overlap in complex ways, arise partly from shifts in real-world politics, partly from broader shifts in the overall field of global environmental politics (GEP), and partly from the advancing capacity of GEP theories and methodologies to investigate the full complexity of local to global governance. This maturing of GEP scholarship does present challenges for the field, however, including the ability of field-defining journals such as *Global Environmental Politics* to engage a diversity of critical scholarly voices and to influence policy and activism.

At the 1999 International Studies Association conference, Peter Dauvergne brought together Jennifer Clapp, Karen Litfin, Paul Wapner, and Marian Miller to brainstorm a proposal to the MIT Press for a new journal. The idea was to develop a well-regarded, peer-reviewed publishing outlet for scholars who were studying how power relations, institutions, norms, and governance interact with global environmental change. A key aim was to create an outlet for political analyses focused on environmental problems, to counter a tendency at the time for environmental issues to serve merely as case studies to illustrate broader trends and theories in the fields of political science and international relations (IR). For us, the environment deserved to be the central focus of scholarly work,

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with theories from a variety of disciplines helping explain the politics of environmental trends and outcomes. Several titles were tossed about, but we soon settled on what we saw as the emerging consensus for the name of both our field of inquiry and the journal: *Global Environmental Politics*. More difficult was deciding on the parameters for submissions. How, we asked, should we draw the interdisciplinary and geographic boundaries? What questions and approaches did we consider to be “global environmental politics”? What language for the contributor guidelines would best capture the diversity of research?

Eventually, we crafted the following as one of the sentences for contributors: “The journal gives particular attention to the implications of local-global interactions for environmental management, as well as the implications of environmental change for world politics.” By employing such broad language, we were hoping to encourage scholars in the GEP field to go beyond just studying the consequences of international regimes, multilateral organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and sovereignty—at the time the focus of the field’s most influential textbook, *Global Environmental Politics*, by Gareth Porter and Janet Welsh Brown (1996). We were also eager to reach across disciplines, and some of us worried that the word “politics” in the journal’s title might limit the diversity of contributors and readers. In particular, we wanted to reach beyond the typical interests and questions of political science and IR in North American universities and embrace the often broader parameters of political or international studies in other parts of the world. Thus, we ended the notes to contributors by emphasizing: “While articles must focus on contemporary political and policy issues, authors and readers will presumably have a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including political science, international relations, sociology, history, human geography, science and technology studies, environmental ethics, law, economics, and environmental science.”¹

Today, as in 1999, drawing hard lines around the disparate and ever-growing body of GEP research is impossible. Space limits, moreover, only allow us to outline the most important trends to shape the journal of *Global Environmental Politics* over the past fifteen years. Certainly, this journal does not mirror the entire GEP field, but at least to some extent, as arguably the field’s leading journal, we do think it reflects (and influences) broader field trends. We highlight three trends in particular, arising partly from shifts in the reality of global environmental management and partly from a maturing of GEP scholarship. First, scholars writing in the *GEP* journal have continued to analyze the workings of specific and formal international environmental governance schemes; however, these studies are increasingly placed within complex, multiscale, and multilevel global governance frames, where formal rules and social norms overlap and interact in nonlinear and unpredictable ways. Second, more and more *GEP* journal articles are focusing on market-based governance mechanisms, integrating analysis of international power relations with analyses of national and local political economies. And third,

1. The word “contemporary” no longer appears in the contributor guidelines.

as is true across the study of global environmental change more generally, the journal's articles are increasingly concentrating on climate change governance, narrowing the journal's empirical focus. Of course, not all *GEP* journal volumes have tracked these exact trends, but these stand out as increasingly defining the journal over the past fifteen years (and thus, to a considerable extent, the *GEP* field).

As these trends have unfolded, *GEP* scholarship has developed more elaborate methodologies, theories, explanations, and terminology, gaining both prominence and readers within academia. Crudely, we see this in Thomson Reuters Journal Citation Reports, which has ranked the *GEP* journal as high as 3/157 in political science and 10/93 in environmental studies (in 2012).² Yet, while these trends have helped advance academic debates and raise the profile of the field, they also present some challenges. The increasing complexity of theories and intricacy of modeling and statistical methodologies risk disconnecting contemporary scholarship from the earlier goals of problem-focused, policy-oriented, activism-linked research. Combined with the growing trend of studying market mechanisms, there is also a risk of overfocusing on refining the operation of these mechanisms rather than on debating whether they are an appropriate approach to addressing environmental problems. Finally, the overwhelming focus of empirical research on the problem of climate change risks a marginalization of other important environmental issues. Together, these trends risk excluding the diversity of voices and critical perspectives that were so important in the early development of the field. Moreover, as the specificity, complexity, and volume of *GEP* research rises, quite understandably, *GEP* scholars are clustering around ever-smaller academic debates, potentially alienating them from policy and activist communities (and at times, even from other academics). Going forward, one of the biggest challenges for the *GEP* field will be balancing what it deems to be "academic knowledge" with the understandable desire by *GEP* scholars to influence policy, activism, and discourses. Let's now turn to examine the more prominent trends in this academic knowledge, looking into the *GEP* journal as a small window into the *GEP* field.

Research Trends

Formal Global Environmental Governance Initiatives

Studying formal global environmental governance initiatives and institutions is a natural focus for the *GEP* field, given that it emerged from a desire to develop policy in the face of a mismatch between political borders and problems without jurisdictional boundaries. How to govern in ways that effectively address global-scale problems has been a defining question since the IR-*GEP* literature began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Biermann and Dingwerth 2004; Mitchell

2. In 2014, *GEP* was ranked 24 out of 161 political science journals and 32 out of 100 environmental studies journals. Year-to-year comparisons, however, are not particularly meaningful, as small statistical shifts in citation counts can cause large shifts in journal rankings.

2002; Paterson 2006; Young 1994; Zürn 1998). As was true in the 1990s, much of the literature since 2000 has also analyzed how domestic and regional political economies and national security interests shape the contours of specific global environmental governance initiatives (e.g., Balsiger and VanDeveer 2012; DeSombre 2000; Hovi et al. 2009; Selin 2012). It is continuing, as well, to weigh the importance of epistemic communities, domestic civil societies, and industry actors for the development of these formal governance initiatives (e.g., Betsill and Corell 2001; Clapp 2005; Meckling 2011; Paterson 2001; Wapner 2002). Yet GEP research is increasingly based on an assumption that a robust understanding of the causes and consequences of global environmental change—or the effectiveness of efforts to manage the global environment—requires a fuller analysis (at least than was common in most of the previous IR literature) of how nonstate actors and forces interact with state power (Andonova 2010; Biermann and Pattberg 2008; Boström and Hallström 2010; Clapp and Fuchs 2009; Falkner 2003).

The *GEP* journal reflects the ongoing focus on formal state-based environmental governance. Since its launch, almost half of all articles have dealt with regimes or international agreements as a primary thematic focus, with topics ranging from how to measure the effectiveness of regimes to why states chose to ratify or oppose specific treaties (and not others).³ Also in this broad category are articles focused on the functioning and effectiveness of environmental governance institutions, such as the World Bank or the Global Environment Facility, as well as articles with an international environmental legal focus. GEP research on formal, interstate governance initiatives shows little sign of losing steam.

At the same time, however, the internal dynamics of this research are shifting as GEP analysis develops more theoretical rigor and conceptual depth, as conceptual understanding advances, and as real-world governance evolves. Especially notable is the shift toward investigating governance (and the effectiveness of regimes and international organizations) within multilevel governance frameworks, where formal and informal rules intersect in volatile ways. Some of this literature has focused on documenting the sheer complexity and messiness of the still-emerging forms of global environmental governance, while also advancing our understanding of the consequences of the interactions of state, market, and social rules as governance moves from the local to the global, and back again (e.g., Andonova et al. 2009; Bäckstrand 2008; Okereke et al. 2009). This work further reveals the fragmentation of global governance across public and private institutions, as well as the contestation over the authority and legitimacy of emerging forms of transnational governance (e.g., Biermann et al. 2009; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and McGee 2013; Lövbrand et al. 2009). At least compared to political

3. To avoid exaggerating the diversity of questions, approaches, and topics, we scored each article for its *primary thematic focus*. This methodology helps to uncover general patterns, but no doubt also underestimates the diversity from secondary themes. Separately, we also scored each article for its *empirical issue coverage*. The first two trends we outline here relate to the primary thematic focus of the articles, and the third trend relates to the empirical issue coverage.

scientists, scholars of global environmental governance typically “underspecify” their research methodologies (O’Neill et al. 2013). Yet this too is changing as the field develops, with more and more scholars employing structured qualitative and quantitative methodologies, testing theories and hypotheses rather than relying on normative or interpretive arguments.

Market-Based Governance Mechanisms

A second, and related, trend in the GEP field is a growing focus on the rise and workings of market-based governance mechanisms and the role of private economic actors in global environmental arenas. Articles in the *GEP* journal, once again tracking real-world shifts in global environmental governance, are increasingly emphasizing the role of the market. The spread of neoliberal economic policies in recent decades has resulted in growing efforts to govern through economic incentives and markets rather than state authority, a normative shift Steven Bernstein (2002) refers to as “liberal environmentalism.” Governments often justify the shift toward market-based mechanisms on the grounds that they are more “efficient” than state-based command-and-control policies. The shift toward market-based governance also reflects a growing skepticism on the part of both policymakers and scholars of the ability of state actors on their own, or even in cooperation with one another, to address with any effectiveness the world’s most pressing environmental problems. Especially when environmental change is global in scale, the process of forming international agreements among states, let alone implementing those agreements through international institutions and state policies, has been painfully slow and disappointing.

GEP scholarship has embraced this private and market-based governance trend, as witnessed by the increasing number of studies focused on certification schemes, voluntary corporate initiatives, public-private partnerships, and transparency-based reporting schemes (Cashore et al. 2007; Dauvergne and Lister 2013; Falkner 2003; Falkner 2008; Gulbrandsen 2010; Gupta 2008). This work has examined in depth the participation in and design of private governance mechanisms, the diffusion of voluntary standards among market actors, and the use of market tools to encourage greater provision of environmental services, such as permit trading, certification, and pricing schemes. This shift has been noticeable in the pages of *GEP*, particularly in the past decade. Since 2001, nearly 30 percent of articles analyzed aspects of (or trends toward) market-based governance as a primary thematic focus, with output on this theme intensifying after 2008.

GEP scholarship on this theme has made significant advances in our understanding of the political dynamics of private and market-based environmental governance schemes. It has offered valuable insights on questions of the authority, legitimacy, and accountability of private actors in global environmental governance, and has highlighted the importance of involving multiple stakeholders,

including civil society, in these initiatives (e.g., Cashore 2002; Cashore et al. 2007; Green 2014). GEP scholars have taken a lead in exploring why private governance initiatives have taken the forms they have, and in addition have brought forward nuanced explanations for the uneven uptake of market-based governance measures in different sectors (e.g., Auld 2014). Work on this theme has also pondered the effectiveness of these efforts and has stressed the need to ensure that the measures are complements to, rather than replacements for, government regulations and enforcement (e.g., Biermann et al. 2012; Clapp 2005).

The Climate Change Shift

At the same time, the empirical focus of the GEP field has been shifting toward climate change. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the GEP field saw many studies of the problems defining those eras: air pollution, nuclear testing, whaling, the ivory trade, the seal hunt, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and ozone depletion. The shift toward climate change over the past fifteen years in part reflects a major increase in research funding from granting agencies and governments to study this problem, as well as growing understanding of the ways in which climate change influences and interacts with a host of other environmental issues—from biodiversity loss, to freshwater depletion, to pollution, to deforestation.

The articles in the *GEP* journal have reflected this trend. To some extent, as one would expect, just about every article from 2001 to 2015 addressed specific environmental problems. Only around 60 percent, however, provided a detailed analysis of one or two problems. In this subset, just over half of the articles dealt with climate change, while issues such as forests and biodiversity were each the focus of less than 10 percent of articles. Other topics accounting for 5 percent or less of articles included waste, ozone depletion, fisheries, chemicals/pesticides, mining, nuclear energy, and whaling. Meanwhile, there has been a distinct trend toward more articles published per year on the theme of climate change. An analysis of the articles in *GEP* over the past fifteen years suggests, too, a shift away from analyzing the politics of ozone depletion and air pollution, which, along with climate change, Michael Zürn (1998, 618) once called “three of the most carefully analyzed issues in contemporary international politics.”

This increasing focus on climate change has allowed many important insights. GEP scholars have carved out a particular niche in understanding the dynamics of transnational climate governance in its many forms. The global politics of carbon emissions and carbon trading has been a prominent research theme, and researchers have helped uncover the political dynamics and roles of various actors influencing the creation and functioning of these markets (e.g., Lövbrand et al. 2009; Meckling 2011; Newell and Bumpus 2012). GEP research on climate change has also advanced the understanding of multilevel governance—for instance, revealing the ways in which cities have taken a lead role in pursuing transnational climate cooperation (Andonova et al. 2009; Bulkeley et al. 2014). GEP climate research has also highlighted “issue linkage” between climate and other

environmental problems. Approaching climate and other environmental problems as interconnected has helped reveal the complexity of the environmental governance challenges we face. For example, in 2011 *GEP* published a special issue on the theme of “Climate Bandwagoning,” which showed how climate considerations have become entwined with an array of formal governance rules and agreements, from biodiversity to fisheries to desertification (Jinnah 2011).

Research Challenges Posed by These Trends

The three research trends outlined above have given GEP scholarship more prominence in academic settings, especially as this scholarship has matured in terms of theory and methodology. This research has helped the field make novel contributions to the design of governance mechanisms and has allowed the field to link directly to climate change research from other disciplines. At the same time, these advances have given rise to risks for leading journals such as *GEP*, as well as for the field more generally. We raise these points here as friendly critique, in the hopes that other scholars will take note of them and consider how we might collectively, as a field, steer research directions in ways that keep GEP scholarship innovative, relevant, and welcoming.

First, the trend toward a focus on the design and functioning of formal governance mechanisms, combined with greater methodological specificity in the field, risks distancing the GEP field from its intellectual roots, which put environmental issues at the center and theoretical and methodological concerns in a supporting role. As theory and methodology advance and take a more central role in GEP scholarship, there is a risk that environmental issues may again become mere case studies rather than the primary motivation for research. If the field fixes its gaze too closely on theoretical refinements of existing governance arrangements and the intricacies of institutional dynamics, scholars may miss important developments regarding new environmental issues that as yet are not subject to sophisticated governance frameworks. For example, difficult-to-address problems such as plastics in the oceans and meat consumption, both of which have global environmental significance, do not have comprehensive global agreements to address them. Not surprisingly, relatively few GEP scholars have focused on the politics of these issues.⁴

Second, the trend toward an analysis of market-based mechanisms, combined with a focus on their design, risks losing sight of broader debates about the merits of market-based tools as primary governance mechanisms. Further, as market-based initiatives have gained prominence, researchers have increasingly focused on those specific initiatives in particular sectors where the initiatives have emerged, deflecting researchers’ attention away from how broader power dynamics affect environmental outcomes. It is through these other dynamics, such as inequitable and changing consumption patterns and volatile financial

4. Our own research interests offer some exceptions: see Clapp and Swanston 2009; Dauvergne 2008.

and commodity markets, that some of the greatest environmental consequences are arising (Clapp and Helleiner 2012; Dauvergne 2008). Whether these trends within the global political economy can be tamed with voluntary market-based governance mechanisms is a critical question that in our view deserves more attention in the wider field of GEP, as well as in the *GEP* journal.

The GEP field's growing focus on climate change also risks crowding out analysis of other important environmental issues. "Environment" is increasingly being equated to "climate change," not only in the mind of the public, but also within academia. Viewing the environment through a climate lens can obscure the causes and grave consequences of many other environmental problems. Although issue linkage is an important consideration, the way we study environmental issues and the lens through which we choose to examine them directly affects how we understand and address those problems. For example, there are multiple reasons to be concerned about forests and deforestation beyond climate impacts—such as biodiversity loss, livelihoods, and ecosystem services—that a climate or carbon-focused analysis may not fully reveal or appreciate (e.g., Hulme 2011; Moolna 2012).

Beyond the specific challenges noted above, together the three trends we have identified present additional challenges for the GEP field. One of those challenges relates to the diversity of scholarship, particularly in terms of theoretical orientation, which in turn influences the empirical focus of research. This is illustrated by examining the flipside of the trends we have noted—that is, what approaches and topics have received relatively little attention from GEP researchers, at least in the *GEP* journal. Considering that *GEP* is one of the key journal outlets for the field, it is surprising to us how few of its articles take a critical political economy approach, especially given the original aims of the journal. For us, topics like capitalism, consumption, trade, finance, and poverty seem like naturals in any effort to understand environmental change; issues like inequality, injustice, and imperialism seem equally, if not more, critical.

How the discourse on these topics is shaped and presented to society will be crucial to examine if we wish to get at how and why global environmental problems and their governance unfold in the world. Certainly, many books have covered these topics, as have many articles in journals such as *Antipode*, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, *Environmental Politics*, *New Political Economy*, *Political Geography*, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, and *Third World Quarterly*. Yet it is revealing to see that these themes have comprised a relatively small portion of the published research in the *GEP* journal over the past fifteen years. Articles focused on inequality and development issues, for example, made up less than 10 percent of the total articles over the years. Articles focused on consumption and ecological critiques of economic growth made up an even smaller percentage, at less than 5 percent.⁵ This finding is intriguing, particularly since the authors

5. We do not mean to downplay the importance of those articles that have focused on these issues. While we cannot list them all, some valuable contributions from the journal are Dauvergne 2010; Maniates 2001; Newell 2005; Okereke 2008; Princen 2001; and Williams 2005.

contributing to the journal have represented a growing diversity of disciplines. A report to the Editorial Board of *GEP* prepared by Mat Paterson and Jennifer Clapp (2013) at the end of their tenure as editors of the journal noted that the proportion of authors from the discipline of political science (including IR) had declined from just over 60 percent in 2003 to just under 40 percent in 2011. Over that same period, contributions from scholars based in environmental studies increased from approximately 16 to 30 percent, and contributions from geographers increased from approximately 3 to 9 percent (Paterson and Clapp 2013).

A second, broader challenge relates to diversity of authorship in terms of their geographic locations. Again, a look at the articles in the *GEP* journal is telling. At the 2007 meeting of the *GEP* Board, a member from Europe called the journal “North American”—partly, we presume, because the publisher is in Cambridge, Massachusetts (even though until 2013 the editorial office ran out of Sydney, Australia), but also partly, as the member explained, because of the content and contributors. While the journal has strived to encourage a wide range of geographic diversity in terms of authorship (as well as in the members of the editorial board), the overwhelming majority of the journal’s published articles over the past fifteen years have come from scholars based in North America and Europe.

Conclusion

This article is in no way a comprehensive review of the GEP field. Nor is it meant to be a criticism of the *GEP* journal as a research outlet. Our aim is to draw attention to some of the most significant trends as the journal has matured, and to ponder the implications of those trends for the field as a whole. The development of greater theoretical intricacy and methodological specificity is only normal in a relatively new research field like GEP, as the large questions that initially opened up the field are explored through detailed studies. This trend indicates advancement for the field in many ways. The focus on market-based governance mechanisms, as well as the focus on climate change, has been shaped to a large extent by shifts in real-world politics and governance trends, as well as by new funding opportunities for scholars that have become available as states and other actors have wished to know more about these issues and approaches to governing. Looking back over the years since the *GEP* journal was launched, one can easily see how these research trends began to emerge and take shape. But at the same time, it is valuable for the research community to be reminded of the *original* aims and purpose of this journal, and indeed the emergence of the field. We encourage ourselves and our colleagues to remember to infuse GEP scholarship with those original ideals of accessibility, policy relevance, interdisciplinarity, intellectual diversity, problem-focused research, and action-oriented analysis. Keeping these ideals central to our scholarship—even if they are at times

messy, broad, and bold—can help prevent the field from becoming too narrow, rigid, and timid in the questions it asks and the solutions it seeks.

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