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1
General Introduction

Michele M. Betsill, Kathryn Hochstetler, and Dimitris Stevis

The study of global environmental politics has grown in both quantity and quality over the last 40 years, and international relations (IR) scholars have been increasingly more involved, particularly since the late 1980s. The goal of this book is to provide a state-of-the-art review of how IR scholars approach the study of global environmental politics, a field we refer to as ‘international environmental politics’ (IEP). The term politics in the phrase ‘international environmental politics’ signals that we are interested in the ways humans organize themselves to relate to their physical environments. Our chapter authors adopt a broad range of more specific understandings of both of these terms. To say that we are focusing on global environmental politics means we are concentrating on environmental issues whose causes or consequences cross national boundaries. From a sub-discipline that attracted mostly American scholars, IR scholarship on IEP has now spread throughout much of the world, although rather unevenly.

Over the years, a number of important volumes, often in multiple editions, have tracked the practice of global environmental politics (Brenton, 1994; McCormick, 1995; Caldwell and Weiland, 1996; Guha, 2000; Chasek et al., 2013). While these volumes also provide important insights into IEP, their primary focus is on the practice of global environmental politics itself. Several other volumes have offered a combination of chapters that examine aspects of IEP, along with particular sectors of the international environment (Hurrell and Kingsbury, 1992; Choucri, 1993; Vogler and Imber, 1996; Laferrière and Stoett, 1999; Chasek, 2000; Elliott, 2004; O’Neill, 2009; Mitchell, 2010; Axelrod et al., 2005), and a number of handbooks offer extensive overviews of the field (Dauvergne, 2011; Falkner, 2013). There have also been a few
chapter- and article-length attempts at synthesizing the field of IEP as a whole (Stevis et al., 1989; Jancar, 1991/1992; Alker and Haas, 1993; Jacobsen, 1996, 1999; Mitchell, 2001; Stevis, 2010). Our book complements these efforts with its systematic attempt to identify the field's central research areas and to provide authoritative accounts of the major concepts, research agendas, and debates involved in their study.

Accordingly, this book examines the major theoretical approaches and substantive debates in IEP as reflected in a sample of graduate syllabi and texts. We have asked a number of scholars with active research agendas in these areas to provide an account of the past study of that issue area as well as of the major questions and debates that characterize it presently. We have also asked them to apply their insights to a case study of their choice in order to illuminate the theoretical issues that they have addressed as well as to demonstrate how these insights can be employed to better understand specific questions.

As a result the book is intended to introduce graduate and advanced undergraduate students to IEP, particularly those with some previous exposure to IR. It can also serve as a complement to the types of volumes mentioned above in more introductory courses. IR scholars who embark on the study of IEP will also find this book helpful both as a review of the relevant literature and as a guide to how research is being done. Academics from various disciplines, including those who are interested in learning more about IR scholarship on IEP, either for teaching or in order to initiate a new research project, will find that this book offers authoritative, accessible, and sophisticated accounts of this area of research.

The contributors to this book were chosen with an eye towards representing the increasing globalization and diversity of IR research on IEP. While we collectively provide an authoritative account of English-language literature, most of the contributors are also familiar with literature published in various other languages and have sought to integrate it where relevant. As a result, this book will appeal to the above-mentioned audiences throughout the English-speaking world as well as to anyone who uses English for their research or writing.

The book's chapters discuss a number of themes that are crucial to understanding the theory, method, and substantive content of the field of IEP. Our organizing framework stresses the international politics roots of this field, as the chapters are focused on broad and enduring areas of study in IR more generally. As Stevis' chapter (Chapter 2) on the history of IEP shows, such disciplinary frameworks have been important influences on how the field defines its questions and seeks its answers.
Specific substantive environmental issues such as biodiversity or water are studied quite differently, depending on whether they are framed as, for example, elements of the international political economy or instances of non-state governance.

The chapters are organized into three major parts. The chapters in Part I – The Context of International Environmental Politics – place the later chapters in a theoretical and historical context. They review the historical development of IEP as well as the theoretical and methodological approaches used by IR scholars in its study. All three of these chapters stress the diverse perspectives and tools that have been developed over several decades. This is a field with few orthodoxies and many debates, not unlike the field of IR as a whole (Reus-Smit and Snidal, 2009; Viotti and Kauppi, 2012; Dunne et al., 2013; Burchill and Linklater, 2013). The chapters in Part II – Major Research Areas – introduce a variety of actors, institutions, and structures that have influenced global environmental politics. Each chapter provides an overview of how a particular topic has risen to prominence, discusses the major theoretical views of that topic, and identifies lines of future research. In addition, each chapter includes original arguments and evidence in a case study to help illustrate some of the theoretical concepts and debates raised in the chapter. A similar framework is used in Part III – Frameworks for Evaluating Global Environmental Politics. The chapters in this final part discuss four key frameworks or standards that have been proposed for evaluating the quality and outcomes of global environmental politics: sustainability, effectiveness, justice, and transparency.

The chapters also address several cross-cutting themes that we believe are central to IEP and the practice of global environmental politics, regardless of issue area, theoretical perspective, or methodological approach. The North–South dimension is one such prominent theme, emerging in nearly every chapter. The interface between local and higher levels of politics is also central in many of the chapters, providing links to the comparative environmental politics field within political science (Steinberg and VanDeveer, 2012). In the conclusion, we discuss how the relatively straightforward treatment of domestic–international linkages in concepts such as ‘two-level games’ has evolved into discussions of complex interactions across scales captured in ideas like ‘multi-level governance’. Such discussions also challenge the state-centrism of many IR theories by tracking the emergence of other types of actors and new forms of governance in IEP, giving rise to debates about the role of the state.
Each of the contributors is an accomplished scholar in her or his own right, and all authors have been encouraged to summarize existing research as well as to stake out their own positions. Most of the authors explicitly position themselves within particular perspectives, illustrating the multi-vocal nature of the field. While individual chapters may reflect some perspectives more heavily than others, across the book as a whole we have attempted to achieve balance, providing readers with a picture of the rich diversity of approaches used by IR scholars in IEP.

With one exception Parts II and III include original chapters with specific cases. The cases are meant to illuminate the theoretical debates and concepts identified in each of the chapters and to provide readers with examples of empirical research conducted by scholars across IEP. The case studies cover a variety of issues, including climate change, biodiversity, sustainable development goals, the green economy, trade in hazardous waste, transboundary resource management, and the establishment of a World Environment Organization. The goal of the case studies is to show how the authors engage some of the theoretical issues they discuss rather than to prove or support a specific argument, as would be the case in a research chapter. The various authors employ a range of methods and approach their subject matter from a diversity of theoretical perspectives. As a result, the case studies reinforce the book's central aim – to introduce readers to the major approaches and debates that characterize IEP.

The book begins with a presentation of the historical trajectory of IR scholarship on global environmental politics. In his chapter, Dimitris Stevis draws on an extensive review of IEP publications, research organizations, and programs, as well as interviews with several senior IEP scholars, to outline the trajectory of IEP since World War II (WWII). He divides the field’s history into four distinct periods and traces the genealogy of worldviews on IEP and of the research topics examined in the remainder of the book. He concludes that IR scholarship on global environmental politics has broadened and deepened in terms of both what is being studied and how it is being studied.

Matthew Paterson’s chapter (Chapter 3) introduces the major theoretical approaches used in IEP. He organizes the chapter according to what he sees as six fundamental starting points for inquiry that guide most analyses. In the process, he examines an array of IR theories, including realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, pluralism, Marxism, feminism, and dependency theory, as well as perspectives developed specifically to understand environmental politics, including ecoauthoritarianism and Green political theory. This chapter stresses
the importance of recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of different theories for addressing particular types of IEP research questions.

In their chapter on methods (Chapter 4), Kathryn Hochstetler and Melinda Laituri note that IR scholars have devoted little attention to the methods they use in IEP. Their aim is thus to outline a number of different approaches, discuss how they are used, and identify their potential pitfalls. The chapter is oriented around two major categories of methods: positivist (including qualitative, quantitative, rational choice, and geospatial approaches) and critical (including qualitative and structural approaches). Given the diversity of the field, they conclude that methodological pluralism is desirable but encourage scholars to pay more attention to their methodological choices in order to avoid unnecessary and unintended weaknesses in their studies.

Leading off the second part of the book, Jennifer Clapp orients her chapter (Chapter 5) on international political economy and the environment around three competing evaluations of the relationship: that growth in the global economy is positive for the environment, that the environment is harmed by growth in the global economy, and the third view that either outcome is possible and depends on the presence or absence of global rules that support the possible positive outcomes. These three positions reappear in her discussions of the more specific impacts of global trade, finance, and investment flows on the environment and their governance. All of these flows occur in Clapp’s case study of the international transfer of hazardous wastes from rich to poor countries.

Nicole Detraz’s chapter (Chapter 6) explores the links between gender and the environment in IEP, noting that people often experience environmental problems differently because of socially constructed ideas about the appropriate roles and responsibilities of men and women. She applies a gender lens to a number of central issues in IEP, including sustainability/sustainable development, population and consumption, environmental justice, and environmental security, and argues that this perspective challenges some of the traditional assumptions of IEP scholars and raises new questions that have been overlooked by the research community. The case of biodiversity protection in South America provides an interesting space to explore real-world examples of the interplay between gender, environmental degradation, and policymaking.

In the next chapter, Eva Lövbrand (Chapter 7) reviews scholarship on the role of knowledge in IEP. Environmental policy debates, whether on local or global scales, are often permeated by claims to particular
types of knowledge and expertise, perceptions of environmental risk and scientific uncertainty. However, the role attributed to science and other forms of knowledge in global environmental affairs differs according to theoretical tradition. This chapter contrasts how rationalist and constructivist IR theories portray the interaction between knowledge and power and the subsequent effect on global environmental politics. The chapter also reviews the contemporary critique of the privileged status of scientific knowledge in the governance of the environment and examines normative calls for more legitimate forms of knowledge and expertise in environmental affairs. The contrasting perspectives are exemplified through a brief case study of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

The chapter on transnational actors in IEP (Chapter 8), by Michele Betsill, begins by highlighting the contribution of IEP scholars to broader debates about the role of non-state actors in IR. Betsill then presents findings on how transnational actors engage in the practice of global environmental politics, in terms of both their involvement in traditional multilateral processes dominated by states and the emergence of a distinct transnational political sphere. She also discusses some of the methodological challenges encountered by IEP scholars in assessing the impact of transnational actors. A brief case study of the Cities for Climate Protection program, a transnational network of municipal governments involved in the governance of climate change, illustrates these points and concepts.

Larry Swatuk’s chapter (Chapter 9) links IEP to one of the central concerns of mainstream IR scholarship – security. Following a discussion of how environmental concerns have reshaped understandings of security in IR, Swatuk distinguishes between two types of environmental security scholars: those concerned primarily with problem-solving, particularly within a society of self-regarding states, and those taking a more critical and holistic approach to issues of security. He further elaborates the critical perspective in his case study of transboundary natural resource management practices in Southern Africa.

Frank Biermann addresses the question of global environmental governance (Chapter 10). He starts by clarifying the main uses of the term and suggests a more empirical approach that distinguishes global governance from IR at large. He then proceeds to discuss various aspects of global environmental governance, particularly participation by categories of actors other than states, the emergence of private governance, and the segmentation of global environmental governance. Drawing upon these insights, he elaborates on how Southern participation can
be enhanced and advances a proposal to turn the United Nations Environment Programme into a World Environment Organization, a move that would address segmentation as well as participation.

In the first chapter on frameworks for evaluating global environmental politics in Part III (Chapter 11), Oran Young provides a state-of-the-art review of current knowledge about the effectiveness of international environmental regimes. The chapter begins with a discussion of conceptual and definitional issues before identifying a number of key findings about the determinants of institutional effectiveness. The chapter then introduces several cutting-edge themes or areas for future research and reviews some of the methodological tools available for tackling these themes, along with recommendations on which strategies are likely to produce policy-relevant results. Young is cautiously optimistic that IEP scholars can make valuable contributions to efforts to strengthen existing regimes or to create new ones.

The next chapter by Sander Happaerts and Hans Bruyninckx (Chapter 12) examines the emergence of sustainable development as a central discourse in global environmental politics and its study. In the first part, they trace the emergence of the concept from the early 1970s to the Brundtland Report (1987), the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992), and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002). They then examine various debates about the meaning of the concept in policy and academic debates, which are further illustrated by an account of research on the institutionalization of sustainable development at various levels, from the global to the local. The chapter concludes by examining the downturn of the sustainable development discourse as reflected in recent debates at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

Chukwumerije Okereke and Mark Charlesworth trace the evolution of key debates on justice in IEP (Chapter 13). They consider social ecology, deep ecology, empty-belly environmentalism, and intergenerational justice as aspects of distributive justice and highlight procedural justice as a growing component of IEP scholarship. A brief case study of climate change illustrates how these concepts and perspectives inform the practice of global environmental politics. Although practical actions are yet to catch up with rhetoric, they argue that questions of ethics and justice can no longer be regarded as external or marginal concerns in global environmental governance.

The chapter on transparency in IEP by Aarti Gupta and Michael Mason (Chapter 14) examines the changing procedural quality of
global environmental governance. Specifically, they focus on increasing expectations for openness in decision-making and disclosure of information as an antidote to various deficiencies in global environmental governance arrangements. The chapter analyzes the promises and pathologies of institutionalizing transparency in diverse areas of global environmental governance, showing how the pathologies go beyond failings of institutional design to reflect the contested nature of global environmental governance. In their case study, Gupta and Mason advance an analytical framework for comparative assessment of transparency in global environmental politics which is applied to a diverse set of initiatives that rely on environmental governance through disclosure.

In the final chapter (Chapter 15), the editors briefly reflect on the status of IR scholarship on global environmental politics as a whole based on the individual chapters in the book. We conclude that the field of IEP has become broader and deeper over time in terms of research agendas, substantive concerns, theoretical approaches, and the geographical and disciplinary origins of researchers. Consistent with this finding, we note that the field lacks a single normative core. We then make several observations related to the three cross-cutting themes – North–South relations, domestic–international linkages, and the role of the state. Looking ahead, we speculate on the future trajectory of substantive, methodological, and theoretical debates in IEP. Finally, we discuss the role of IR in IEP and consider how IEP scholars might create bridges to a number of other disciplines.

Notes

1. We have decided to label the object of study ‘global environmental politics’ and its study ‘international environmental politics’.
2. We fully recognize that other scholars might make different choices about the theoretical approaches and substantive debates to include in such a book. Some readers may find gaps in the issues presented and/or prefer that a topic addressed within one or more chapters be treated separately. We acknowledge these potential critiques and can only say that the organization of the book reflects conscious decisions based on our own experiences teaching and researching in the field of IEP, constraints dictated by the publisher, and/or the usual challenges of coordinating an edited book.
3. Despite our best efforts, the book does not include contributions from Southern scholars to the extent we would have liked.
4. The exception is Oran Young’s chapter, which is a revised version of an article that appeared in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences and contains many rich empirical examples throughout the text.
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10 General Introduction


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