Philanthropic Foundations as Agents of Environmental Governance: A Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Philanthropic foundations play an increasingly prominent role in the environmental arena, yet have received scant attention from environmental governance scholars. This article advances a social science research agenda on foundations as *agents* of environmental governance based on a thematic review and synthesis of the limited body of research in this area. We identify current understandings, debates, and research gaps related to three overarching themes: 1) the roles foundations perform in environmental governance, 2) the outcomes of environmental philanthropy, and 3) the sources of foundation legitimacy in environmental governance. We call for more systematic and empirical research on the roles, outcomes, and legitimacy of foundations as agents of environmental governance using diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. This research agenda contributes to contemporary debates on the appropriate role of foundations in democratic societies, and provides practical insights to assist practitioners, stakeholders and donors in achieving effective, equitable, and enduring environmental governance.

Key words: environmental governance; philanthropic foundations; agency

Word count: 8,901

INTRODUCTION

Philanthropic foundations play an increasingly prominent role in the environmental arena as funders of projects, organizations, policy initiatives, and research activities across a range of environmental issue areas. US foundations gave $676 million to environmental organizations in 2000, a 470% increase from 1990 (Jenkins et al. 2017). Foundation funding for global marine conservation first surpassed funding from official development assistance in 2015 (California Environmental Associates 2017). Foundations provided an estimated $1 billion in climate funding in 2018 (ClimateWorks Foundation 2018), with Jeff Bezos recently pledging $10 billion through the Bezos Earth Fund (BBC 2020). In light of similar development in other issue areas, social scientists have called for increased scholarly research on foundations' influence on public policy and governance and the the societal implications of philanthropic giving (Goss 2016, Jung and Harrow 2015, Reich 2016, Rogers 2015, Skocpol 2016).

Our goal is to advance a social science research agenda on philanthropic foundations in environmental governance systems, which include the institutions, structures, and processes through which decisions are made about the environment (Bennett and Satterfield 2018; Lemos and Agrawal 2006). We view foundations as *agents* of environmental governance, where an agent is an authoritative actor with the resources and capacity to influence and steer environmental governance systems in particular directions (Betsill et al. 2020; Dellas et al. 2011). Questions of agency have received significant attention in environmental governance scholarship, and an extensive body of literature documents how diverse agents engage with environmental governance, including national and sub-national governments, businesses, civil society organizations, and scientists (Armitage et al. 2012, Evans 2012, Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Newell et al. 2012, Young 2016). Compared to these other actors, foundations have received limited attention and remain poorly understood. We have identified just 23 academic publications on philanthropic foundations in environmental governance. Existing scholarship has focused heavily on US-based foundations involved in terrestrial conservation at the local level in North America. Given the growing prominence of foundations in the environmental sector, research should be expanded to look at a broader range of foundations across environmental issues and geographies from the global to the local level.

This article outlines a scholarly research agenda on foundations as agents of environmental governance through a thematic review and synthesis of the limited body of research on philanthropy in environmental governance (hereafter referred to as the "environmental philanthropy" literature). We begin by defining philanthropic foundations and explaining how foundations may be conceptualized as agents of environmental governance. The following sections review environmental philanthropy scholarship through the the lens of three core themes within the broader literature on agency in environmental governance: 1) the roles foundations perform in environmental governance, 2) the outcomes of environmental philanthropy, and 3) the sources of foundation legitimacy in environmental governance. For each theme, we present current understandings and debates and identify research gaps, drawing on related literatures in environmental governance and philanthropic studies where relevant. Our review highlights limitations in current knowledge and scopes theoretical and applied questions for environmental philanthropy research. This contribution comes at a pivotal moment when foundations are facing calls for reform and engaging in self-reflection (LaMarche 2020). In advancing the research agenda presented here, environmental governance scholars can contribute

to these important contemporary debates and the pursuit of effective, equitable, and enduring responses to environmental problems.

CONCEPTUALIZING PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS

The term "philanthropy" comes from the Greek concept "love of humanity" and refers to voluntary contributions of time, talent, or treasure to the public good (Daly 2012, Holmes 2012, Jones 2012, Ramutsindela et al. 2013, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). The environmental philanthropy literature focuses primarily on foundations as the organizational form through which private wealth is funneled towards public environmental goals. Largely a US invention, foundations are non-profit grant-making organizations that typically are governed by a board responsible for identifying broad priorities with a professional staff that implements the board's agenda (Jenkins et al. 2017, Jung and Harrow 2015, Tedesco 2015). Foundations differ in terms of funding sources: 1) corporate foundations derive their resources from private companies, 2) private/independent foundations are associated with individual or family wealth, 3) community foundations pool resources from donors in a particular geographic region, and 4) public charities accept donations from members of the public (Jung et al. 2018). Private/independent foundations (e.g. the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation) have received the most attention from environmental philanthropy scholars. Foundations also differ in ideology (conservative, liberal, and progressive) as well as grant-making styles, with implications for how foundations engage in environmental governance (Brulle 2014, Delfin and Tang 2006, Faber and McCarthy 2005, Morena 2016).

Foundations are associated with a shift from government to governance in the environmental arena, whereby non-state actors are assuming increasing influence and decision-making power over environmental actions and outcomes (Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Ramutsindela et al. 2013). Foundation giving for environmental issues has increased in recent years, often associated with decreases in state spending, with considerable variation across issues and geographies (EFC European Environmental Funders Group 2018, Environmental Grantmakers Association 2015, Foundation Center and Council on Foundations 2018). Some see foundations as filling a void when governments retreat from or ignore environmental issues (Delfin and Tang 2006, Fortwangler 2007, Yandle et al. 2016), while others hypothesize that foundation funding facilitates state withdrawal from environmental regulation (Holmes 2012, Jones 2012, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). More detailed empirical research comparing foundation funding to government spending is needed to investigate these claims.

Environmental governance scholars often situate agents in the state, market or civil society (Lemos and Agrawal 2006). However, foundations do not fit neatly into these spheres, making it difficult to disentangle the public from the private in the study of environmental philanthropy (Ramutsindela et al. 2013), and perhaps contributing to the obscurity of foundations within the environmental governance literature. Historically, philanthropic activity was associated with civil society, but foundations also are connected to the market as direct channels for corporate profit or as mechanisms for the transfer of excess wealth generated through capitalism. Tedesco (2015, 14) argues that foundations "are embedded in both the state and the market, as their capacity is determined by their legal status and the fluctuating values of their invested assets." Foundations often work closely with governments on environmental issues

through public-private partnerships or co-management arrangements (Delfin and Tang 2006, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). Given these diverse relationships, it may be more appropriate to focus on foundations as hybrid actors that link these sectors (Spierenburg and Wels 2010).

Two distinct theoretical perspectives shape how environmental philanthropy scholars conceptualize foundations as governance agents (Daly 2012, Delfin and Tang 2008, Tedesco 2015). The literature is dominated by a critical perspective that analyzes foundations through the lens of global capitalism. From this perspective, foundations are seen as instruments of elite economic interests that perpetuate neoliberal capitalist ideologies. The concept of "philanthrocapitalism" captures this link between philanthropy and capitalism as well as the assumption among many foundations that business practices and market instruments are the most efficient means of solving public issues (Holmes 2012, Jones 2012, Rogers 2015, Tedesco 2015). Critical scholars draw on Gramscian and Foucauldian notions of power to highlight foundation funding as a form of social control that enables elites to shape organizational identities, capabilities, and priorities, thereby enrolling new actors in support of capitalism and silencing dissent.

A second, but less prominent, theoretical perspective is pluralist in orientation and highlights potential synergies between foundation and grantee interests. Such approaches call attention to the multi-dimensional context of philanthropy and contend that foundations differ in intent and motivation based on idiosyncratic features of their organizational culture as well as connections to issues beyond capitalism, such as religion, class formation, the state, and civic engagement (Delfin and Tang 2007, 2008, Ramutsindela et al. 2013). According to Daly (2012, 543-544), pluralists view foundations as "a source and leader of innovation, champion of a range of social problems and issues, supporter of multiple perspectives on how these problems should be addressed, and engaged in complementing the government by acting on 'unpopular' or difficult areas, often over the long term." Pluralists also acknowledge that foundations depend on grantees to carry out their agendas thereby giving grantees a level of agency often overlooked by critical scholars (Delfin and Tang 2008, Morena 2016).

GOVERNANCE ROLES

Environmental governance scholars focus on how diverse actors gain and enact authority in addressing environmental issues. They have identified many distinct roles involved in environmental governance, including formal and informal regulation, knowledge generation, goal-setting, monitoring and reporting, and financing (Betsill and Milkoreit 2020, Scobie et al. 2020). Different agents may be better positioned to perform particular governance roles depending on their specific resources (Nasiritousi et al. 2016, Westley et al. 2013). Environmental philanthropy scholarship primarily has focused on two roles. Studies of foundations as *funders* typically emphasize the significant financial assets controlled by foundations, while scholars who analyze foundations as *field-builders* consider how foundations deploy non-material or social resources alongside financial resources. As noted below, foundations perform or contribute to other governance roles through their funding and field-building efforts.

Funders

Grant-making is seen as the primary mechanism through which foundations exercise agency in environmental governance. As Brulle (2014, 688) observes, "Private foundations gain their influence through their financial power and constitute a system of power and influence." Scholars frequently use foundation funding flows as a measure of engagement in the environmental arena, focusing on grants for specific activities (Bakker et al. 2010), geographies (Delfin and Tang 2007), or issues (Brulle 2014, Nisbet 2018). Scholars rarely consider how foundations invest their non-grant assets to generate financial returns through, for example, impact investing (an exception is Mallin et al. 2019).

Environmental philanthropy scholars seek to identify broad patterns, trends, and implications related to the types of organizations and activities that are funded. In the US, foundations are an increasingly significant funding source for conservation science in light of declining federal support, thereby contributing to the role of knowledge production (Bakker et al. 2010, Zavaleta et al. 2008). Foundations are major funders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs; also referred to as social movement organizations or SMOs) working in the environmental arena as well as networks and policy initiatives (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, 2008, Jenkins et al. 2017, Morena 2016, Tedesco 2015). Scholars also view foundations as funders of social movements, including the US environmental movement (Brulle and Jenkins 2005), the environmental justice movement (Faber and McCarthy 2005), and the climate change counter-movement (Brulle 2014).

Funding places foundations in a position to influence the agendas, activities, and issues supported by organizations working in the environmental arena. The specific mechanisms of influence are shaped by how foundations approach their funding activities. Both critical and pluralist environmental philanthropy scholars note a growing tendency towards "strategic" philanthropy that is consistent with philanthrocapitalism and involves bringing business practices and efficiency goals to funding activities (Barker 2008, Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, Morena 2016, Nisbet 2018, Tedesco 2015). Strategic philanthropy is project-oriented with an emphasis on specific and measurable goals that can be documented with clear metrics and reporting standards. An alternative "emergent" approach allows for general organizational support, flexible multi-year funding, and evaluation criteria that acknowledge the capacity of grant recipients (Faber and McCarthy 2005). Proponents of emergent philanthropy argue that the strategic approach over-emphasizes the need to demonstrate a concrete return on investment, which may direct resources towards initiatives with easily measurable outcomes (Gienapp et al. 2017, Rogers 2015).

Environmental philanthropy scholars contend that foundations use strategic funding to "channel" or steer environmental governance (Barker 2008, Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Faber and McCarthy 2005, Holmes 2012). Foundations are assumed to make calculated choices about which organizations and activities to fund ("selectivity"), choices that may be informed by a grantee's technical ability to develop and implement fundable projects and comply with foundation reporting standards ("professionalization"). Critical scholars argue that this leads foundations to direct resources to well-established NGOs with existing expertise to implement market-based environmental solutions and results in foundations co-opting NGO agendas and leadership to advance a capitalist agenda (Barker 2008, Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Faber and McCarthy 2005, Holmes 2012, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). In the process, channeling acts as

gatekeeping, resulting in exclusion and marginalization of grassroots organizations more likely to promote radical or structural change. In contrast, pluralists see channeling in more instrumental terms and assume foundations make decisions based on whether a grantee is in a position to advance foundation goals. They note that grantees have not found selectivity as "particularly harmful to them," and that foundations may provide capacity-building grants to ensure an organization has the technical skills to effectively implement projects and solve complex problems (Delfin and Tang 2006, 14; see also Delfin and Tang 2008, Faber and McCarthy 2005).

In light of these debates about strategic philanthropy and channeling, it is important to better understand why foundations choose to use this approach as well as the material and perceived benefits it may provide compared to the alternatives. With the exception of Zavaleta et al. (2008), there has been very little research on foundations' internal operations in environmental philanthropy scholarship. There is a need to open up the "black box" of foundations to understand the relative role of staff (e.g. program officers) compared to board members or trustees as well as the importance of organizational culture and other factors that may shape priority-setting and funding decisions (Jung and Harrow 2015).

Research on internal operations also may help clarify how foundations differ from other types of funders, such as governments and multilateral development banks. Philanthropic studies scholars note that foundations have unique levels of autonomy and independence—or "hyper-agency"—in deciding how funding is allocated (Jung and Harrow 2015), which may allow for innovation along with greater flexibility, adaptiveness, responsiveness, and/or tolerance for risk (Mulgan et al. 2007, Quinn et al. 2014, Reich et al. 2016). However, Holmes (2012) argues that strategic philanthropy may incentivize less risky investments. Autonomy also may give foundations greater flexibility to end funding relationships unexpectedly, with potentially significant impacts on the organizations and initiatives they support. Shifts in funding, or "exits," are common in the philanthropic sector, but have received little attention in academic research (Kibbe 2017). Empirical studies of internal decision-making processes could add nuance to these discussions.

More generally, we call for more systematic analysis of how power operates through foundation funding with greater attention to foundation-grantee relations in environmental governance. Critical scholars emphasize power imbalances where grantees are heavily dependent on foundation funding, which may enable foundations to directly pressure grantees to address environmental issues in particular ways. Moreover, power may operate more indirectly by pressuring non-grantees to alter their practices to attract foundation funds. Grantees often are seen as passive recipients of financial resources, especially from a critical perspective. Pluralists appear more likely to recognize that grantees may exercise some degree of agency in shaping foundation priorities (Tedesco 2015). Delfin and Tang's (2006, 425) study found that none of the grantee interviewees "reported any overt form of control" from their foundation funder. A subsequent study of grantee perspectives highlights foundations' dependence on grantees to achieve their goals (Delfin and Tang 2008). Future research should consider how this mutual dependency operates in practice and shapes foundation funding decisions.

Field-builders

Studies of foundations as field-builders highlight a governance role that goes beyond grant-making (Bartley 2007, Faber and McCarthy 2005, Ramutsindela et al. 2013, Tedesco 2015). According to Bartley (2000, 233) "building an organizational field means creating an arena that brings a number of different actors (often with different interests, ideologies, and organizational forms) into routine contact with one another, in pursuit of an at least partially shared project" (see also DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Field-building calls attention to both the material and non-material or social resources that foundations can deploy, and the need to consider the portfolio of foundation grants and activities in a particular arena. Foundation field-building has been studied in the context of forest certification (Bartley 2007), the UN climate negotiations (Morena 2016, 2020), the climate change counter-movement (Brulle 2014), and the environmental justice movement (Faber and McCarthy 2005).

Field-building highlights the potential for foundations to influence the broader context in which environmental governance takes places and introduces relational and cultural channeling mechanisms that go beyond selectivity and professionalization (Bartley 2007). In terms of relationships, field-building involves bringing together diverse stakeholders to address common problems. Foundations play this convening role by facilitating partnerships and networks and/or sponsoring conferences and policy platforms that enable such interactions (Bartley 2007, Delfin and Tang 2006, Morena 2016). In addition to providing funding, foundations also may use their professional contacts and reputation to encourage stakeholders to work collectively. From a cultural perspective, field-building involves the creation of shared meanings and discourses that broadly shape understandings of what goals should be pursued and how environmental governance should be carried out (Bartley 2007, Morena 2016, 2020). Environmental philanthropy scholarship suggests that foundations promote and legitimate understandings of environmental problems that privilege market-based solutions (Bartley 2007, Brulle 2014, Delfin and Tang 2006, Holmes 2012, Jones 2012, Tedesco 2015). These shared understandings are circulated through financial flows as well as more general practices, such as articulating foundation priorities and establishing standards by which to measure project success (Morena 2016, 2020). Foundations can use this discursive power to create and maintain an organizational field.

Foundations may coordinate their field-building efforts in a particular environmental governance arena by harmozining their grant-making efforts and taking one another's activities into account (Barker 2008, Bartley 2007, Faber and McCarthy 2005, Morena 2020). Foundations may create new venues for collaboration and pooling shared resources (Nisbet 2018). In the case of building the environmental justice movement, progressive foundations collectively hosted briefings to educate other foundations and coordinated messaging around the need to promote NGO autonomy and diversity (Faber and McCarthy 2005). These collaborative activities may provide additional leverage for foundations to legitimate particular norms and practices and elevate distinct discourses within an organizational field.

Overall, there is a need for more empirical research on the grant and non-grant resources deployed by foundations and the diverse governance roles involved in building environmental governance fields. Research on the internal operations of foundations could explore whether field-building is an intentional part of their work and, if so, the specific strategies they pursue.

We suggest greater attention to power dynamics between foundations and stakeholders as new actors are enrolled in an issue area (Bartley 2007). Where foundations have collectively agreed on a set of goals and priorities, potential grantees may face pressure to develop and implement projects consistent with foundation interests (Morena 2016). At the same time, networks and platforms created by foundations may create opportunities for grantees and other stakeholders to shape field-building goals and strategies (Bartley 2007). Researchers should consider how foundations and grantees navigate foundation exits and identify measures that can be taken to minimize impacts on field-building efforts (Kibbe 2017).

There also is a need to understand foundations in the context of complex environmental governance systems, and their relative importance in particular issue arenas (Chan and Mitchell 2020). How and to what end do foundations directly or indirectly engage governments and the private sector or environmental policy processes at various scales? To what extent are stakeholder communities involved in defining and implementing philanthropic agendas? Environmental governance scholars could turn to theoretical frameworks such as polycentricity (Andersson et al. 2008, Carlisle and Gruby 2017), multi-level or multi-scalar governance (Armitage 2007, Bulkeley 2005), and governance complexes (Bernstein and Cashore 2012, Biermann et al. 2009) to answer these kinds of questions.

Finally, we call for more conceptual and empirical research to systematically account for the diversity of governance roles performed by foundations as funders and field-builders, and beyond (e.g. knowledge generation, rule-making and regulation, or innovation). It could be useful to identify which roles are prioritized by individual organizations and/or at the field level (e.g. is there more attention to knowledge generation or is the focus on monitoring?) to help foundations take stock and strategically reflect on the diverse roles they may play. Such an account also could help environmental governance scholars better identify where and how they should "look" for the presence of foundations in their research projects, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of foundation engagement in environmental governance.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Evaluating the effects of agency in environmental governance is complicated by the fact that "influence flows from networks and relations as much as from single actors" and that "agent influence often reflects cumulative policy interventions and innovations" (Chan and Mitchell 2020, 170). Environmental governance occurs in highly complex institutional contexts, creating difficulties in identifying cause-effect relationships between individual agents and observable outcomes. What should be evaluated: single activities vs. cumulative effects within a particular geography, direct effects vs. catalytic impacts, intended vs. unintended effects (Bernstein and Cashore 2012, Bernstein and Hoffmann 2018, Stern et al. 2012)? Environmental governance scholars tend to focus on how agents influence governance processes, with less attention to other social and ecological outcomes (Chan and Mitchell 2020), a pattern that is replicated in the environmental philanthropy literature.

Governance processes

Environmental philanthropy scholars assume (often implicitly) that foundation influence on governance processes may lead to particular on-the-ground and place-based social and

ecological impacts. Scholarship primarily analyzes foundation influence on organizational autonomy (Barker 2008, Bartley 2007, Delfin and Tang 2006, Faber and McCarthy 2005), organizational fields (Bartley 2007, Brulle 2014, Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Faber and McCarthy 2005), and the neoliberalization of environmental governance (Brulle 2014, Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Delfin and Tang 2007, Jenkins et al. 2017). We review this work, in turn, noting that research approaches and findings often differ depending on the study's theoretical orientation.

Critical scholars tend to argue that foundation influence constrains organizational autonomy, while pluralists are more likely to acknowledge both enabling and constraining effects (Ramutsindela et al. 2013). Findings also vary depending on whether the focus is on individual projects or funders, broad patterns in funding flows across organizations, or cumulative effects of foundation activity within an issue area or geography. Delfin and Tang (2008) found that grantees held a benign view of foundation effects on their autonomy and recognized that funders must make strategic choices on how best to achieve their goals (see also Delfin and Tang 2006). However, critical scholars would argue that these findings are consistent with co-option where NGO leaders become enrolled in and supportive of a hegemonic agenda advanced by foundations (Barker 2008, Bartley 2007). Faber and McCarthy (2005) found that an emergent approach to funding (e.g. multi-year grants, general program support, less burdensome reporting standards) enhanced organizational autonomy and limited co-option (see also Delfin and Tang 2008). Scholars should theorize more explicitly about the observable implications of foundation influence on organizational autonomy in light of these mixed results. Closer and more systematic examination of donor-grantee relations also could contribute to understanding the factors that lead to different outcomes.

Foundation field-building efforts have been evaluated by examining changes in the number and diversity of organizations participating in the field (Bartley 2007, Brulle and Jenkins 2005), changes in funding priorities and practices of other foundations (Faber and McCarthy 2005), partnerships and alliances between organizations (Bartley 2007), and shifts in NGOs goals, rhetoric, and strategies over time (Bartley 2007, Holmes 2012, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). Scholars often use case studies to tease out the mechanisms through which foundations influence field development (Bartley 2007, Faber and McCarthy 2005). Brulle (2014, 690) used social network analysis to evaluate foundation influence, arguing that "the more ties to different organizations a foundation has, the more power the foundation exerts in directing the overall activities of the network." Some studies use interpretive approaches to analyse the discursive influence of foundations in building organizational fields (Holmes 2012, Spierenburg and Wels 2010).

Evaluating the link between foundations and the neoliberalization of environmental governance has received considerable attention (Holmes 2012, Jones 2012) and is of growing importance in light of increasing awareness of social justice within the philanthropy field more generally (Goss 2016, Rogers 2015). Critical scholars argue that foundations maintain global capitalism by funding organizations and activities that uphold the status quo, but large-n empirical studies of funding patterns have produced mixed results. Several critical studies find that foundation funding tends to concentrate on a few well-established NGOs engaged in projects rather than protest (Brulle 2014, Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Jenkins et al. 2017). In contrast, Delfin and Tang's (2007) study of California-based NGOs from a more pluralist perspective did not find a privileging of large, mainstream organizations or a preference for project-based grants

over other activities. Faber and McCarthy's (2005) study of progressive foundation support for the environmental justice movement challenges the assumption that all foundations are tied to maintaining the capitalist structure. Several in-depth case studies support the neoliberalization thesis, but they all start from a critical perspective (Barker 2008, Jones 2012, Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Tedesco 2015). Additional case studies could empirically interrogate these causal claims and identify the mechanisms through which neoliberalization operates (or not).

Future research should examine foundation influence on environmental governance processes beyond organizational autonomy, organizational fields, and neoliberalization. Many important questions have not received attention, such as: To what extent do foundations create enabling conditions that empower communities to self-govern? Under what conditions does foundation support and attention crowd out or mobilize related government initiatives? Do foundations spark innovation in environmental governance approaches? Scholars should assess how foundations shape relationships among grantees as well as between grantees and governments. In exploring how foundations operate within complex governance systems, environmental governance scholars could consider whether foundations can be thought of as "keystone" actors with a disproportionate role and ability to influence environmental governance systems (Österblom et al. 2015). Relatedly, research could explore how governance systems are affected by foundation exits. Do shifts in funding lead to a reorganization with new actors, strategies, priorities and discourses emerging? Environmental philanthropy scholars also should consider foundation influence on other social change processes, such as diversification of economic activities and resource use patterns that may shape social and ecological impacts experienced by people and ecosystems on the ground (Gruby et al. 2017).

Social and ecological impacts

Few academic studies have evaluated the material and perceived on-the-ground impacts of foundation-supported projects and programs. Instead, monitoring and evaluation often is conducted internally by foundations or by hired consultants, raising a number of potential concerns as highlighted by philanthropic studies scholars. The relationship between donors and grantees can encourage "heroic illusion," preventing total honesty, and all parties may be reluctant to admit that a project did not succeed (Leat 2006). Petrovich (2011) warns of "obsessive measurement disorder" whereby foundations put too much emphasis on funding initiatives with discrete, easily measurable outcomes. This raises questions about whether assessments accurately reflect broader impacts and how to evaluate goals that change over time (Beadnell et al. 2017, Gienapp et al. 2017). Foundation assessments may focus on measures of social and ecological impacts without adequately linking foundation practices to those impacts. Moreover, foundation evaluations are typically for internal use and are not made public, which would otherwise allow for meta-analysis and generalizable findings. Foundations rarely conduct long-term post-project assessment so there is limited knowledge about the effects of exits and long-term durability of impacts (Zivetz et al. 2017). Academics are in a position to address many of these issues.

The few studies on social and ecological impacts of environmental philanthropy suggest a mix of impacts. Larson et al. (2016) found a mis-match between areas of high diversity in need of attention as identified by scientists and where foundation resources are directed. Some studies have documented displacement and marginalization of local populations tied to foundation-supported environmental initiatives (Fortwangler 2007, Jones 2012). Delfin and Tang's (2006)

study of a foundation-supported land conservation project in California identified several impacts, including preservation of 300,000 acres, mobilization of additional funding, increased profile of land conservation, and stakeholder collaboration. Additional documented impacts of foundations include "the creation of city parks and gardens, the establishment of national parks and nature reserves, the protection of wetlands, support for community conservation, and so on" (Ramutsindela et al. 2013, 4).

Future research should explore foundation influence on a broad range of social and ecological outcomes, working with communities that are directly or indirectly impacted by foundation activities. Scholars should consider the factors that explain those outcomes and embrace causal complexity to understand the role of foundations in combination with other relevant factors, such as local context and grantee characteristics. For example, do outcomes vary depending on whether funding flows through large international NGOs compared to grassroots organizations or whether stakeholders and local communities are involved in developing and implementing projects and programs? What is the difference between strategic and emergent philanthropy in terms of social and ecological outcomes? Comparative case studies and research using synthetic approaches such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) could allow for identification of general patterns linking foundations and outcomes (Benney et al. 2020, Chan and Mitchell 2020). Scholars should consider both intended and unintended consequences as well as material and perceived outcomes in the short- and long-term.

Existing environmental governance studies could provide insights on foundation influence on governance processes as well as social and ecological outcomes even though they are not explicitly presented as such. There is a large body of existing research on the outcomes of foundation-supported environmental governance initiatives, including some of our own work in marine conservation (CITATIONS DELETED FOR PEER REVIEW) and climate change (CITATIONS DELETED FOR PEER REVIEW). Here we see an opportunity to conduct a meta-analysis of existing research for insights on foundation influence on environmental governance processes and social and ecological outcomes.

SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY

Today, institutional philanthropy faces a "reckoning" linked to broader societal debates about inequality and institutions of power (Giridharadas 2018, Kolbert 2018, LaMarche 2020, Minhaj 2019). We see this as an issue of legitimacy, where legitimacy refers to the justification and acceptance of the right to exercise power (Bernstein 2011, Lebel et al. 2017). According to Heydemann and Toepler (2006, 4),

> For foundations, the challenge of legitimacy is pervasive and enduring. It exists in every setting in which private assets receive privileged treatment by governments in exchange for an obligation—often very loosely defined—to use those assets for public good.

For foundations, legitimacy is critical to their social license to operate in different geographies and issue areas, and their ability to gain support from stakeholders in achieving desired social and ecological outcomes (Seibert 2017). Non-state actors such as foundations must secure and maintain their legitimacy by shaping the perceptions of those over or with whom they seek to govern (Bäckstrand 2006, Bernstein 2011, Bernstein and Cashore 2007, Cashore 2002).

Environmental governance scholars have identified several potential sources of legitimacy, frequently differentiating between "input" legitimacy, which refers to the perceived quality of the governance process, and "output" legitimacy, which rests on perceived effectiveness in achieving results and solving problems (Bernstein 2011, Lebel et al. 2017). Legitimacy may also depend on perceptions related to justice and fairness (Bennett et al. 2019, Lebel et al. 2017).

Questions of legitimacy generally have not been addressed directly by environmental philanthropy scholars. We find limited empirical analysis of how foundation legitimacy is perceived by a range of stakeholders, whether and how foundations recognize and respond to legitimacy challenges, the relative importance of different sources of legitimacy in securing acceptance of foundation authority, or how legitimacy is shaped by the changing social contexts and broader societal attitudes towards philanthropy. Rather, scholars offer general conceptual critiques that provide insights on the legitimacy challenges facing foundations as agents of environmental governance. These critiques, reviewed below, focus heavily on issues of input legitimacy, such as transparency, accountability, participation and deliberation, and alignment with local context, as well as questions of justice.

Transparency refers to the availability of information about decision-making processes and/or outcomes and is seen as central to legitimate environmental governance (Gupta 2010, Mason 2008). The lack of transparency about internal decision-making processes leads to perceptions that foundation priorities and funding choices may reflect private rather than public interests (Holmes 2012). Scholars also highlight a lack of transparency around the source(s) of foundation wealth, noting that foundations are not required to publicly divulge the details of where their endowments come from or how they are invested (Brulle 2014, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). "Donor-driven" foundations allow individuals to make anonymous donations for specific purposes, as in the case of the climate change counter-movement (Brulle 2014). There are additional transparency concerns related to tracking foundation funding flows, especially when foundations partner with government, mixing public and private funds (Delfin and Tang 2006).

Lack of transparency makes it difficult to hold foundations accountable, where accountability requires the justification and acceptance of responsibility as well as the possibility of redress if those responsibilities are not fulfilled (Kramarz and Park 2017, Lockwood et al. 2010). Scholars highlight a lack formal accountability mechanisms in environmental philanthropy. While foundation staff are accountable to their boards, boards have limited substantive accountability and are largely insulated from public opinion and political considerations that serve to hold other types of actors accountable (Reich 2016, Tedesco 2015). Additionally, Jenkins et al. (2017, 1655) argue that foundation funding may alter accountability dynamics within the organizations they fund, shifting control "away from active members and toward financial patrons, which reduces the independence of the movement organization." Collaboration and partnerships could serve as informal accountability mechanisms between foundations and stakeholders (Delfin and Tang 2006). Faber and McCarthy (2005) documented how foundation-supported shareholder activism initiatives enabled local communities to hold corporations accountable for environmental damage.

Scholars question the apparent lack of stakeholder participation and the concentration of power in determining public goals and how they should be pursued through foundations funding

(Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Homes 2012, Rogers 2015). Foundations may strengthen the role of civil society and provide opportunities for public participation in environmental governance by funding NGOs (Delfin and Tang 2008, Tedesco 2015), but such funding may crowd out particular (often more radical) voices, strategies and solutions through channeling (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Fortwangler 2007, Tedesco 2015). Scholars also raise concerns about organizational autonomy and contend that NGOs dependent on foundation funding may feel constrained in voicing positions that contradict foundations' preferred approaches thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives considered (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Morena 2016). These effects could be minimized through meaningful partnerships and collaboration (Delfin and Tang 2006) or a participatory approach to philanthropy (Pitkin 2020).

Environmental philanthropy scholarship suggests that legitimacy may be jeopardized when foundation interests do not align with the local context. This was the case when Conservación Patagónica (a foundation set up by the former CEO of Patagonia) used the puma as a visible symbol of threatened ecosystems in the Peruvian Amazon, ignoring the fact that local communities view the puma as a pest (Jones 2012). In addition to jeopardizing the effectiveness of foundation supported interventions in terms of stakeholder support and outcomes, such mis-alignment raises broader justice concerns when it results in exclusionary forms of conservation that alienate and displace marginalized communities (Fortwangler 2007, Spierenburg and Wels 2010).

Environmental philanthropy scholars also raise distributional justice questions related to foundation funding patterns (Faber and McCarthy 2005), but they are even more concerned with justice issues linked to the relationship between foundations and global capitalism. Critical scholars argue that in redistributing excess wealth generated by capitalism, reportedly for the public good, foundations serve to reinforce and legitimate capitalism as a positive force for society (Holmes 2012, Morena 2016, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). In addition, scholars call for greater reflection on the fact that foundations address environmental problems that were created by the economic exploitation of nature through capitalism (Holmes 2012, Jones 2012). In other words, legitimacy is challenged by perceptions that foundations are embedded in and support an inherently unjust global economic structure.

The extant literature is virtually silent on questions of output legitimacy, with little consideration of whether foundation authority is legitimated by the perceived ability to deliver effective and efficient solutions to environmental problems. This omission is interesting in light of the trend towards strategic philanthropy. To the extent that grantees and other stakeholders are concerned primarily about input legitimacy and justice, foundations may undermine their ability to secure and maintain their legitimacy by focusing too heavily on measurable outcomes (Faber and McCarthy 2005). However, the lack of attention to output legitimacy in the environmental philanthropy literature simply may reflect the dominance of a critical theoretical perspective and lack of scholarship on the social and ecological impacts of foundation-supported projects and programs.

Future research on foundation legitimacy in environmental governance should begin by documenting grantee and stakeholder perceptions of what constitutes foundation legitimacy. Studies should then seek to measure the extent to which foundations meet these legitimacy standards in practice. The field needs to explore how the legitimacy of foundations is viewed in

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light of changing social context and broader attitudes towards philanthropy. Scholars should identify the formal and informal processes and activities associated with different sources of legitimacy and evaluate stakeholder perceptions on their relative importance. Research could explore the extent to which foundations recognize and attempt to respond to legitimacy challenges. Applied research can draw on this groundwork to identify and assess different strategies and tools that foundations could use to secure and maintain legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The involvement of philanthropic foundations in environmental governance is too important to ignore. With this review, we seek to mobilize a diverse social science research community on environmental philanthropy. The extant literature has begun to make foundations visible and has raised important questions, but much remains to be done to better inform comtemporary scholarly debates and philanthropic practice. The existing environmental philanthropy literature consists of a relatively small number of studies dominated by conceptual work and critical theoretical perspectives. An overarching priority for the environmental philanthropy research agenda is empirical research employing more diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.

Future research should focus on how foundations engage with environmental governance processes, and with what effects. There is a need to look at a wider selection of foundations operating beyond North America and across a range of environmental issues from the global to the local level. Broad understanding of foundations as agents of environmental governance requires deeper knowledge of how foundations operate internally and manage their financial and non-monetary resources. Further, researchers should broaden understanding of foundations' diverse governance roles beyond funders and field-builders, and develop more sophisticated understandings of how foundations operate in the context of complex governance systems. We also call for more systematic empirical evaluation of how foundations influence social and ecological outcomes from the global to the local level and across geographies and issues areas, with a focus on short- and long-term effects and the factors that lead to those effects. Finally, there is a pressing need for empirical research on questions of legitimacy to inform current conversations about how foundations approach their work and how grantees and other stakeholders engage with foundations.

Overall, this new research agenda will bring greater nuance, complexity, data, and evidence to discussions of foundations as agents of environmental governance. This area of scholarship will contribute to interdisciplinary literatures in philanthropic studies and environmental governance, and can contribute to contemporary debates on the role of foundations in democratic societies. Most importantly, additional research on foundations' governance roles, effects on outcomes, and legitimacy will provide practical insights that can assist practitioners, stakeholders and donors in achieving environmental governance that is effective, equitable, and enduring.

FUNDING DETAILS

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