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Understanding Policy Change in Developing Countries: The Spheres of Influence Framework

Paul F. Steinberg*

National policy reform is a prerequisite for improved stewardship of the global environment. National policies and institutions are frequently the target of both international diplomacy and nongovernmental advocacy, and have been identified in the literature as important determinants of the success or failure of international and local environmental institutions.¹ Yet research on global environmental politics has proceeded absent clearly specified models of policy change in developing countries, where most of the planet's people, land, and biological diversity are found. In this article I present a theoretical framework—the spheres of influence framework—to explain the domestic responses of developing countries to global environmental concerns. Based on an analysis of policy-making to protect biological diversity in Costa Rica and Bolivia over the past four decades, this article examines the micro-mechanisms through which transnational environmental relations impact domestic policy and institutions in the South and considers the implications for the study and practice of global environmental politics.

Why Things Sometimes Go Right

Institutional failure in developing countries has been the subject of a rich literature in the environmental social sciences, highlighting the role of class conflict and soured state-society relations,² corruption,³ financial crises,⁴ trade shocks,⁵

* The spheres of influence framework and associated historical analyses are described in detail in Steinberg 2001. I wish to thank the editors of *Global Environmental Politics* for allowing an exception to the usual word limit for a *Current Debates* manuscript, which facilitated a more thorough exposition of the book's central argument. This research was supported by grants from the MacArthur Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the U.C. Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, the Hewlett Foundation, the Switzer Environmental Foundation, and the Organization of American States.

1. Ostrom 1990, 101, 143–181; Blaikie 1985; and Haas, Keohane, and Levy 1993.
2. Peluso 1992; and Gadgil and Guha 1995.
3. Rose-Ackerman 1999.
4. Dauvergne 2001.
5. Ross 2001.

political survival strategies employed by domestic leaders,⁶ and the insatiable appetites of multinational timber companies.⁷ In practice, however, there is considerable variation in environmental policy outcomes in the South, with many successes to report alongside the failures.⁸ Yet little attention has been devoted to understanding the social origins of successful initiatives, and in particular the process of policy change—creating new policies and programs where none existed before, improving the performance of regulatory agencies and national park systems, and reforming traditional bureaucracies to take account of new ecological and social concerns.

To better understand the process of environmental policy change in developing countries I undertook a year of field research in Costa Rica and Bolivia, both of which have undergone profound transformations in recent decades from societies with little interest or accomplishments in conservation to their current status as recognized leaders in biodiversity policy.⁹ Interviews were conducted with several dozen of the most important policy reformers and other participants in environmental politics in these countries over the past few decades. These included agency officials, presidential advisers, legislators, social activists, scientists, indigenous leaders, journalists, environmental attorneys and others who together provided a wealth of information on the politics of institutional reform. This was combined with archival research in governmental and private collections, and with a team of twelve research assistants I conducted a quantitative content analysis of over 3,000 environmental news stories appearing in these countries' major daily newspapers from 1960 to 1995. In the absence of longitudinal public opinion data, this is the most complete data set available for tracing changes over time in the level and type of attention accorded environmental issues in any developing country. The goal of this research is to derive theoretical insights from an in-depth examination of a small number of countries and to present the findings with the use of generalizable analytic categories, so that the geographic scope and explanatory power of the resulting framework can be readily tested by researchers familiar with other parts of the developing world.

Biodiversity Policy in Latin America

Costa Rica and Bolivia are among the world's most biologically rich nations, possessing diverse assemblages of species in ecosystems ranging from Chaco savannas to evergreen rainforests. Although the two countries differ markedly in their social composition and political histories, each has amassed a significant record of institutional accomplishments for biodiversity conservation, often

6. Ascher 1999; and Gibson 1999.

7. Dauvergne 1997.

8. For a sample of recent successes beyond those discussed in this article, see World Bank 2000.

9. Costa Rica and Bolivia conform to Young's (1991) conception of leaders insofar as they not only sign and comply with international environmental treaties but generally exceed their re-

employing highly innovative approaches subsequently emulated by other countries. This was not always the case. As recently as the early 1970s, environmental protection was almost unheard of in Costa Rica. The handful of Costa Rican environmentalists active during this period faced “nearly total indifference to the problem of environmental degradation” on the part of government authorities and civil society, according to early participants.¹⁰ Today, the country benefits from an entrepreneurial environment ministry, high-level bipartisan political support for conservation, and one of the best protected areas systems in the world.¹¹ Costa Rica has been a pioneer in the development of biodiversity prospecting and ecotourism and routinely positions itself at the forefront of new policy approaches such as debt-for-nature swaps, domestic charges for ecosystem services, and Clean Development Mechanism projects under the climate convention.¹²

Similarly, Bolivia moved from a position of little interest in environmental protection throughout the 1970s to become host to the world’s first debt-for-nature swap and the world’s largest forest-based climate mitigation project. Bolivia established a national environmental endowment that has served as a model for other developing countries, led the international campaign to ban trade in mahogany, and created a biodiversity conservation agency that collaborates with civic environmental groups and indigenous organizations to manage a rapidly expanding national park system. In both countries these accomplishments have been accompanied by high levels of popular support for environmental causes. By 1997, there were roughly 245 domestic environmental groups active in Costa Rica—a per-capita number surpassing that of California, known for its tradition of green activism.¹³ As is the case in wealthy countries with strong biodiversity policies, the successes are not unqualified and substantial challenges remain.¹⁴ But the overall pattern of accomplishments is remarkable given the extraordinary challenges of institution building in the developing world.

How have these changes come about? And given the intense global interest in tropical conservation, what have been the relative roles of foreign and domestic actors and resources in the process of policy change? The history of biodiversity policy reforms in these countries is analyzed in detail elsewhere.¹⁵ To motivate the present discussion, let us briefly consider the historical evolution of one site—Bolivia’s Noel Kempff Mercado National Park—which illus-

quirements, have a strong record of domestic policy accomplishments, and experience substantial domestic political pressure for environmental protection.

10. Boza 1993, 240.

11. See Wallace 1992.

12. Gámez et al. 1993; Jakobeit 1996, 135–141, 149–153; and Figueres 2002.

13. According to Press (1998), there are approximately 650 non-governmental environmental groups in California, which has a population of 34 million. Costa Rica has approximately 245 organizations and a population of 3.5 million. The Costa Rican figure is from FECON (1994) and data collected in 1997 at the Costa Rican Public Registry, Department of Associations.

14. See Boza et al. 1995.

15. Steinberg 2001.

trates in condensed form the political dynamics driving successful policy reforms. The reader's attention is directed in particular to the nature of the domestic and international resources deployed, which will be described more systematically in the remainder of the article.

Dynamics of Change

Beginning in the late 1960s, long before tropical rainforests entered the lexicon of environmental activism in industrialized countries, Noel Kempff Mercado, founder of the Municipal Zoo in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, led a one-man campaign to create a national park system in Bolivia. To accomplish this Kempff drew on an extensive social network that included colleagues, friends, and family members in the legislature, in mayors' offices of Amazonian townships, and in the administration of General Hugo Bánzer, where Kempff's brother sent letters suggesting strategies for influencing military officials with authority over land use decisions.¹⁶ Kempff blended these domestic political assets with the resources of conservation allies abroad, maintaining regular correspondence in French, Spanish, and Portuguese with colleagues in South America, Western Europe, and the United States who offered technical support and sent address lists of Northern environmental groups.¹⁷ Kempff's international outreach efforts culminated in 1971 when he hosted a hemispheric conference on Amazonian conservation, attended by a number of foreign experts whom he used to focus the attention of military leaders on the plight of the Amazon and the need for protected areas.¹⁸

Kempff's efforts and those of a handful of agricultural experts working separately in La Paz resulted in legal backing for a number of protected areas including Huanchaca National Park, located in a sparsely-populated region in the east. Although initially the parks lacked adequate financial and administrative support, this changed with the founding of the Ecology Institute in La Paz, which after a series of closures amid the coups and counter coups of 1978 to 1982, was established at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés. With strong connections to American and European universities, the Ecology Institute spawned a generation of foreign-trained Bolivian ecologists who launched a renewed movement for national parks. They created non-governmental organizations that lobbied for policy reforms and that served as conduits for foreign funds from Northern publics increasingly interested in tropical conservation.

In 1986, just as the Bolivian environmental movement was growing in size and scope, Kempff and his research team were assassinated by Brazilian

16. Kempff, Rolando, letter to Noel Kempff, 14 June 1972, Kempff family papers, Santa Cruz de la Sierra.

17. Jean-Paul Harroy, letter to Noel Kempff, 13 February 1968; Harold Edgard Strang, letter to Noel Kempff, 10 October 1967; and Noel Kempf, letter to Paulo Nogueira-Neto, 8 July 1968.

18. Anon., *Con Expectativa y Exito Realízanse Jornadas de Fauna y Flora Amazónica*, *Nueva Epoca*, 16 October 1971; Anon., *Protección de la Flora y de la Fauna*, *El Deber*, 24 October 1971.

drug runners while conducting species surveys in Huanchaca. His death provoked mass marches in Eastern Bolivia by a public leery of government complicity in the drug trade. Conservationists parlayed the tragedy into opportunity, convincing the powerful Santa Cruz Civic Committee to devote several hundred thousand dollars to the expansion of Huanchaca, renamed Noel Kempff Mercado National Park. That same year, President Paz Estenssoro declared a near-total ban on trade in Bolivian wildlife, to halt a voracious illegal trade that had been taking a toll in the park and elsewhere in the country. The ban was precipitated by a decision of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to impose trade sanctions on Bolivia, and was catalyzed by the domestic lobbying efforts of a group of influential Bolivian conservationists including Armando Cardozo, who had led a successful South American effort to ban trade in the Andean vicuña in the late 1960s—prior to the passage of CITES and over the objections of European zoos.

Foreign financial support increased by an order of magnitude in the early 1990s when the Global Environment Facility provided several million dollars for a national park system planned with technical support from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Domestically, Bolivian environmentalists assumed leadership positions in the national park agency and wrested control of the protected areas from the famously corrupt Center for Forestry Development. Concerned about mismanagement of funds for Noel Kempff Park, the new environmental officials prevailed in removing the park's politically influential director by enlisting the support of a prominent senator related to an Ecology Institute graduate. The strength of the national parks movement grew further when the father of environmentalist Alexandra Sánchez de Lozada was elected president of Bolivia in 1993, and appointed her to head the new National Biodiversity Conservation Directorate. Taking advantage of the opportunity opened by an emboldened national movement for indigenous territorial rights, she crafted innovative agreements ceding management authority to indigenous groups in several national parks. In Noel Kempff Park, with logistical support from The Nature Conservancy and scientific backing from the Missouri Botanical Garden, she convinced the president to approve a \$7 million deal with American Electric Power in 1997, expanding the park as part of the world's largest forest-based climate mitigation project.

Spheres of Influence in Global Environmental Politics

The political dynamic observed in Noel Kempff Park follows a pattern that has been repeated across four decades of policy reforms in Costa Rica and Bolivia. As I discuss later in the article, there is good reason to expect that similar dynamics underlie successful policy reform efforts throughout the developing world. The resulting explanatory framework is based on two observations. First, there has been an enormous foreign influence on domestic environmental politics and institutions, far surpassing that revealed by research assessing the iso-

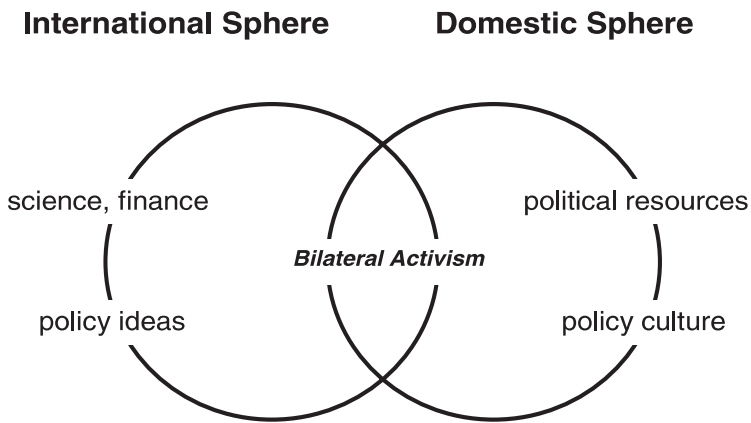
lated causal impact of one or another international institution.¹⁹ The leading environmental groups receive most of their funding from abroad, and foreign funds often comprise 50 percent or more of the budget for government conservation agencies. The research ecologists and wildlife officials also maintain close ties with foreign scientific institutions and draw heavily on foreign technical resources and expertise. The second observation, however, is that when one traces the political requirements for institutional change—outmaneuvering intransigent bureaucrats, taking advantage of rare windows of opportunity, forging alliances with diverse civil society organizations—the foreign influence is all but absent. Moreover, the political skill sets needed to win these struggles require a long-term, in-country presence that very few foreign advocates or international organizations possess.

In a context of global concern and national sovereignty, the resources brought to bear on environmental policy in developing countries are of two types: those closely associated with a given domestic political system, and those whose essential productive dynamic resides beyond that society's borders. Accordingly, we may think of two spheres of influence affecting environmental policy in developing countries: an international sphere and a domestic sphere (Figure 1). Those with access to the resources of the international sphere affect national policy by deploying financial and scientific resources, while those with access to the resources of the domestic sphere impact national policy with their extensive political resources. These political resources include expansive social networks, an intricate knowledge of institutional relationships and tacit rules of political engagement, and a decades-long presence needed to take advantage of sporadic opportunities for agenda setting and to ensure long-term program success.

The resources of the international and domestic spheres of influence may be further sub-divided into institutional and ideational resources. The scientific, financial, and political assets described above are institutional resources, insofar as their deployment has been necessary for the creation and effective operation of institutions such as national parks, regulatory agencies, and environmental laws. But policy change is also driven by changes in ideas about the social goals to be served by these institutions. The international sphere has long served as a rich source of policy ideas, as participants in domestic debates look beyond their borders for normative, evaluative, and prescriptive ideas pertinent to governance. Especially for policy-makers in developing countries, where policy-relevant information is in chronically short supply,²⁰ in the course of agenda setting and institutional design those with broad exposure to international policy ideas are in great demand. These international ideas interact in specific ways with the established political discourses and cultural orientations of the nation into which they are introduced. This interaction is mediated by actors operating

19. See, for example, Keohane and Levy 1996.

20. See Grindle and Thomas 1991.

Figure 1 The Spheres of Influence Framework

within that nation's borders—in the domestic sphere—who can press the case at home and refine international ideas to enhance their domestic relevance and salability. These actors can improve the prospects for effective environmental institutions by fostering an environmental *policy culture*—a concept I use to describe an enduring public expectation for government action in a particular issue area.

Importantly, the actors spearheading environmental policy reform efforts in Costa Rica and Bolivia have always been individuals who operate simultaneously in both spheres of influence—who are conversant in international ideas, and have ready access to international scientific and financial networks, but are at the same time deeply engaged in the domestic policy processes of their home country. I describe these individuals as *bilateral activists* to emphasize the dual nature of their influence. The term *activist* is used in its broadest sense to denote reformers within government as well as civil society actors pressing for policy change; this broad usage is necessary because bilateral activists typically alternate between these roles over the course of their long involvement. Some bilateral activists are expatriate scientists who have spent decades in a particular developing country, acquiring a measure of domestic political resources in the process. More often they are cosmopolitan nationals of developing countries who routinely interact with foreign environmental experts, advocates, and donor organizations. Compared to their fellow citizens, bilateral activists are not only more likely to encounter foreign ideas, by virtue of their travels, but are more apt to embrace them, as a function of their worldly outlook.²¹ At the same time they are fully immersed in domestic politics and society, where they press

21. See Hannerz 1990.

normative claims for ecology and seek out the foreign and domestic resources needed to advance their cause. In what follows I examine the resources at their disposal in greater detail.

International Science and Finance

It is widely recognized that there is an inverse relation between the location of the planet's biological diversity, which reaches its apex at tropical latitudes,²² and the global centers of wealth and technology—and hence of conservation finance and research—concentrated in the industrialized North. For as long as this situation holds true, there will exist powerful incentives for those concerned about environmental degradation to facilitate the transfer of funds and scientific expertise from North to South.²³ Indeed it is difficult to find a major conservation policy initiative of the past four decades in either Costa Rica or Bolivia that did not benefit significantly from foreign financial resources, whether in the form of payments for ecosystem services, grants from international wildlife groups, or ambitious bilateral and multilateral aid programs. From the perspective of an environmental policy entrepreneur in a developing country, however, the breach between the possibility of foreign financial support and its timely application in specific settings is a wide one. To access these resources requires a unique set of cross-cultural skills and facility with the social and professional norms of foreign philanthropists and donor organizations. Grant proposals must generally be written in the language of the funding organization and the formats, catch phrases, and accounting standards must conform to donor expectations. Personal relations with influential individuals in granting agencies can make all the difference, and these relationships are more easily established among people sharing common points of cultural reference. This gives bicultural individuals a distinct advantage and helps explain why the most influential environmental reformers in the South are typically those with agility in foreign relations.

Scientific expertise takes its place alongside finance as a resource characteristic of the international sphere of influence. As Peter Haas has cogently argued, environmental policy-making takes place in a context of considerable scientific uncertainty regarding the dynamics of natural systems and the causal linkages between policy interventions, social behaviors, and environmental outcomes.²⁴ This is especially true of biodiversity policy, which is a technically intensive undertaking precisely because of the diversity of natural systems involved.²⁵ Seemingly simple questions concerning the appropriate boundaries of protected areas or sustainable levels of hunting and harvesting require a great deal of information beyond that possessed by traditional resource users. Throughout

22. See Rohde 1992.

23. See Keohane and Levy 1996.

24. Haas 1992.

25. See Doak and Mills 1994.

the developing world, foreign-trained scientists play a central role in managing these uncertainties, identifying priority areas for conservation, conducting environmental impact assessments, and designing park management plans. The importance of foreign training stems from the fact that most developing countries lack doctoral programs in the biological sciences, and the bulk of their research ecologists receive their education in Western Europe and the United States. Moreover, science is an inherently transnational enterprise and has been so since the emergence of scientific communities in the 17th century.²⁶ As a consequence, the demand for foreign scientific information does not decrease with the development of domestic research capacity. On the contrary, it increases as a growing community of domestic scientists seek the best available information worldwide. Individuals whose training and professional networks facilitate access to this international resource are highly valued by policy-makers in developing countries who must make important decisions on land use planning and economic development despite chronic shortages of information.

Domestic Political Resources

The role of international science and finance in domestic conservation efforts in developing countries is widely appreciated. However, an entirely different category of resources—domestic political resources—has been equally important to policy outcomes yet entirely overlooked in the literature on global environmental politics. The lower visibility of political resources is a direct result of the discretion surrounding their deployment. Whereas scientists have a professional stake in ensuring that their names appear prominently on the written products of their efforts, those who deploy political resources often prefer to do so out of the public light. Similarly, the back room deals and Byzantine channels of political influence that determine whether conservation initiatives sink or swim are not polite topics of conversation in the project reports of donor agencies and international environmental groups. By contrast, the legitimacy of international financial resources is apparent in the menu of organizational logos decorating these widely-read materials, and the importance of international resources figures prominently in the causal stories told therein. And whereas financial resources can easily be quantified and presented in tabular form on the web pages of conservation donors, political resources are a more subtle phenomenon—as subtle as a brief phone call to an old friend in a high place.

Domestic political resources are resources in the sense described by Dahl as “anything that can be used to sway the specific choices or the strategies of another individual.”²⁷ They are political because they are applied by actors struggling to control some aspect of the institutions of governance. Importantly, they are domestic because accumulating these resources requires many years of resi-

26. Crane 1971.

27. Dahl 1961, 226.

dence in a given country, and throughout the South there exist formidable legal and normative barriers against direct foreign involvement in natural resource policy-making.

Among the most important political resources dispatched by policy reformers in the South are extensive personal contacts with individuals in positions of influence. Networks facilitating reciprocal favors and interpersonal bonds of trust are especially important in societies where legal institutions are weak—as is the case in most of the developing world—where they act as a surrogate method for resolving collective action problems. In common with the patron-client relations driving deforestation in Southeast Asia,²⁸ the social networks that environmental reformers in developing countries rely on to advance their agenda are personal, reciprocal, and non-contractual. In contrast with patron-client exchanges, they are less material-based and less vertical, more apt to take the form of symmetrical relations among friends, colleagues, and kin. Sometimes these personal contacts facilitate access to decisionmakers—as is apparent in the preceding discussion of Noel Kempff National Park—allowing bilateral activists to present proposals, solicit political support, and offer their services as managers and consultants. Although connections to heads of state provide the most poignant examples, in practice the fate of environmental policies is determined in diverse venues ranging from newspaper rooms to the governing bodies of national banks, village councils, legislative committees, party headquarters, police stations, agricultural cooperatives, and teachers' unions. Accordingly, those with the most expansive social networks have the greatest chance of crafting winning coalitions for agenda setting and overcoming veto points during policy implementation. Bilateral activists also use these networks to punish adversaries, publicizing the objectionable actions of their opponents to relevant communities and peer groups, thereby sullyng their reputations as worthy and reliable contractual partners.

Political learning—the accumulation of lessons on institutional design, policy processes, and political tactics across numerous policy arenas—is another political resource accruing only to those engaged in domestic politics over many years.²⁹ The information most pertinent to institutional designs—such as underlying causes of environmental problems, or latent sources of support and opposition—may emerge only after the first steps are taken, often in the wrong direction. The string of policy successes described at the outset of this article were in many respects enlightened responses to a long string of earlier failures. It was in response to the history of ineffective “paper parks” in Costa Rica that Park Service Director Mario Boza decided in the early 1970s to provide each new park with administrative and financial backing before declaring additional areas. Similarly, the design of Costa Rica's successful National Biodiversity Institute (INBio) was informed by the earlier, unsuccessful efforts

28. See Dauvergne 1997.

29. See Williams 2001; and Baumgartner and Jones 1993.

of Rodrigo Gámez and Pedro León to establish a tropical research institute within the University of Costa Rica. It was precisely because of these failures that INBio was created independent of the universities. In both countries, past failures to include local communities in decisions affecting protected areas provided the inspiration for today's widely-lauded policy innovations in community participation. Among non-governmental advocates, learning includes venue shopping by reformers trying their luck in the courts, on the radio, in the schools, and inside and outside the state apparatus over the course of decades.

Political resources also include the capacity to take advantage of rare windows of opportunity for agenda setting, by developing policy proposals over many years and then moving quickly in response to fortuitous changes in political circumstances. An example is found in 1972, when the Costa Rican Communist Party organized the citizens of Quepos to demand public access to local beaches controlled by North American developers. The Park Service acquired the beaches and piggybacked onto the proposal a plan to acquire the surrounding rainforests, thereby creating Manuel Antonio National Park. In Bolivia, an unprecedented national movement for indigenous land rights made possible the establishment of the world's largest protected dry tropical forest, in an area identified as a priority by environmentalists years earlier and now managed under the aegis of an indigenous organization in the Bolivian Chaco.

Process expertise is another example of political resources, and includes intimate familiarity with the complex formal rules and routines of government, as well as more tacit knowledge regarding the contours of partisan and ethnic alliances and the history of rivalries among individuals and organizations. The rapid expansion of Bolivia's national park system was facilitated by the process expertise of its first director, Mario Baudoin, who insisted that the new agency have its own legal affairs department to avoid the bureaucratic bottlenecks of the larger ministry. Process expertise was also in evidence when Costa Ricans first debated proposals for an environmental agency in the 1970s. The younger participants in these discussions feared partisan manipulation of the new agency and argued for the creation of an autonomous, quasi-state institution; the more seasoned members of the debate prevailed, noting that only a full-fledged ministry would be capable of confronting powerful traditional ministries.

If foreign scientific resources are indispensable for managing the technical uncertainties surrounding environmental statecraft, these domestic resources are a hedge against political uncertainties concerning the place and timing of opportunities for reform. When coalition politics unexpectedly place an obscure political figure at the helm of an environmental agency, bilateral activists mobilize their social networks to gain an audience and present opinions and advice. When after years of meager high-level support for conservation a president suddenly and unexpectedly proclaims "something must be done," bilateral activists are poised to act quickly with policy proposals developed and discussed with public opinion leaders many years in advance.

Transnational Movement of Policy Ideas

Policy change occurs at the intersection of changes in institutions and changes in ideas about what these institutions should be doing.³⁰ Using Schattschneider's conception of institutions as the mobilization of bias,³¹ we must not only understand the methods of mobilization described above but the origins of the new bias for ecology. This in turn requires an appreciation for the transnational movement of policy ideas. Environmental ideas have long been the subject of cross-border exchanges, as can be seen in the spread of forest conservation ideas from German and French forestry academies to the United States and from colonial India throughout the British Empire.³² Particularly in the contemporary era, when in many countries large environmental movements have produced rich repertoires of concepts and philosophies, and time-tested organizational practices, it makes little sense for pioneering groups of concerned citizens in other countries to invent environmentalism *de novo*. Instead, they borrow environmental ideas from abroad and reshape them to enhance their domestic salience. This process can be understood as the transmission and translation of policy ideas.

Transmission

In a period of widespread but uneven global environmental concern, the transmission of environmental policy ideas from one society to the next is facilitated by cosmopolitan individuals who spend significant periods of time in foreign settings, who seek out and enjoy interacting with cultures other than their own, and who carry a personal predilection to entertain foreign ideas. Transmission typically begins as a social immersion process in the course of face-to-face, small group interactions with foreign actors beholden to a coherent set of ideas with normative implications for government action. Sometimes these are communities of experts sharing the social vision and evaluative standards of their professions.³³ In other instances this ideational immersion takes place during university studies abroad, when the visitor joins a social movement and is swept up by the ideas, enthusiasm, and expectations of peers.³⁴ When these cosmopolitans return home, the transmission process may remain confined to a small group of elites, as has been the case with purveyors of economic policy ideas both Keynesian and neoliberal.³⁵ Contemporary environmental ideas carry with them, however, an embedded idea regarding the appropriate mode of their transmission: consciousness-raising among the general public, which is undertaken to create a social movement that can transform both private behavior and policy outcomes.

30. See Sikkink 1991; Sabatier 1989; and Legro 2000.

31. Schattschneider 1960.

32. Grove 1992.

33. Haas 1992.

34. On social movement recruitment mechanisms, see Rochon 1998.

35. Hall 1989; and Geddes 1995.

When successful, these efforts may eventually produce a policy culture—an enduring set of social expectations for government action in a particular issue area.³⁶ This mass phenomenon has occurred in Costa Rica and Bolivia, where the indifference of an earlier era has been replaced by widespread public interest in environmental protection. The rise of environmental policy cultures is reflected in a dramatic increase in domestic news coverage of environmental concerns, shown in Figure 2.³⁷ The shift in public attention reflected in Figure 2 is corroborated in interviews with long-term observers of environmental politics in these countries, who confirm that significant public discussion and social mobilization for the environment first arose in Costa Rica in the mid-1970s and in Bolivia in the mid-1980s. (The dip observed in Costa Rica in the early 1980s is likely an example of issue attention cycles, as this was a period of economic crisis and public concern over the war in neighboring Nicaragua.³⁸)

Today biodiversity, sustainable development, and other environmental themes are popular topics in both countries, and are routinely the focus of church activities, art exhibits, professional conferences, university theses, radio and television shows, electoral platforms, and mass demonstrations. This civic environmentalism has served as a creative wellspring for new policy proposals eventually adopted by their respective governments, has given rise to volunteer groups monitoring the environmental impacts of private firms and state agencies, and has on numerous occasions tilted the playing field in favor of environmental protection during legislative battles and proposed developments in ecologically sensitive areas.³⁹

The rise of environmental policy cultures in these countries was catalyzed by bilateral activists who had formative social immersion experiences with foreign environmental advocates and energetically promoted environmental awareness at home. Inspired by environmental movements around the world, and deeply involved in domestic debates, bilateral activists not only created new government institutions based on these new ideas, but spread the word by launching public campaigns and non-governmental organizations that would recruit large numbers of domestic advocates among politically engaged citizens with a less cosmopolitan orientation.

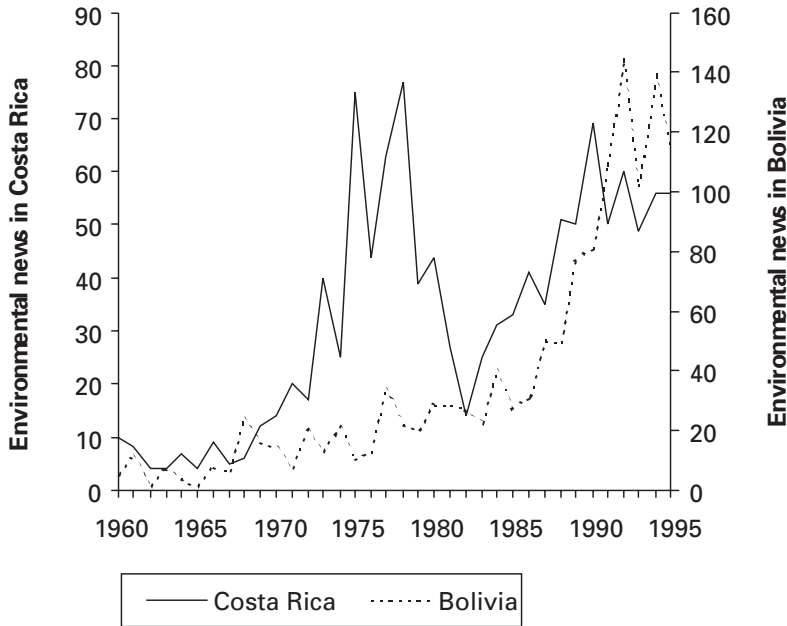
The rise of an environmental policy culture a full decade earlier in Costa Rica than in Bolivia is directly attributable to the earlier presence of a community of bilateral activists in Costa Rica. This process was facilitated by a unique category of organizations that I term “coupling institutions,” which served as meeting places for foreign and domestic actors and fostered the growth of a community of bilateral activists. Established in Costa Rica from the 1940s through the early 1970s, organizations like the Inter-American Institute for Agricultural Sciences, the Organization for Tropical Studies, and the Tropical Sci-

36. See Steinberg 2001, 153–191; and Almond and Powell 1978, 39–46.

37. Full results of the news content analysis and associated methodologies are provided in Steinberg 2001.

38. See Downs 1972.

39. On the policy impact of civic environmentalism in developing countries, see Steinberg 2002.

Figure 2 Environmental News Stories in Costa Rica and Bolivia

Note: Data are from a twice per week sample of the daily newspapers *La Nación* in Costa Rica and *Presencia* in Bolivia. The two newspapers differ in size, therefore inter-country comparisons are based on the timing of changes, rather than absolute numbers of articles. The sample only includes articles reflecting an environmentalist perspective, meaning the headlines reflect the idea that “Our natural resources (or environment) are threatened. Something must be done to protect them”; or the text of an environmental news story contains strongly environmentalist keywords. For methodological details, see Steinberg 2001, 211–227.

ence Center exposed a number of Costa Ricans to foreign environmental ideas and scientific and donor networks, and facilitated their enrollment in conservation-related courses in American universities. These same organizations provided a long-term institutional home for foreign conservationists, enabling a few of them to acquire domestic political skills and participate effectively in domestic debates. Soon after the rise of environmental movements in the United States and Western Europe, bilateral activists such as Alvaro Ugalde, Carlos Quesada, and Pedro León organized educational seminars for professional associations across the country, launched environmental studies programs in the major universities, and created nature interpretation programs in national parks for the *concientización* of the public. By the mid-1970s there was a growing social movement⁴⁰ pushing for policy change on many fronts, includ-

40. Following Rootes (1997) I use the term “social movement” to refer to a loose network of numerous organizations of varying degrees of formality, as well as unaffiliated individuals, engaged in diverse forms of collective action motivated by shared environmental concern.

ing a national alliance of high school environmental protection clubs that lobbied members of the legislative assembly to ratify the CITES treaty, and citizen protests preventing the construction of a controversial oil pipeline.

In Bolivia, a similar coupling institution—the Ecology Institute—was proposed in 1974, to be funded by the University of Göttingham. The proposal was shelved, however, following protests by German students opposed to providing aid to the Bánzer dictatorship. As a result, while Costa Ricans were successfully combining international resources and ideas with skillful domestic political engagement, the 1970s was the lost decade for conservation in Bolivia, which lacked the institutional foundations for routine transnational environmental relations. When democracy was restored to Bolivia in 1978, the proposal moved ahead and the Ecology Institute was operational by 1982. The Ecology Institute served the same coupling function as its equivalents in Costa Rica, giving rise to a community of bilateral activists such as Arturo Moscoso, Carmen Miranda, and Juan Pablo Arce, who had the opportunity to study conservation-related sciences in Northern (principally American) universities as a result of contacts made at the Ecology Institute. This group spearheaded a variety of efforts to spread environmental awareness in Bolivia throughout the 1980s. When the second wave of international enthusiasm for the environment arose in the latter half of the 1980s with a new focus on global issues such as tropical deforestation, Bolivia had in place a cadre of well spoken environmental leaders and associated organizations that could channel international resources and raise the level of domestic debate. In contrast to the earlier efforts of Noel Kempff, this was a sizable, interacting community working with the benefit of foreign technical training and financial support. A large social movement encompassing diverse civil society organizations was soon firmly established in the country and environmental protection has since been an enduring component of national political discourse.

Translation

While the international sphere of influence serves as a rich source of new policy ideas, these ideas are translated domestically to enhance their compatibility with national conditions and cultural orientations. This translation process in turn affects the composition of political demands pressed by reformers and the content of national policies.

The literature on the transnational diffusion of policy ideas often emphasizes the inherent fit (or lack thereof) between an idea and the society into which it is introduced.⁴¹ There is, however, an active process of “fitting” at play in which logging companies and other targets of regulation argue that environmentalism is an absurd foreign transplant ill-suited to national conditions, while proponents argue that environmental ideas are entirely consistent with cultural traditions and national aspirations. Translation occurs as bilateral activ-

41. See Cortell and Davis 2000.

ists package environmental ideas to appeal to important political constituencies and to plug into legitimizing national discourses.⁴² Moreover, each country has unique environmental conditions, social needs, and philosophical traditions that shape the content of demands by environmental advocates. For example, in many developing countries even field biologists working in remote locations with a deep love of nature are quick to distance themselves from environmental philosophies that do not place human needs front and center. Different countries may also embrace a policy issue in different historical periods, thereby affecting the content of the policy idea. Thus national parks in Costa Rica and Bolivia are more oriented toward biodiversity conservation than are those of the United States because the latter were established a century earlier, when the preservation of scenic beauty dominated the conservation agenda. Translation also results from the fact that many intellectuals and activists in the South, delighting in innovation and sensitive to cultural imperialism from abroad, simply desire to make the idea their own. Particularly when environmentalism manages to attract widespread popular interest, the translation process escapes the firm control of the bilateral activists who first introduced these ideas, as diverse domestic agencies and civil society organizations blend the new environmental thinking with their traditional mandates and concerns.

The experience of Costa Rica and Bolivia suggests that the translation of environmental ideas from one society to the next occurs by means of conceptual bundling with pre-existing domestic discourses ranging from nationalism to economic populism, non-violence, women's rights, regional autonomy, religion, and ethnic identity.⁴³ A clear example is found in the link established between conservation and indigenous peoples' rights, which became a standard feature of environmental discourse in Bolivia after August of 1990, when Amazonian indigenous groups captured national attention with a dramatic cross-country trek to demand land rights and political recognition. Indigenous leaders cognizant of the growing popularity of environmentalism in Bolivia pitched their cause in terms of ecological protection and forged alliances with environmental groups eager to associate themselves with a high-profile human rights cause. Arguing that "indigenous peoples plus land equals conservation," as one advocate expressed the equation, this translation process soon became institutionalized in the practice of Bolivia's national park system, which in response to these developments established cooperative management agreements with indigenous groups in a number of protected areas.

Two extremes characterize the translation process. At one extreme, inadequate translation may lead to a careless adoption of ideas from abroad, as occurred in the 1960s when the Bolivian government copied verbatim Venezuela's hunting season regulations—despite the fact that the seasons are reversed across the equator. At the other extreme, an international policy idea may undergo so much adaptation that the original idea literally gets lost in the translation. The

42. See Snow and Benford 1988.

43. This strategic bundling of discourses is described by Rochon (1998) as "value connection."

compatibility between indigenous self-determination and biodiversity conservation, for example, is not nearly as formulaic as some partisans would pretend.⁴⁴ Bilateral activists occupy an interesting position in this regard. All else equal, they are more likely than their international allies to ensure that at least some translation occurs, and more likely than their compatriots to ensure that the crux of the original idea is not lost. Only by pursuing a compromise between the two extremes can they simultaneously maintain legitimacy within their foreign and domestic peer groups. Although as noted above, the translation of international policy ideas is not entirely under the control of the bilateral activists who first introduce them, they retain significant power to mediate this tradeoff in their roles as prominent leaders in advocacy groups and government agencies, where they make daily decisions about what programs to support and which causes to champion.

Conclusion

Over the coming decades the fate of the global environment will be strongly shaped by policy decisions in developing countries, on issues ranging from coastal management to road building, reproductive health services, energy infrastructure, commodity pricing, and urban planning. The history of biodiversity policy-making in Costa Rica and Bolivia suggests that in a context of heightened global concern alongside jealously-guarded national sovereignty, environmental policy change in developing countries is driven by reformers who combine international scientific and financial resources with the domestic political resources needed to usher through major reforms. Routinely exposed to international policy ideas, yet fully immersed in domestic debates, bilateral activists mediate the impact of global environmentalism on domestic institutions by transmitting and translating international ideas and fostering the establishment of environmental policy cultures in their own countries.

There is good reason to believe that the spheres of influence framework can help explain the dynamics of environmental policy reform in a wide range of developing countries beyond those discussed here. The distinction between the international and domestic spheres of influence is a product of structural conditions common throughout the South. Northern financial and scientific resources will be highly prized by environmental reformers in developing countries for as long as there are asymmetries in global concentrations of wealth and technology. In contrast, the political resources essential to institution building in the South are of distinctly domestic origins, available only to those with long experience in a given country and generally off limits to foreigners. It is precisely because the end of colonialism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America brought significant political independence without a corresponding redress of economic disparity that these resources reside in separate spheres of influence. Both categories of resources are necessary for the development of effective environmental

44. See Redford and Stearman 1993.

institutions in developing countries and the most influential reformers are those capable of skillfully combining the two.

The spheres of influence framework is designed to explain how policy change occurs within the subset of problems that carry widely recognized global implications. By focusing on the resources used to overcome obstacles and build effective institutions, the framework cannot provide a complete explanation for variation in policy outcomes because the intensity of the obstacles themselves—from entrenched timber lobbies to protracted civil war—varies across countries and over time. In the balance of social forces affecting policy outcomes, this analysis weighs only one side of the scale. I do maintain, however, that bilateral activism is a vitally important—and probably necessary⁴⁵—condition for producing a pattern of environmental policy accomplishments like those observed in Costa Rica and Bolivia. In countries with fewer policy successes to report, this framework offers the hypothesis that those few were largely the result of bilateral activism.

The spheres of influence framework demonstrates the importance of combining international and comparative perspectives in research on global environmental politics. In comparing the policy histories of Costa Rica and Bolivia, for example, it is apparent that domestic structural factors, notably the presence of democratic institutions, have played a significant role in facilitating environmental protection—but not in the way that comparativists testing for correlations between democracy and environmental outcomes might expect. Authoritarian rule in Bolivia hindered environmental policy change not because of a lack of opportunities for citizen advocacy. Rather, the dictatorship denied Bolivian citizens access to the resources of organizations in Western democracies with a distaste for authoritarian regimes. In other words, the relation between domestic institutional structures and environmental policy outcomes cannot be understood absent the transnational context of environmental concern. Conversely, to understand the impact of transnational environmentalism requires an appreciation for the ways in which domestic structures mediate the causal relationship between international ideas and domestic outcomes.

Situating the impact of international resources in the context of long-term domestic political processes, the spheres of influence framework can facilitate a richer understanding of the nature of transnational environmental relations. Keck and Sikkink⁴⁶ have provided important insights into the operation of transnational advocacy campaigns. These high-profile campaigns are, however, far too rare and short-lived to be of much consequence for environmental policy processes in the developing world. They are a fascinating but nonetheless unrepresentative illustration of the mechanisms by which transnational relations impact environmental outcomes in the South. The campaign for World Bank reform (the focus of Keck and Sikkink's analysis), in particular, represents

45. On probabilistic assessments of causation, see Mahoney 2000. For a critical assessment of alternative explanations for the rise of environmental policy cultures in these countries, from Inglehart's postmaterialism thesis to environmental imperialism, see Steinberg 2001, 171–173.

46. Keck and Sikkink 1998.

a unique case in which Northern environmentalists possessed a monopoly on political resources affecting environmental outcomes in the South, by virtue of American influence over the Bank. In practice, the transnational relations that matter most for environmental governance in the South involve politically skilled reformers in developing countries who engage in advocacy and policy experimentation over a period of decades, and advance their cause by cultivating relations with diverse foreign actors—from university researchers to private philanthropists, multinational corporations, and advocacy groups large and small. The transnational dynamic is of higher complexity, lower profile, and longer duration. Where the two theoretical approaches converge is in exposing the rich repertoire of strategies and organizational forms that activists use when reaching across borders. Keck and Sikkink are surely right in predicting that the importance of transnational networks as an organizational form in international politics will continue to grow. The level of nongovernmental activity has increased, the relevance of national governance is undiminished, and negotiation between state and society takes place in an increasingly globalized context.

The epistemic communities literature provides considerable leverage for understanding the motivations and cohesiveness of communities of bilateral activists, many of whom were first exposed to environmental ideas in the course of natural science studies.⁴⁷ But bilateral activists also include in their ranks lawyers, physicians, chemists, architects, and agronomists who were influenced by expatriate wildlife biologists or became immersed in environmental movements during travel abroad. This suggests the need for further research on the patterns of spillover effects between episteme-based organizations and social movement recruitment networks spanning diverse professional and civil society organizations. This could be part of a larger research agenda exploring in greater detail than I have provided here the causal mechanisms linking the consciousness-raising efforts of early environmental activists (via media campaigns, grassroots organizing, university programs, and other means) and the subsequent uptake of these ideas by large swaths of society. The spheres of influence framework also offers new insights with respect to an oft-cited shortcoming of the epistemic communities literature, namely its lack of specificity on the causal mechanisms through which expert communities shape policy outcomes.⁴⁸ I find that while technical expertise carries considerable weight in policy circles, the influence of environmental scientists in Costa Rica and Bolivia is only partly a function of their science. Their influence owes more to the fact that scientists are ideally positioned to engage in bilateral activism, because they are among the most cosmopolitan of citizens in developing countries, while among foreigners natural scientists are the most likely to commit to a long-term stay due to the longitudinal nature of their field work.

Studies of policy failure have taught us a great deal about the hurdles facing proponents of sustainable and equitable development in the tropics. To ac-

47. See Haas 1992.

48. See Hirschman 1989.

tually improve outcomes, however, it is equally important to understand the social origins of more successful initiatives. Improvement in the performance of public institutions requires more than the removal of the observable cause of failure—be it corruption, resource conflicts, or poor administration—because policy failure is over-determined: There is a long line of variables in the queue that will express their deleterious effects when other powerful causes of failure are resolved. Success-oriented research can help us understand the technology of social influence deployed by environmental reformers in the developing world as they encounter diverse, overlapping, and evolving problems over long time horizons.

Research on “why things sometimes go right” also produces novel policy prescriptions. It has become axiomatic in conservation circles to note that local community support is a prerequisite for successful conservation outcomes. Less widely appreciated is the need for national communities of policy entrepreneurs capable of confronting domestic power brokers and undertaking a cumulative process of institution building over decades. With the renewed interest in governance for sustainable development issuing from the 2002 Earth Summit, the time is ripe for creative measures to support the efforts of these policy communities. This could include support for the civil society organizations that enable reformers to stay involved over the long term, providing an institutional home when partisan shifts prevent their direct participation in government. Other promising approaches include support for “coupling institutions” and related processes that facilitate routine transnational exchanges of ideas and resources, and the promotion of South-South forums in which reformers can share experiences on innovative institutional approaches and the social processes supporting or hindering their success.

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