

Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,
Comparative Designs (REGov)

New environmental regionalism and sustainable development

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Abstract

This contribution is based on a set of reflections presented at the REGov Workshop. These reflections were offered as part of a panel discussion around the topic “New environmental regionalism.” Additional presentations provided in the context of this panel discussion include those of William Jackson, International Union for the Conservation of Nature (this volume) and Frédéric Giraut, University of Geneva (this volume). Webcasts of all presentations are available at <http://www.reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.

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1. Framing a paradox

During the last two decades, many parts of the world have become veritable laboratories of economic, political, and spatial reconfiguration. The vast body of scholarship on European integration, for instance, has powerfully revealed the historical contingency of the state as a form of political organization, the socially constructed nature of political scales and borders, and the possibility for the emergence of new polities (Duchacek, 1986; Duchacek, Latouche & Stevenson, 1988; Brenner, 2004; Deas & Lord, 2006).

At the same time as Europe has simultaneously become more united and fragmented, strong and growing concerns over environmental degradation have reinforced questions about appropriate scales of action. In particular, the rapid rise to dominance of human-induced climate change as the most important environmental challenge has demonstrated the spatial specificity and significance of societal adaptation. In response to demands by policy makers around the world, the regional implications of climate change will be the central focus of the next report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, due to be released in 2014.

While rescaling environmental policy to better correspond with ecoregional boundaries is an idea that has been promoted for a long time, promoted already in the 19th century by John Wesley-Powell for the U.S. West, the so-

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called ‘new environmental regionalism’ refers to a more recent wave of initiatives focusing on mountain ranges (e.g. Alpine Convention), river basins (e.g. European Union Water Framework Directive), or marine water bodies (e.g. Baltic Sea) (Balsiger & VanDeveer, 2010; Balsiger, 2008). While some ecoregional initiatives originate in ambitious visions of geopolitical transformation, the majority of initiatives has been subject to extensive “bricolage” – practices of construction or creation that draw from a diverse range of things that happen to be available (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010). Environmental concerns influence both regionalism as an ideology and regionalization as a manifest process. In moving from the former to the latter, however, pragmatism often sets in and compromises are made.

New environmental regionalism implies that it is principally for the purpose of *environmental* policy that this rescaling is pursued, that is for efforts to mitigate the negative consequences (externalities) of certain types of externalities such as water pollution. Ecoregional rescaling from the perspective of externalities presupposes the existence of other “fields of practice” or “functional spaces” (Frey & Eichenberger, 1996; Nahrath, 2007) that are not coterminous with the stock or flow dynamics of environmental phenomena. Prominent types of such other fields can be of a political-administrative nature (e.g. citizenship), an economic nature (e.g. trade patterns or production networks), or a social nature (collective identities). Hence, below the global scale, ecoregional rescaling always simultaneously *mitigates* the negative consequences of some externalities while potentially *exacerbating* those of others. For instance, while promoters of integrated water management typically recommend the establishment of new institutions at the hydrological basin level, existing bodies, even within the same sector, such as water supply or waste water treatment associations frequently operate at a different scale because their technical infrastructure transcends watersheds. Hence, the creation of new structures for different functional spaces may always entail the fragmentation of service delivery in another. The rise of ecoregionalism thus creates an important conundrum relating to the co-existence of multiple (functional) spaces.

If we take environmental, economic, and social policy domains as the most general types of domains or functional spaces, we are of course talking about the classic dimensions of sustainable development, which, despite all criticism leveled at its vagueness, embodies one of the politically and symbolically most compelling ideas that capture integrated well-being (cf. 2012 World Summit on Sustainable Development Rio+20). This train of thought thus leads to an interesting question: if we accept that environmental regionalism focuses on environmental problems and that their spatial reach is not coterminous with other types of challenges, then how can environmental regionalism be reconciled with sustainable development broadly understood as environmental, economic, and social policy integration?

2. Searching the forest for the trees

Where can we turn to find answers to this question? Looking at the field of (international) environmental politics immediately raises questions that stem from the field’s very definition. Not only does the bulk of work continue to focus on the global or national - at the expense of the regional – level, its emphasis on *environmental* politics often neglects the integral aspects of sustainable development. Indeed, if the last twenty years are any indication, the most prolific body of research has examined how environmental policy has been internationalized and, in the process, institutionalized in issue-specific domains – tellingly, today we are confronted with so-called “earth system governance” as a highly influential research brand that illustrates the evolution of functional differentiation.

In practice, there is an incredible diversity of regional initiatives, many of them of an ecoregional nature. If they were positioned in a three-dimensional space that is defined by three axes for environmental, economic, or social regionalisms, respectively, we would find that most contain some aspects of all sustainability dimensions. In other words, what in theory we think of as ecoregionalism, in practice is often more varied already.

Somewhere between the idealism (for better or worse) of environmental politics and the pragmatism of transboundary practice thus lies a space in which a plethora of actors negotiate the trade-offs between environmental, economic, and social goals. The question is therefore not just whether the new environmental regionalism is bricolage or profound geo-socio-political transformation, but what conditions shape the tangible and

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