

BOOK REVIEW

The global environment and world politics, 2nd ed.

By Elizabeth DeSombre

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To judge by this book, Elizabeth DeSombre is not an ideologue. The author is now a mid-career scholar in a New England college (Wellesley), teaching “political science” and “environmental studies.” Her tone is calm and measured. She refers readers to published studies from a range of competing perspectives.

The book, itself, seems designed to provide a survey of developments in global environmental policy suitable for a university course. Students assigned this book are not likely to see it as axe-grinding. For anyone who has looked into these issues, the book may be of most interest as a guide to conventional wisdom in this field – as up-to-date on respectable opinion as one would expect a second edition to be.

The book starts with an overview of the history and legal framework for international agreements on environmental matters. Ensuing chapters look at the role of “science and uncertainty” in environmental negotiations, at the distinctive claims of “developing countries” and the role of “non-governmental actors,” both non-profit advocacy groups and profit-oriented business. Then there are four chapters reviewing experience in particular fields, starting with “ozone depletion and climate change,” followed by separate overviews of “whale conservation,” of land-based “biodiversity” efforts (in “the Amazon and elsewhere”), concluding with “Regional Trans-boundary Air Pollution Agreements” (comparing European and North American experiences).

What does it all show? Five pages of throat-clearing prose in the “Introduction” offer few definite claims. The comparably brief “Conclusion” chapter does not add much. The case study chapters “suggest,” according to the Conclusion, that it is “difficult to gain international cooperation to protect the environment” but the case studies “also demonstrate the willingness of states to work together” and of “non-state actors to undertake

cooperative actions with states ... to address problems that affect the global environment.”

These are not exactly daring claims. Since no one would bother to dispute them, one must wonder why it is worthwhile to offer a whole book to confirm such claims. Presenting background facts may be worthwhile, of course, even if they don’t add up to a particular conclusion. But the book does not simply rely on this journalistic premise. It actually does offer a more contentious thesis – which is very much worth thinking about, even though the author does not subject it to any serious analysis.

This more interesting thesis is stated quite forthrightly in the last paragraph of the Introduction:

“Environmental politics poses challenges to a lot of traditional thinking about international relations. At its most basic, environmental politics challenges the idea of sovereignty – states can no longer realistically protect their own territory and populations from harm by actions they take alone. Thinking about the environment expands the sphere of concern of international relations beyond state-centric security-dominated approaches ...”

The point seems to be that “environmental politics” is quite different from other areas of international politics. Hence, the logic of a separate study of this field. The last paragraph of the final chapter (“Conclusion”) also alludes to this theme: “to a large extent, all environmental politics is global.” Since the environment surrounds all nations, “environmental politics” just has to be “global” in its outlook – and that makes “environmental politics” something new and distinctive. That seems to be the thought.

It might well seem a natural premise for a survey text

of this kind. Why have a separate overview of “environmental policy” if it is not a separate or distinct subject? Yet there are good reasons to view it as questionable and inevitably distorting.

To start with, the underlying thought is almost certainly untrue. Before activists started to focus on global environmental threats, did national governments really think that “sovereignty” assured all states – every one of them – the capacity to “protect their own territory and populations from harm by actions they take alone”? Why have states so often committed to alliances if they could protect themselves by “actions they take alone”? Looking at the history of warfare, would one really conclude that it is rare or even unusual for sovereign states to suffer “harm” to their “territory and populations” as the result of war?

You might think environmental harms are different, because they do not respect borders. But how many countries caught between, say, Russia and Germany in the Twentieth Century were able to rely on mere “borders” for protection? Even countries that were not directly invaded – and in that sense were shielded to a degree by their borders – often still suffered considerable “harm” from blockades or attacks on ocean shipping or other economic disruptions occasioned by the world wars.

It is not even clear that the “harm” threatened by war is less serious than the harm threatened by a worsening natural environment. To take the most extreme case, an all-out war with nuclear weapons would surely have consequences as catastrophic – and much more immediate – than the direst scenario of global warming over the next century. If you think environmental harm challenges the idea of sovereignty, you might think the advent of nuclear weapons would do so even more. And if you thought that way, you would have had a lot of company. But you would still have been wrong. We have been hearing since 1945 that the challenge of nuclear weapons means we must accept international controls on resort to war or at least on the capacity to deploy nuclear weapons. Somehow, such appeals have not persuaded states to entrust all their hopes for security to international institutions. Even when it comes to resisting the proliferation of nuclear weapons, there is no great trust – nor all that much deference – given to international institutions.

To the credit of Prof. DeSombre, when she describes actual experience negotiating and implementing international environmental agreements, she does not paint an overly rosy picture. Though she does not draw this conclusion, she provides plenty of evidence that “world politics” is not, after all, so different when it grapples with the “global environment” than with other issues.

The chapter on whale conservation, for example, notes that the Soviet Union turned out to be systematically deceiving international monitors, taking twice the catch allowable under international quotas, then concealing this delinquency behind fraudulent reports. The truth came to light only in the 1990s, when many secrets of the communist era were revealed. Today’s Russia may remain more honest in its approach to international obligations, but nothing in this chapter offers grounds for confidence on that score. International conservation agreements do not seem to provide easy means for outsiders to challenge national assessments of compliance – and Putin’s Russia does not encourage whistle-blowing by insiders.

Meanwhile, developing countries in Africa and elsewhere have sought seats on the international whaling commission, even though they have little direct interest in whale conservation. These countries have learned, however, that votes in this forum can be traded for support on international policies they do care about.

In general, developing countries (those that used to be called “Third World”) have viewed international environmental measures with suspicion – unless offered direct financial inducements for participation. There are good and bad reasons for this stance and this book does not do nearly as well as it might have in exploring all the factors involved. But the general pattern is clear. On almost every measure proposed for the global environment, less developed countries have been more skeptical about making sacrifices today for the sake of averting speculative harms in the more remote future. They have also been far more insistent about demands that more affluent and environmentally conscious states provide them with hard compensation for any major costs they do accept in conforming to global protective standards.

The Global Environment is relatively forthright about the policy outcomes to date. Not very much has been achieved. Even efforts to protect the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere have not accomplished very much, though protective efforts in this area, starting in the mid-1980s, provided the model for most subsequent ventures in global environmental protection. Western countries have found substitutes for the coolants and aerosols thought to be depleting the ozone layer, but developing countries insisted on the right to continue production for a longer period. We still do not know whether black-market sales of targeted chemicals will cancel the benefits of official phase-out programs. Even on optimistic assumptions, it will take at least half a century for ozone concentrations to recover from the thinning trend of recent decades and we don’t yet have enough data to be confident of a new trend.

Current experience does not counsel despair but it surely indicates grounds for great caution. States are not easily corralled into common policies merely by abstract claims about common interests. They may well have common interests at some level of abstraction but that's far from saying they can agree on common policies.

Prof. DeSombre offers part of an explanation when she distinguishes regulatory benefits that are "excludable" from benefits that aren't. Those countries that make greater sacrifices to protect the ozone layer, for example, get no more benefit from their effort than any other countries – which leaves less incentive for any one country to make great sacrifices on its own. Meanwhile, benefits may prove "subtractable" as when whaling conservation efforts by some nations are nullified by larger catches taken by others. Benefits may be both subtractable and non-excludable, as is true with ozone protection and climate change. Even where outsiders can be prevented from poaching or free-riding – as in efforts to protect biodiversity within a particular jurisdiction (such as Brazilian rainforests) – it is often quite speculative and uncertain what future benefits may be obtained from protecting endangered species, so possibly large future benefits may be undervalued by particular governments.

It is regrettable – and probably revealing of the author's background assumptions – that this book says almost nothing about successful conservation efforts which do have an influence on the global environment. Governments have most incentive to protect fish stocks in waters adjacent to their own coasts.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea authorizes states to claim a 200 mile exclusive economic zone in which they have a free hand at regulating fishing. Almost all coastal states have claimed such a zone and most do take some effort to regulate fishing. Even countries so generally international minded as Canada have made strong efforts to protect coastal fisheries from foreign encroachments. It would have been worthwhile to acquaint students with the benefits that can accrue from placing such wide swaths of what was formerly global commons under "private" (that is, particular national) control.

But the biggest and most characteristic failing of this survey is that it leaves readers with the impression that most problems stem, as the author says, from "the tragedy of the commons": we deplete global resources and degrade the global environment because no nation has enough incentive to behave better in a world where others will not be compelled to do likewise. What seems to follow from this metaphor – the environmental

counterpart to the "state of nature" in social contract theories – is that strengthening global regulatory authority is the answer to most challenges. The thought is all the more seductive because it is, at some level, entirely logical: if it were easier to impose global regulatory obligations, there would indeed be more of them. But would the world really be better off then?

One can imagine a world in which wise and impartial regulators impose just the right set of prohibitions and just the right level of constraints to safeguard the environment at reasonable cost. But one can imagine all kinds of things. One can also imagine a world in which global authorities impose controls that condemn much of the world to misery and squalor for the profit or the ideological whims of well-connected minorities. It should be somewhat easier to imagine the latter, because we have seen it played it out in so many nations, where kleptocrats or fanatics have driven their countries to ruin. To put the point succinctly, a global environmental policy looks more attractive if you imagine it is run by some international counterpart of the Swiss confederacy than by Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

Affluent countries won't soon cede governing authority to the Group of 77 – the caucus of less developed countries (now numbering many more than 77) who form the governing majority in the UN General Assembly. But the fact is that developing countries have no great reason to entrust global standards to the affluent minority. Even Prof. DeSombre notes (though without dwelling on the implications) that western nations refused to make any commitments to help poor countries cope with desertification when this subject was proposed for international action. Spreading deserts threaten the lives of many millions in Africa but calamities in Africa don't necessarily engage the interest of people in Europe or North America. Residents of Darfur could testify on this point. So could the people of Rwanda.

There are very good reasons why even democratic governments in developing countries do not want to entrust their futures to the priorities of environmentalists in affluent countries. A few years ago, the Danish social scientist Bjørn Lomborg assembled some of the world's most distinguished economists (including several Nobel laureates) to analyze proposed international responses to "global challenges." They tried to rank policies by how much good they might do for given levels of investment or cost. They agreed that investments in reducing the spread of communicable disease, especially AIDS and malaria, deserved the very highest priority, followed by measures to provide dietary supplements and general agricultural improvements in poor countries, measures

to improve the supply of safe water in poor countries – and measures to open rich countries to exports from poor countries.

The economists participating in this “Copenhagen Consensus” ranked as least promising – in terms of actual improvements in measurable human welfare for resources expended or diverted – proposals to slow the rate of global warming by reducing carbon use in the near term. (Lomborg 2004). If these economists are anywhere near correct in their assessments, the level of interest and attention which western environmental advocates – and western media coverage – give to global environmental issues is almost inversely proportionate to the benefits which proposed policies offer to human well-being, when actually considered on a global scale.

At home, more affluent countries do better at reducing health and safety risks, because they have more resources to devote to such concerns. The people of such countries can afford not only to devote extensive resources to recreation and entertainment but to more high-minded or long-range projects such as providing more protection for endangered species. Concerns about “acid rain,” as Prof. DeSombre relates in her chapter on transboundary pollution, actually did mobilize support for curbs on polluting emissions in European countries. Dealing with basic sanitation – as, for example, by assuring that drinking water is not contaminated – is something which people in affluent countries take for granted.

People tend to see what they look for. If we talk about “environmental policy,” we imply that “the environment” presents “issues” which stand on their own. Perhaps it is almost true for “issues” that do not cost much to address or “issues” that involve such immediate threats to health that everyone supports available preventive measures. But to make a separate topic of what “world politics” will do about “the global environment” is to imagine a world in which “issues” can be assessed in relative abstraction from all the questions of wealth and power and divergent priorities which beset actual politics. It is to imagine we can find a more harmonious world by abstracting from the different claims of the people who inhabit it.

References

- Lomborg, Bjørn. 2004. *Global Crises, Global Solutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.