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**SALLY K. FAIRFAX and HELEN INGRAM\***

# **No Theory, No Apology A Brief Comment on the State of the Art in Natural Resources Policy and the Articles Herein\*\***

Analysts of natural resource policy have been humble if not actually marginal practitioners of political science. Even in the "environmental decade" of the 1970s when "our" issues moved rapidly to the center of the nation's political consciousness and agenda, we remained outside the mainstream of the profession.

Nearly two decades ago Charles O. Jones reviewed the literature on politics and the environment and concluded that the available information contained "more unanswers than a Dr. Seuss encyclopedia."<sup>1</sup> Of course, getting actual answers depends on asking the right questions which, in turn, relates to clear and coherent conceptual frameworks. Employing sound methods is also important to the support of authoritative findings. Both theoretical and methodological sophistication are measures of a field's maturity, and the study of natural resources and environmental politics and policies were at the stage of early development when Jones wrote.

The papers in this symposium suggest that relatively little has changed. The papers grew out of two years of panel discussions at the Western Political Science Association in which section and panel organizers were uncommonly attentive to common themes, methods and frameworks in the resource policy field. The first set of three papers evaluates the base of political knowledge of natural resources concerns and suggests areas ripe for development. In general, these papers highlight the missing threads of theory in natural resources policy research. Prescriptive assumptions

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1. C. Jones, *From Gold to Garbage: A Bibliographic Essay on Politics and the Environment*, in 66 *American Political Science Review* 588-595 (1972).

have tended to guide the analytical process. Methodological techniques for analyzing natural resources concerns remain largely undeveloped.

Francis argues that the natural resources field has a prescriptive tradition which has favored normative theory over empirical observation. Rather than challenging the underlying prescriptive assumptions, Francis finds that the prevailing methodologies have sought to confirm these normative assumptions which touch on questions of the relationship between control of natural resources and state security, patterns of allocation and institutional stability, and state protection of the environment as a fundamental value.

Not only has this strong prescriptive context stunted the growth of natural resources studies, it has also kept these concerns out of the mainstream of political inquiry. However, it is not the case that theoretical constructs are missing, as Francis demonstrates. Although methodological rigor might be achieved through the use of existing constructs, in many cases they are simply not applied and tested.

Salazar and Lee assess a particular methodological framework for analyzing natural resource issues: rational choice theory. Like Francis, they note that analysis in this area has tended to focus on the prescriptive aspects of natural resource concerns. Using a rational choice framework, new resource economists have tended to advocate a particular set of public policies rather than to test theoretical claims against empirical evidence. Against this tradition, Salazar and Lee look at the extent to which rational choice theory can be used to address specific empirical questions.

Rational choice theory lends itself to the derivation and testing of competing hypotheses, Salazar and Lee conclude, and can thus be developed methodologically to conduct resource policy analysis. Further, the substantive focuses of rational choice theory and natural resource concerns overlap—such as attributes of goods and resources, institutions, and collective action—making this a particularly fruitful avenue for further development and inquiry.

Unlike the first two papers, Lester and Lombard find that environmental policy research does have a methodological base which has aided in explaining comparative state policy. However, advances have been concentrated in explaining state policy formation. Explanation of state implementation and management of federal programs have not seen the same level of methodological refinement—an especially critical void in this era of regulatory federalism. These authors suggest that future analysis of natural resources policy needs to adopt an intergovernmental framework which focuses on implementation.

To achieve this, Lester and Lombard provide a number of methodological recommendations, including the use of longitudinal analysis, both expenditure and non-expenditure data, and both large-N and special case

studies. They conclude that it is research strategies such as these which offer the greatest potential to building our understanding of specific resource policies and to transpolicy generalizations.

The second set of papers apply theoretical frameworks to specific cases of natural resources concerns. These attempts not only build our base of knowledge but, more important for this volume, clarify where the field now stands. Ultimately, it is tests of application—using political theories, generalizations, and frameworks to analyze emerging issues—which help us to assess what it is we know and where it is we need to go.

Kamieniecki and Sanasarian attribute the lack of theory in environmental policy to a tendency to narrowly focus on American issues and politics. Comparative policy studies, too, tend to have a limited focus on particular variables and nations rather than on broad theoretical concepts and applications. To meet this challenge of developing theoretical generalization, they look at the potential usefulness of studying natural resource problems from a comparative politics perspective. In doing so, Kamieniecki and Sanasarian introduce two theoretical frameworks from the comparative politics literature—political culture and modernization—and apply them to the problem of deforestation.

Blending concepts from the comparative politics literature with natural resources policy analysis could prove especially useful in light of the cross-national nature of many such concerns. Kamieniecki and Sanasarian's analysis is suggestive of further analysis using concepts such as state-society relations, center-periphery relations, and dependency.

Parsons and Mathews demonstrate how the application of a political model to a particular historical case can both refine the model and elucidate a policy. They interpret the water politics of Arizona and California through an elite model, tracing historical developments from the late 1800s to the present. Strategies, tactics, operational contexts, and participants are compared across four water development eras in this period. Parsons and Mathews find that, despite increased participation in policy making over time, the overall goals and narrow membership of the core elite have remained dominant.

Similarly, Fortmann's application of agency-client relations theories to California state natural resources agencies provides insight into the particular cases and, more important, into the adequacy of the theories themselves. Cooptation, capture, and agency resource theories are used to explain actions by staff of two natural resource agencies in terms of maintaining or extending their relationships with the public after rapid and massive population shifts. Fortmann concludes that none of these existing theories is sufficient to explain agency reactions to population changes without consideration of professional norms and beliefs.

Taken together the six papers in this symposium illustrate that schol-

arship in the politics and policy of natural resources and environment has undergone change for the better in the past twenty years. In part, these improvements may be attributed to the fact that a perceptible blush of professional respectability has settled over what have long been regarded as weaknesses in the field. The prescriptive tendencies lamented by Francis and Salazar and Lee are very much related to an a- if not anti-theoretical preference for storytelling. Both are enjoying a vogue under such diverse headings as policy history and the "cafeteria of the center."<sup>2</sup>

However, this moment in the sun of professional fashionability does not appear to us to be a trend in the natural resources policy field. Resource and environmental policy since the 1970s has been imbued with a notion that "the problem" however defined arises directly or remotely from an excess of science, linearity, positivism, reductionism, technique, formalism, and expertise. It would be surprising indeed if those who study such policies would embrace these aspects of political science professionalism in their quest for better resource policy. So the "improvements" we see are more likely to be deviations toward the norm, or cultural drift, than "progress," another queasy notion in our field.

Our field is demonstrably less gnostic, as are the policies we study, than in times past. Yet the field is still more interested in the stories and their outcomes than their promise for yielding rejectible hypotheses or testing general theories of policy or politics.

We do not see, in this volume, in the discussions that led up to it, or in our own work, a tendency to eschew passion and prescriptions in favor of theoretical-methodological sophistication. If some of the self-righteousness of the 1970s scholarship has abated, we are nevertheless peculiarly aware of the intellectual lessons at the roots of that turbulent period: Progress probably isn't, and science is suspect. We therefore neither lament our humility nor prescribe a coherent agenda for enhanced professional respectability in future decades.

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2. G. Almond, *Separate Tables: Schools and Sects in Political Science*, in 21 PS: Political Science & Politics 828-842 (1988).