GOVERNANCE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT: NEW PERSPECTIVES

Magali A. Delmas and Oran R. Young (eds)
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One virtue among many from Elinor Ostrom winning the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences (sic) in 2009 is its highlighting the growing prominence of environmental governance, a field to which she has contributed greatly. The edited volume under review acknowledges her role as well as the contributions to the field that University of California professor, Oran Young, has made.

The book has four parts. Part I offers the Introduction and Chapter 1, where the editors lay out the central themes and perspectives. The Introduction provides a particularly useful summary of their conceptual model and how the case studies fit into the model. Part II is disciplinarily grounded, with authors setting out respective perspectives from economics, political science and management on environmental governance and problem-solving. Part III provides the bulk of the case material relevant to the effectiveness of environmental
governance interventions, while Part IV concludes with a summary of findings and steps ahead for further research.

This book would make an excellent introductory text for upper division undergraduates and lower division graduate students coming new to the field. In this instance, the repetition across chapters can serve as useful reminders to newcomers of essential points. The book’s title, however, implies a readership that comes to the volume seeking new perspectives presumably to supplement the ones they already have. In that case, the repetition and introductory material can be skipped. If I were to assign this book to upper division graduate students already somewhat knowledgeable about environmental governance, I would have them read the Part IV Conclusion first, followed by Part II chapters on political science and management perspectives, and then the bulk of Part III. That sequence has the added advantage of letting informed readers get more quickly to the question they are surely seeking an answer for, namely, just how effective were the various environmental governance interventions under review?

For those readers who operate under the old fashion expectation that what they read should be concise, informative and readable at the same time, I single out for their attention the chapters by King and Toffel, Haufler, and Auld et al.

This book’s reader should be prepared for some surprises. Even the dead hand of Foucault is made to wave about in some interesting ways, though the rest of text is spirited by regular paroxysms of shorthand econospeak. (Am I to suppose that the ‘supply and demand for governance’ produce prices like whacks of crossing staves in a Punch and Judy show?) Surely the best news, however, is how useful the editors’ conceptual model for environmental governance may be.

Delmas and Young present the following simplified schematic for understanding environment governance as described in their literature review and volume’s case studies:

In this perspective, environmental governance involves three intersecting spheres whose interactions produce a set of different interventions that collectively fall under the umbrella term, environmental governance. Note here that governance is not the same as government. Indeed, as the editors make clear, it is because the public sector cannot produce all the environmental improvements needed that we must rely on private sector markets and civil society communities. Also note that many interventions are necessarily hybridized, involving different mixes of public, private and civil society sectors.

Delmas and Young plot some of these interventions into their figure 1 (reproduced here), drawing again from the case studies and associated literature reviews. For example, public-private partnerships are singled out this way, including but not limited to agreements between industry and regulators for pollution-reduction schemes.

For our purposes here, note specifically the environmental arenas where two or three spheres overlap, such as non-state market driven agreements, including those related to what has been called eco-labelling. In the edited volume, Auld et al. spend considerable time on such interventions where the focus is on third-party certification schemes that ensure goods and services are sustainably sourced. We have programs that certify the produce is organically grown, the coffee is fair-trade, and the wood comes from forests sustainably managed. Such certification programs typically work on two fronts, first by incenting consumers to buy only certified produce while discouraging them from buying non-certified produce, including boycotting such produce where possible.

Now undertake a thought experiment: What insights would this conceptual model produce if it were applied, say, to controversies currently conceived in different ‘environmental governance’ terms? For example, a continuing controversy exists over how best to
manage the San Francisco Bay-Sacramento Delta. This is an ecosystem threatened by all manner of environmental governance problems arising from encroaching urbanization, chemical agriculture, and declining species and habitat that are already endangered by substandard levees and large technical water supplies. What would the Delmas/Young conceptual model have to say about ‘environmental governance’ problems currently being cast through a more conventional ecosystem management perspective?

Nothing seems farther away from the San Francisco Bay-Sacramento Delta than eco-labelling. Surely, the shared, intersecting problem in the Delta are its risky levees that threaten city, farm and habitat alike? Yes indeed, and therein reside the interesting implications of the Delmas/Young environmental governance framework for the Delta.

Imagine a third party program (that is, some body different from federal, state and local government) that certified Delta levees to a standard of high reliability in terms of their reduced probability and consequences of failure. Imagine further that consumers would be encouraged to buy ‘levee-certified’ goods and services and discouraged from buying those that were not certified.

For instance, the wider buying public in California and beyond would be encouraged to purchase only those goods and services from county firms that had supported levee certification in and around the Delta water intake for that county and beyond. In like fashion, the wider buying public would be discouraged in purchasing from those firms whose goods had been transported on Delta deepwater shipping channels to Sacramento.
and Stockton, if those firms did not support levee improvements up to third party certification standards along those shipping channels. Also in parallel ways, the wider buying public would be encouraged to buy agricultural produce grown from those islands that had been levee certified and discouraged from buying that which was levee uncertified.

I could go on, and in the end my thought experiment may have no policy or management relevance whatsoever. Yet to my knowledge nothing like this has been argued in the 50-year stalemate over what to do in the Delta. I encourage readers to find out if this book’s schematic model is as interesting in their own applications.

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