Between Preservation and Exploitation

Transnational Advocacy Networks and Conservation in Developing Countries

Kemi Fuentes-George

Between Preservation and Exploitation

Transnational Advocacy Networks and Conservation in Developing Countries

Kemi Fuentes-George

Acknowledgments

indebted to all of my named and unnamed interviewees, who took time out of their days to answer my questions and point me in new directions during my research.

Finally, for their patience and unceasing emotional support, I am eternally grateful to Xavier, Aldan, Bennet, and my wife, Lindsey.

Introduction: Transnational Advocacy and Conservation in Developing Countries

The Global Problem of Biodiversity Loss in the Developing World

In the late 2000s, protests, informational campaigns, and lobbying efforts broke out in Jamaica and Mexico, as ordinary citizens demanded that governments put a stop to lucrative, but ultimately environmentally harmful economic development activities. What these campaigns had in common was that they were catalyzed by transnational advocacy networks comprised of researchers, academics, and local activists who had spent the better part of two decades gathering information about increasingly alarming threats to biodiversity in these regions. Despite the fact that powerful business interests in Jamaican bauxite mining and Mexican tourism strongly opposed any change in the status quo, the mass public in these countries mobilized around the networks' information. With the support of sympathetic governmental agents, they successfully pushed for new regulations to conserve globally important biodiversity.

Although these networks based their claims in part on the scientific implications of biodiversity decline, their influence on policy and practice in these cases is not attributable solely to their ability to speak as scientific experts in a complex issue area. Rather, scientific claims about biodiversity were married to local demands for resource access and environmental justice by marginalized populations who were threatened with displacement by large-scale mining and tourism. Countering both preservationist claims and economic exploitation, networks and mass publics successfully argued that local populations should retain traditional access to land. Only by doing so, they argued, would it be possible to use natural resources in a sustainable manner. So it was that scientific data produced by transnational networks comingled with historic narratives about slavery, colonial

resistance, regional identity, intergenerational tradition, and in some cases threats of bloodshed, to influence new environmental regulation to conserve biodiversity. More significantly, this was done in the face of opposition by industrial developers in mining and tourism who, along with the government, argued that new regulation would hamper the economic growth sorely needed in developing countries.

At the same time that transnational networks were influencing the passage and implementation of environmental legislation in Jamaica and Mexico, two other networks were attempting to influence conservation in the interior of southern Mexico and along the Red Sea in Egypt. As in the aforementioned cases, transnational networks produced scientific information arguing for new regulations that would conserve biodiversity in the face of significant threats from nationally prominent industries. Industrial practices from large-scale agriculture and tourism were similarly threatening to displace local and marginalized populations in Mexico and Egypt who depended on natural resources for small-scale commerce and subsistence. However, whereas transnational advocacy networks of scientists were able to influence environmental action along the coast of Mexico and in Jamaica, they were unable to do so in southern Mexico's interior or on the Egyptian Red Sea coast. Not only did governmental agents and industrial actors challenge the policy implications of the scientists' information, so too did members of the mass public who were unconvinced by the stated reasons for conserving biodiversity in times of poverty. And so, efforts at building effective regulatory instruments to conserve biodiversity failed in these two cases.

While these contestations over environmental policy played out at a very local level, they nevertheless had important implications for global environmental governance. As scholars like Rosendal and Schei and Swanson have noted, international conservation treaties like the Convention on Biological Diversity depend for their implementation on the ability of developing countries to change domestic behavior among communities and subnational units.[1] Without commitment at the local level, multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and other institutions will be ineffective at addressing the problems of ecosystem decline.[2]

In this book I discuss four cases of transnational advocacy networks that participated in the design and implementation of biodiversity conservation projects in the developing world. I use these cases to ask the following

questions: why were transnational advocacy networks able to persuade policymakers and private sector actors to change environmental behavior in the mountains of Jamaica and the coast of Mexico, but not in Egypt or inland in southern Mexico? How important is scientific information in explaining when networks can influence policymaking? Can networks reconcile scientific arguments for behavior with appeals to culture? Should transnational networks even promote conservation in developing countries, if conservation impedes economic productivity? Or can the environment be conserved in a way that serves the most needy and vulnerable populations in developing countries?

I am particularly interested in exploring how people and institutions approach the problem of biodiversity conservation in developing countries. Biodiversity or biological diversity is defined by the international community as follows: "The variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems."[3] For a variety of reasons, including different rates of industrialization, colonization, and accidents of evolution, most of the world's remaining biodiversity is found in the developing world.[4]

Global biodiversity loss is one of the major environmental problems of the modern era, a fact illustrated by increasingly alarming data gathered by the international community. For example, the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment tells us that biodiversity is being lost at a rate that is currently "up to one thousand times higher than the fossil record," primarily due to human activity.[5] The 2010 *Global Biodiversity Outlook*, published by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, tells us that the human activity causing biodiversity loss, including anthropogenic habitat change, overexploitation, and pollution, is either remaining constant or increasing in intensity.[6] Moreover, the *Global Biodiversity Outlook* and the 2012 report on the Millennium Development Goals illustrate that at best, we have slowed the rate of biodiversity loss in only a few areas.[7] As humans drive various species of mammals, birds, aquatic life, and plants to the brink of extinction, we are faced with as-yet unknown, but potentially severe environmental problems. At a minimum, we are faced with the loss of forms of life that took millions of years to evolve and are irreplaceable. More alarmingly, biodiversity loss can have ripple effects. As each species

in an ecosystem is lost, there is a risk that complex and poorly understood relationships may be irrevocably disrupted, leading to sudden declines and ecosystem collapse. In addition, poor and rural people are more vulnerable to ecosystem decline. They depend more directly on biodiversity and ecosystem services than urban dwellers, and poverty makes it more difficult for vulnerable populations to purchase substitutes of natural resources, or relocate in order to escape problems caused by environmental decline.[8]

Because biodiversity is generally contained within a state's borders, there is less need to coordinate environmental regulations across different political systems, which makes managing biodiversity less problematic in some ways than regional or internationally managed problems such as acid rain, ozone depletion, and transnational waste movement. However, the international society still has to find ways to convince governments of developing nations to implement meaningful and potentially costly environmental reforms if global biodiversity is to be saved.

The cases studied here center on the domestic implementation of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) but involve other biodiversity-oriented MEAs, such as the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). As a framework convention, the CBD leaves substantial room for states to interpret treaty obligations. Article 8 of the CBD recommends that parties create and manage protected areas for in situ conservation, while the World Conservation Union (IUCN) has also recommended that parties to the CBD adopt an internationally standardized approach to defining and managing protected areas. However, in a system of international sovereignty, states complying with the CBD are free to manage protected areas to the extent that policymakers see fit.[9] In practice, this means that protected areas can range from zones restricted only to scientific researchers for the purpose of knowledge and data gathering, to "cultural landscapes" with human populations daily utilizing the natural resources within, to regularly accessed sites of tourism, to "paper parks," legally created areas that have no effective management practices in place.[10]

Technically, states may be in compliance with biodiversity treaties if they create additional protected areas, regardless of whether the creation of these areas leads to a real change in behavior at the local level or not. This points to one of the challenges of using regime compliance as a measure of good environmental governance. If a regime's obligations are substantively vague or otherwise poorly designed, it may be difficult to determine

if the parties are meeting them. In fact, as Victor and others have illustrated, regimes may have requirements that are so thin, that they do little more than codify existing behavior such that states comply with them by default.[11] In other words, regime compliance does not always mean good environmental behavior. As Mitchell has noted in a recent volume edited by Young, King, and Schroeder, a regime can only be effective if it leads to a meaningful change in behavior among key actors.[12]

This is a problem that has been picked up on by the international society. The report on the Millennium Development Goals demonstrates that even as the total coverage of protected areas has increased globally, biodiversity has steadily declined. Galaz and others in the Young, King, and Schroeder volume attribute some of this discrepancy between the growth in institutional norms and local regulations and the steady decline in biodiversity to the problem of "fit." Problems with institutional fit emerge when the instruments designed to address an environmental problem do not meet the needs of the biophysical and social systems in which they are deployed.[13] The authors point out that if institutions have jurisdiction over too small an area, then even positive regulatory changes may cover too little an ecosystem to arrest an environmental decline.

In addition, one of the challenges of environmental governance is that human society creates regulatory instruments with imperfect and incomplete knowledge about the precise effects of current and future anthropogenic stress on natural resources. For example, ecosystems may reach tipping points earlier than anticipated, due to the introduction of new stresses, or because some causal relationships were overlooked. If institutions do not respond dynamically to observed changes, then regulations that may have been initially well designed could quickly become obsolete. Fortunately, as their volume indicates, institutional "fit" may be improved if decision makers have access to the right information at the right time. To that end, transnational advocacy networks can play a crucial role in helping existing and future regimes become more effective tools in conserving biodiversity. Transnational networks can do this if they use information to influence which geographic areas are considered relevant to biodiversity management, how to evaluate appropriate management policies in protected areas, and how to identify and measure improvements in biodiversity indicators.

Transnational Scientific Networks, Activism, and Environmental Governance

Although the barriers to entry are great and the successes are hard won, the history of global activism shows that advocacy networks of ordinary people, motivated by strongly held ideas, can influence how governments and institutions treat the environment. Scholars such as Khagram,[14] McCormick,[15] Wapner,[16] Keck and Sikkink,[17] and Haas[18] have described how advocacy networks, using only the power of persuasion, have influenced the content of international treaties such as the Montreal Protocol on Ozone, and the environmental practice of institutions like the World Bank in funding dam development projects in less developed countries (LDCs). Moreover, institutions in the UN constellation have recognized that nonstate actors matter to global environmental governance. Responding to the global problem of biodiversity loss, international organizations like UNESCO and the Global Environment Facility have asserted that local communities, environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOs), and civil society researchers should be involved in designing and managing governance mechanisms, such as protected areas and sustainable use practices.

However, even though civil society advocates can, and arguably should, make a difference does not mean that they always will. As advocates have realized, at the international level the proliferation of networks and advocacy organizations has not always led to influence. Participation in treaty drafting or at international summits is ultimately circumscribed by the will and interests of states who function as arbiters of civil society legitimacy.[19] Moreover, at the local level, governments have ways of jealously guarding their authority. Although international institutions like the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the World Bank encourage governments to include nonstate actors in decision-making processes, they are unable to legally require local governments to listen to the recommendations of the civil society. As these cases show, governments may establish institutions with impressive titles like State Advisory Council, create formal seats for representatives of the civil society, and then either circumscribe the agenda to which civil society advocates have access, or ignore all policy recommendations that do not already fit with vested interests.

In addition, network advocacy may fail to gain influence if networks do not act appropriately in choosing, framing, and deploying arguments.

The literature is rife with examples of conservation networks in developing countries that managed to alienate potential supporters in the civil society and government by adopting an environmental agenda that was insufficiently attentive to the needs of local populations. Therefore, network advocacy may succeed or fail based on characteristics of the networks themselves, such as their ability to build cooperative relationships with target audiences, as well as characteristics of the political system in which they are engaged.

So for those interested in learning about the possibilities of environmental activism, the question remains: if nonstate actors matter to global environmental governance, under what conditions and when are they most likely to do so? By comparing the case studies examined here, I contend that transnational advocacy networks will have to meet at least three conditions to improve the likelihood that they will influence environmental policymaking. First, they will have to generate an internal and intersubjective scientific consensus on the causal dimensions of the area in which they are interested. Second, they will have to link conservation to environmental justice concerns among local communities. Third, they will have to establish social links with target audiences in critical regulatory and civil society institutions.

By asserting that transnational advocacy networks can persuade other powerful actors, such as governments and institutions, to change their behavior, I am asserting that ideas matter in international relations. This claim places my research firmly in the interpretivist school of international relations theory. Interpretivism is not, strictly speaking, one approach, but contains many schools that focus on the role of ideas, including constructivism, feminism, and critical race theory.[20] In contrast, rationalist approaches like neorealism and neoliberalism downplay the normative role of ideas, and claim to explain important global phenomena by focusing on the quantifiable material capabilities of key actors (usually states), such as the distribution of military capabilities, differences in the gross domestic product (GDP) of powerful countries, and economic incentives.[21]

These two approaches differ significantly in the causal power and import they attribute to transnational advocacy networks. Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) are loosely organized coalitions of "actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchange of information and services."[22] Unlike

corporations and governments, transnational networks cannot use political force, military coercion, or massive economic resources to influence outcomes. Rather, they have to appeal to norms, or widely held ideas about appropriate behavior in a particular issue area, in order to persuade other important actors to change behavior.

From a rationalist perspective, this means that TANs have limited ability to shape outcomes. Governments may rely on TANs for information at critical junctures, but only to clarify preexisting interests. In other words, TANs function primarily as informational resources for governments trying to maximize fixed, hierarchically ordered preferences.

For constructivism, one of the interpretivist approaches, interests are not fixed, but are constituted by norms, and hence subject to change in ways not entirely dependent on material realities. In other words, while there are undoubtedly aspects of our world that exist independent of our thinking about them (such as nuclear weapons, colonialist policies, international differences in military power, and racial inequality), our understanding of, and approach to, these problems can be altered if we think about them in different ways. Since ideas affect the conduct of international relations, actors who can shape them—like transnational networks—have power. In fact, *influence* is a kind of power that networks exercise when they convince policymakers and other actors to take action that they ordinarily would not have. This knowledge-based view of power is not materialistic, nor is it manipulative, in that it does not depend on networks convincing policymakers to act against their objectively determined interests.[23] By exercising knowledge-based power, networks do more than bring problems to light. They attempt to negotiate meanings and shape the discourse around an emerging issue area.[24] This is particularly relevant to nature conservation. Although the lay public thinks of environmental places like ecosystems, watersheds, and ecoregions as being objectively "out there," our understanding of the natural environment and what environmental management "means" is shaped by social understandings.

Constructivist scholars have written extensively about how norms have shaped the conduct of international relations. For instance, Risse-Kappen argues that the Soviet Empire was brought down in part by internal conflicts between supporters of political and economic liberalism and supporters of Soviet statism, and not entirely by changes in the distribution of military power between the two international poles.[25] Klotz posits that

the international society, including the United States and the United King-
dom (both of which had economic ties to South Africa), imposed crippling
sanctions against the apartheid regime to protest its institutionalized racial
hierarchy because of new ideas about racism's moral failings.[26] Dimitrov
contends that states have adopted a norm of environmental multilateral-
ism, and thus create treaties and institutions to address problems such as
global deforestation, even when there is no additional problem-solving
capacity gained by doing so.[27] Finally, Price and Tannenwald assert that
although contemporary conventional weapons may exceed the destructive
power of nuclear weapons, the fact that the international society has not
used them in almost seventy years despite ample opportunity can be attrib-
uted to a sentiment of international revulsion against the idea of nuclear
weaponry.[28] In all of these examples, norms affected how governments
acted internationally and domestically.

Further, several contemporary studies have also clarified how civil soci-
ety advocates have used ideas and persuasion to affect global environmen-
tal governance in important ways. Rodrigues describes a case wherein TANs
persuaded Brazilian policymakers and the World Bank to endorse public
participation in environmental impact assessments of Amazonian develop-
ment on indigenous communities.[29] Skodvin and Andresen give evidence
that TANs lobbied states to push for the adoption of a moratorium on com-
mercial whaling in the International Whaling Convention (IWC) because
of deeply held ideas about the intrinsic value of cetacean life.[30] Khagram's
work argues that networks convinced the World Bank to allow indepen-
dent review of the environmental and social impact of dams in India, while
Levering and Keck and Sikkink point out that networks also assisted states
in negotiating the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas.[31] TANs and
advocacy groups thus matter at all levels of global environmental policy-
making. They use ideas to shape international outcomes by constraining
the language and negotiation of international treaties, or by using domes-
tic, grassroots activism to change the behavior of other members within a
state or subnational political system.[32]

However, the literature is also clear that, for good or ill, transnational
advocacy networks are not always successful in promoting new ideas. If this
were so, the relationship between global environmental activism and state
policymaking would look very different. While the number and activity of
ENGOs has grown exponentially in the past four decades, they certainly

have not had untrammeled influence over global environmental governance, to the dismay of climate activists, conservationists, and environmental justice advocates.

As I have argued, networks that have a scientific consensus are more likely to influence policymaking. This argument is based on the study of *epistemic communities*, which comprise one subset of TANs. Epistemic communities are knowledge-based networks of individuals who are recognized as experts in a given issue area, and who agree about the causal relationships, scientific validity claims, reasons for action, and appropriate policy recommendations in this area.[33] Like all TANs, epistemic communities are motivated in part by principled beliefs. Unlike most TANs, they exercise a particular kind of authority in making knowledge claims by virtue of the fact that they can rest their arguments on an internally held consensus that is generated by a shared epistemology about the way the world works in their field of expertise.

The use of consensually validated knowledge claims distinguishes epistemic communities from other kinds of networks, as moral claims do not rely on hypothesis testing and the validation of causal relationships pertinent to an emerging problem.[34] To be clear, the fields of expertise of epistemic communities include natural science, but these networks may also be comprised of social scientists, including economists and legal scholars.[35] While scientific research forms one category of knowledge in which actors, recognized as experts, can claim authority, epistemic communities can emerge in any field where individuals "1) share professional judgment on a policy issue; 2) weigh the validity of their policy goals in their area of expertise; 3) engage in a common set of practices with respect to the problem area ... 4) share principled beliefs."[36] As Cross points out, these individuals could just as well be military experts making claims on nuclear arms control, as faith leaders in the priesthood.[37] Nevertheless, since this manuscript focuses on environmental policymaking, I draw from the literature that examines epistemic communities as networks of scientists.

Epistemic communities are generally seen as more likely to exercise policymaking influence in cognitively complex issue areas like environmental management. Scientific reasoning and shared causal beliefs not only distinguish epistemic communities in environmental advocacy from other kinds of advocacy networks, but also are the causal mechanisms by which epistemic communities shape governance. Scientific knowledge claims

are commonly seen as "objective," "competent," and "valid," and science portrayed as derived from a "permanent, ahistorical" truth.[38] When science-based communities generate a consensus on causal relationships in a problem area, they have a powerful cognitive tool to convince target audiences, including state policymakers, corporations, and secretariats of international institutions to adopt a certain understanding of the world and act appropriately. Epistemic communities and their scientific authority have been influential in shaping: the development of the UN Economic Commission for Europe's convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution (LRTAP),[39] the creation of a Mediterranean Action Plan to manage oil pollution,[40] and the negotiation of the regulatory Montreal Protocol of the Vienna Convention on the Protection of the Ozone Layer.[41]

While these studies have focused primarily on the influence of epistemic communities on governments and state leaders, Cross also points out that, particularly in an era of multilevel governance, we should examine what effect epistemic communities have on nonstate actors.[42] In other words, environmental epistemic communities are trying to change not only policy, but also the actions of people in the private sector, like corporate leaders and community groups, that influence how we use natural resources. McCormick, for instance, studies how epistemic communities mobilized the mass public to campaign against breast cancer.[43] The argument that network influence can be strengthened when networks agree about the science underlying an issue is a well-established one, but influence operates at multiple levels. In order to measure it, scholars need to pay attention to the effect, if any, of knowledge on the behavior of actors other than policymakers.

At the same time, epistemic communities depend on more than getting the science right. While scientific authority is an important cognitive tool available to epistemic communities, civil society networks nevertheless have to persuade target audiences, whether policymakers or CEOs, that their claims are salient and congruent with preexisting interests.[44] This requires that epistemic communities and TANs negotiate the social and political norms in which they operate, as causal arguments that violate institutionalized norms will be dismissed by target audiences, even if the underlying science is valid.[45] It is this need to appeal to domestic norms that suggests that epistemic communities will have to frame their arguments in language that is likely to appeal to the worldview of target audiences. The ability to choose

appropriate *frames* (or the set of metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to interpret an issue, provide a rationale for action, and mobilize support)[46] is an additional important cognitive tool through which epistemic communities and other kinds of advocacy networks may exercise influence. When emerging problem areas are framed in such a way as to resonate with the predetermined interests and institutionalized norms of target audiences, managers are more likely to self-identify as potential stakeholders, and internalize the arguments presented.[47] With this in mind, my second broad argument is that transnational advocacy networks will have to frame conservation in a way that supports local environmental justice claims. In doing so, networks will be more likely to ground their claims in a way that attracts public support and legitimacy for conservation.

This argument is perhaps the most contentious, as it seems to contradict one of the major contemporary approaches about the best way to promote environmental management in developing countries. Over the past twenty years, neoliberalism has emerged as the dominant framework in creating environmental governance mechanisms. Bernstein describes the rise of "neoliberalism" as a dominant approach in environmental governance as *liberal environmentalism*,[48] while Bakker and others more recently describe this as the rise of *neoliberal environmentalism*.[49]

Although scholars like Bakker and Castree are very critical of the overuse of the term "neoliberalism" as an excessively vague rhetorical tool lambasting the attitudes and practices of multinational corporations, the literature is clear that there are certain practices and norms that fit within the typology of neoliberalism. Moreover, these practices distinguish neoliberalism from other approaches to environmental management. For instance, liberal environmentalism (or environmental neoliberalism) is characterized by the use of mechanisms such as privatization of water and natural resources; commodification and marketization of biodiversity; deregulation of public lands and goods; monetization of ecosystem services; and the delegitimization of nonmarket (i.e., cultural, emotional) perspectives of valuing nature.[50] Neoliberalism also acts in the service of global capital, by disseminating norms and attitudes that privilege a capitalist mode of conceptualizing appropriate policies to manage nature.

In practice, this has meant that conservationists have focused on drawing a parallel between the goal of conservation—healthy ecosystems—and the economic benefit of these ecosystems to major economic sectors in