CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY: RETHINKING THE LINKS BETWEEN NATURAL RESOURCES AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION
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This collection of papers emerged out of an international conference entitled "Environmental Violence and Conflict: Implications for Global Security," which took place at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in February 2010. The conference brought together a wide array of scholars, policy experts and activists to evaluate the role of the non-human environment in precipitating and perpetuating violence. Our aim was to foster deeper engagement between the security and environmental communities, whose expertise is too often isolated from each other.

This working papers series is the preliminary result of our efforts to investigate the as-yet-underappreciated ecological dimensions of conflict by exploring the intersections between natural resources and political upheaval. The dominant perspective on environmental security is most often identified with the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program (ECSP), and the University of Toronto's Environmental Change and Acute Conflict Project (ECACP).[1] While a 'broad church,' most scholars associated with these programs operate within a statist ontology, wherein threats to security are fundamentally regarded as threats to the people and resources of geopolitically demarcated social spaces. In addition, most scholars of environmental security begin from the assumption that changes in resource endowment (scarcity or abundance) are the primary drivers behind social conflict.

Because of this preference for thinking about environmental security as the implications of changing resource endowments for state security, and as an issue primarily for powerful actors and their networks to deal with, alternative conceptions which focus on rights, justice and access remain marginalized within this state-centrist discourse. This collection of papers seeks to redress this limitation by privileging alternative conceptions and understandings of environmental security. Our aim is to encourage new ways of thinking about the theories and practices of environmental security, by focusing on three major themes: rejecting the primacy of the state; environmental security as environmental justices; and questioning key assumptions.

Rejecting the Primacy of the State

Many of the papers in this collection grapple with questions about the appropriate scale at which to begin unravelling questions of environment and security. Contributors are unanimous in rejecting the primacy of the state as the preferred level of analysis for exploring issues of environmental security. Many stress the omissions and erasures that result from this tendency to emphasize the national scale of analysis above all others. Tom Deligiannis, for instance, begins with the provocative contention that the state is an inadequate level of analysis for investigations of environmental security. He argues that this state-centred focus marginalizes local complexities and livelihoods which are key to understanding how lived realities are reconfigured by environmental insecurity. He suggests that this failure to appreciate local livelihood complexity has led to an over-prediction of possible violent conflicts, proposing instead an emphasis on household livelihood analysis to better understand capabilities and assets at the micro-level.

Contributors are equally wary of simply replacing the state with another privileged lens of analysis; rather, these papers suggest that multiple scales must be taken into account simultaneously. Congruent with political ecology's emphasis on multi-scalar, or nested scales of analysis these papers integrate regional, community and individual perspectives in order to reveal the complex and layered interactions that determine environmental insecurity. Larry Swatuk and Dominic Mazvimavi's survey of water availability in Africa, for instance, includes analysis undertaken at continental, regional and community levels, which allows the authors to challenge long-held assumptions regarding the short supply of water on the continent. Shane Mulligan examines the rhetoric of peak oil by examining the interplay between national and supra-national scales in the same analytical frame, suggesting that these interactions across scales are key to understanding widespread reluctance to face impending energy shortages.

Environmental Security as Environmental Justice

The second thread that connects these papers is a desire to broaden the analytical field of environmental security to encompass questions of environmental justice. O.P. Dwivedi and Jorge Nef express concern over what they perceive as the transformation of national security into elite security, which prioritizes the concerns of a small minority. Instead they suggest broadening this frame by recognizing that, in highly and complex interconnected systems, the security of the whole depends upon its weakest links. Peter Stoett takes up this point in his paper as he too expresses concerns over the narrow scope of concerns that emerge within the literature on environmental security. He proposes understanding environmental violence as transgressions of environmental justice, which offers both a better conceptual vantage point for understanding the links between the non-human environment and political violence, and a normative program from which we can move forward with plans and policies to remedy situations where "chronic inequality or sudden catastrophe have ensured ongoing harm to vulnerable populations."

Several contributions seek to add some empirical meat on to these theoretical bones by shedding light on the lived realities of vulnerable groups coping with environmental insecurity.

Shelly Whitman narrates the brutal realities faced by women living the eastern Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, arguing that the international demand for precious metals such as coltan and tantalum is largely responsible for these unprecedented levels of sexual violence. Sarah Wiebe similarly focuses on the lived experiences of women coping with environmental insecurity among the Aamjiwnaag First Nations. She provides a theoretically rich and locally situated account that underscores how environmental violence literally inscribes itself upon people's bodies. Wilfrid Greaves focuses on community experiences of insecurity among the Inuit, arguing that dominant narratives of securitization exclude and ignore the environmental realities experienced by non-dominant populations. Heather Smith and Brittney Parks ask similar questions about the agency of non-dominant actors, as they focus on reclaiming voices that have been silenced within broader debates about environmental security. Their analysis shows that Inuit activists explicitly reject the language of vulnerability when representing their plight, suggesting that the language of environmental security does not resonate as loudly among vulnerable groups as it does among the elite. These contributions aim to transform the vocabulary of environmental security from one based on territories, threats and defence, to one based on rights, access and justice.

Questioning Key Assumptions

The third element of critical environmental security is a commitment to questioning some of the key assumptions that underpin much of the existing scholarly and policy research. The first pertains to geographic focus. Following in the tradition of Robert Kaplan's seminal 1994 essay "The Coming Anarchy,"[2] widely recognized as the catalyst that popularized environmental issues among security and policy experts, much of the literature on environmental security locates the source of insecurity squarely in the Global South. Accordingly, most scholarly accounts come replete with dramatic projections of swelling numbers of environmental refugees ready to invade the North, or entrenched conflicts among resource-poor pastoralists fighting over dwindling food supplies. The primary concern, in this view, is that instability in the South may spillover to threaten prosperity in the North.[3]

Contributors refuse to fall into this trap, emphasizing that environmental insecurity remains deeply embedded in supposedly secure states. The papers by Chris Arsenault, and Philippe Le Billon and Angela Carter both focus on insecurities created by the Alberta oil sands. Touted in the United States as a secure alternative to dirty Middle East supplies, both papers show that the oil sands may not be as secure as they initially appear. Contributions by Wiebe, Smith and Parks, and Greaves all focus on Aboriginal Canadian communities, whose insecurities are often occluded by this bias against recognizing insecurity in supposedly secure states. This focus on "insecurities of non-dominance," as Greaves puts it, is an attempt to redress this widely held assumption that insecurity can be neatly delineated along geographic lines.

Other contributions take aim at other deeply engrained assumptions that underlie much of the environmental security literature. Chris Russill warns against accepting the rhetoric of securitization at face value, suggesting we need to investigate critically the relationship between science and policy. Using the case study of climate change, his paper investigates the representative process of

securitization, demonstrating how scientific information is selectively incorporated by security agencies to further their own agendas. Similarly, Mulligan challenges dominant representations of energy security, explaining not just how certain discursive formations emerge as dominant, but how other conceptualizations (such as that of peak oil) are suppressed.

Toward a Critical Analysis of Environmental Security

Taken together, this series of papers represents a first step towards articulating a critical analysis of environmental security, one that dislodges the state as the preferred level of analysis, seeks to understand threats to security in terms of rights, access and justice, and questions key assumptions that underlie much of the existing literature. Within this lens the focus shifts from environmental security to environmental *in*security, as we attempt to put the focus of analysis on understanding how individuals, groups and communities become disadvantaged in terms of their environmental entitlements. Locating our analysis within this rubric of insecurity implies a deep level of self-confrontation that connects these papers: a willingness to follow Simon Dalby's lead and critically examine our own role (as citizens, as scholars, as activists) in creating conditions of insecurity.[4]

Notes

1. For the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program (ECSP), see Richard A. Matthew, Jon Barnett, Bryan McDonald and Karen L. O'Brien, *Global Environmental Change and Human Security* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: MIT Press, 2010); John Barnett, *The Meaning of Environmental Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001); Danial Deudney and Richard Matthews (eds) *Contested Grounds: Security and Conflict in the New Environmental Politics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). For the University of Toronto's Environmental Change and Acute Conflict Project (ECACP), see Thomas Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity and Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Thomas Homer-Dixon and J. Blitt (eds), *Ecoviolence* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
2. Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 273, No. 2 (1994), pp. 44-76.
2. Simon Dalby, *Environmental Security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
3. Simon Dalby, *Security and Environmental Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).