



# **THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS AS A FIELD OF INQUIRY OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES**

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## **Abstract**

Global environmental politics (GEP) has evolved significantly over the past three decades, emerging as a distinct interdisciplinary field that transcends traditional frameworks in international relations. This paper traces the development of GEP from its state-centric origins in the 1970s and 1980s, through its institutionalisation at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, to its contemporary focus on justice, equity, and plural governance. The paper highlights key innovations, including the integration of Earth system science, critiques of neoliberal environmentalism, and the centrality of climate change research, while noting persistent challenges such as North-South inequities and the marginalisation of non-climate issues. The field's expansion to incorporate non-state actors, Indigenous knowledge, and critical methodologies reflects its maturation into a transformative domain addressing Anthropocene challenges. However, tensions remain between incremental reform and systemic change, as well as between academic rigour and policy relevance. This analysis underscores GEP's vital role in reimagining global governance for an era of ecological crisis.

## **Keywords**

Global Environmental Politics, Climate Governance, Environmental Justice, International Relations, Sustainable Development

## **1. The Origins of Global Environmental Politics**

Global Environmental Politics (GEP) is an interdisciplinary field that examines how diverse actors govern transboundary ecological challenges (Dauvergne & Clapp, 2023). It analyses power dynamics and institutional frameworks, addressing issues such as climate change (Keohane & Victor, 2016), biodiversity loss (Friedman et al., 2022), and environmental justice (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Distinct from traditional International Relations, GEP integrates natural science insights (Steffen et al., 2015) with critical social theories to study: (1) multilateral agreements (Mitchell, 2002); (2) corporate environmental power (Falkner, 2021); (3) Indigenous knowledge systems (Whyte, 2017); (4) North-South inequities (Roberts & Parks, 2007); and (5) grassroots movements (Temper et al., 2018). This pluralist approach bridges theory and praxis to address Anthropocene governance challenges (Dryzek & Pickering, 2019).

Global Environmental Politics emerged as a distinct subfield of international relations in the 1970s and 1980s in response to growing recognition of transboundary ecological challenges. The 1972 Stockholm Conference served as a pivotal moment, establishing key principles of international environmental governance while exposing tensions between industrialised and developing nations over environmental protection and economic development (Boardman 1997). Early scholarship, exemplified by Porter, Welsh Brown, and Chasek's foundational text (2000), focused primarily on state behaviour and interstate cooperation mechanisms through the lenses of regime theory (Krasner, 1983) and liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 2011). These frameworks proved particularly valuable for analysing successful multilateral environmental agreements, such as the Montreal Protocol. The Brundtland Report's (1987) introduction of sustainable development concepts represented a significant conceptual breakthrough (Van Der Heijden, 2006).

By the early 2000s, scholars began identifying significant limitations in the state-centric paradigm that had dominated early GEP research. Ward's (2003) influential critique highlighted three key deficiencies: inadequate attention to non-state actors in environmental governance, the failure to account for structural inequalities between

the Global North and South, and a lack of engagement with critical theoretical perspectives. These limitations became increasingly apparent as environmental challenges grew more complex and interconnected with broader issues of development, justice and human rights. The field's initial focus on formal interstate cooperation mechanisms proved insufficient for addressing the multifaceted nature of contemporary environmental problems, which often involve complex interactions between state and non-state actors across multiple governance levels.

Modern Global Environmental Politics has evolved into a theoretically rich and methodologically diverse field that transcends its origins in international relations. Recent scholarship has demonstrated significant advances in four key areas. First, the field has moved beyond state-centrism to systematically incorporate non-state actors, including analyses of corporate power (Newell, 2021) and transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Second, it has developed robust justice frameworks that examine distributive equity (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014) and Indigenous rights (Whyte, 2017). Third, the field has embraced critical theoretical perspectives, including political ecology (Martinez-Alier 2002) and decolonial approaches. Ultimately, methodological innovation has combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to more effectively capture the complexity of socio-ecological systems (Epstein et al., 2025). This evolution reflects GEP's maturation into a comprehensive field that addresses the complex challenges of the Anthropocene while maintaining its core focus on the political dimensions of global environmental change.

## 2. The 1990s: Institutionalization and Theoretical Diversification

The 1990s marked a pivotal decade in the institutionalisation and theoretical development of global environmental politics (GEP) as a distinct field of study. The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro represented a watershed moment that fundamentally transformed both the practice and study of international environmental governance. This landmark conference established key frameworks, including the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, as well as major environmental conventions, that continue to shape contemporary scholarship and policymaking (Steviss, 2010). The Summit's unprecedented inclusion of over 2,400 non-governmental organisations signalled a paradigm shift toward more pluralistic forms of governance, challenging traditional state-centric models of international relations and opening new avenues for academic inquiry.

The Rio Summit's legacy manifested in three principal ways, expanding the scope of GEP research. First, it codified the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, creating new analytical categories for examining North-South relations in environmental governance. Second, Agenda 21's comprehensive action plan introduced multiscale governance approaches that compelled scholars to consider interactions among local, national, and international policy levels. Third, the parallel adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) demonstrated how environmental issues were becoming institutionalised within global governance architectures. These developments prompted scholars to develop more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that could account for the growing complexity of environmental politics.

This period saw a significant diversification of GEP scholarship as the field responded to these new governance realities. Three emergent branches of inquiry that reflect this theoretical expansion were identified (Van Der Heijden 2006). The first branch focused on state-centred analyses of security implications and novel governance mechanisms; the second developed a political economy approach to investigate the structural drivers of ecological degradation. The third branch examined normative questions of civil society mobilisation and environmental ethics. This tripartite framework enabled GEP to break from its narrow origins in regime theory while maintaining analytical rigour. Seminal works, such as DeSombre's *The Global Environment and World Politics*, exemplified this maturation by integrating IR theory with rich empirical case studies of ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, and climate change governance (Ward, 2003).

However, this period of rapid growth also revealed significant tensions and limitations in the emerging field. While scholarly work has become more theoretically sophisticated, it often struggles with pedagogical accessibility for students new to the discipline (Ward 2003). The gap between the Rio Summit's ambitious rhetoric on sustainable development and its limited implementation on the ground spurred important critical scholarship on governance deficits and structural barriers to transformative change. These tensions have continued to fuel contemporary debates about the efficacy of multilateral environmental agreements versus alternative governance forms, while simultaneously expanding the field's empirical scope to include transnational activist networks, scientific expertise, and justice dimensions of environmental policy.

The Rio moment bequeathed a dual legacy that continues to inform current GEP scholarship. On the one hand, its institutional innovations created enduring sites for analysing regime effectiveness and compliance mechanisms. On the other hand, its shortcomings highlighted the need for more critical approaches to understanding the political economy of sustainability transitions. As the field has matured, it has developed more sophisticated frameworks for analysing these persistent challenges while maintaining its foundational focus on the interplay between environmental change and political processes across multiple governance scales. This evolution

reflects GEP's growing theoretical and methodological pluralism as it seeks to address the complex environmental challenges of the 21st Century.

### **3. Governance Mechanisms and Market-Based Approaches in the 2000s**

By the early 2000s, scholars conducted a comprehensive reassessment of global environmental politics, identifying significant limitations in the field's state-centric foundations. A systematic critique influentially exposed three fundamental shortcomings in prevailing approaches (Ward 2003). First, the analytical focus on interstate relations failed to account for the growing influence of transnational corporations in shaping environmental governance regimes. Second, the field's frameworks largely ignored structural inequalities between the Global North and South in environmental decision-making processes. Third, the theoretical toolkit remained underdeveloped for analysing normative change and grassroots resistance movements. These limitations became increasingly problematic as environmental challenges grew more complex and intertwined with broader issues of development and social justice, revealing the need for more sophisticated analytical approaches.

The field subsequently underwent a significant transformation through the incorporation of new theoretical perspectives and empirical foci. Scholars developed innovative frameworks to examine corporate power dynamics in environmental governance (Newell 2021), the growing influence of transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink 1999), and the crucial role of scientific-epistemic communities in policy formation (Haas 1992). This theoretical pluralisation was particularly evident in the emergence of environmental justice frameworks that analysed distributional impacts, recognition politics, and participation inequities in global governance (Schlosberg & Collins 2014). Indigenous scholars have further challenged Western-centric paradigms by highlighting the value of traditional ecological knowledge systems in environmental management (Whyte, 2017; Epstein et al., 2025). This expansion reflected the field's maturation and its increasing engagement with interdisciplinary insights from political ecology, critical theory, and decolonial studies.

A particularly significant development in this period was the growing dominance of market-based governance mechanisms. Dauvergne and Clapp (2016) characterise this trend as reflecting the ascendance of neoliberal environmentalism, which privileged economic incentives, privatisation, and corporate partnerships as primary solutions to ecological challenges. A critical analysis of this shift demonstrates how neoliberal approaches have strengthened institutions that favour privatisation and market pricing, often at the expense of more equitable governance models (Van Der Heijden 2006). While acknowledging some progress through these mechanisms, he highlights their tendency to reinforce existing power imbalances and marginalise vulnerable communities (Van Der Heijden 2006). It was further criticised that these market-based solutions fail to address the root causes of environmental degradation, particularly systemic inequalities and patterns of overconsumption in industrialised societies.

Kopnina's (2010) unique contribution to these debates examines the role of fundamental human traits in shaping environmental governance. Her analysis of human universals, including technological innovation drives and status-seeking behaviours, provides important insights into both the drivers of environmental exploitation and potential pathways for sustainable solutions. This perspective complements structural analyses by highlighting how these enduring human characteristics interact with the dynamics of industrial capitalism to produce contemporary governance challenges and opportunities. Together, these critical perspectives have significantly enriched the field's understanding of the complex interplay.

### **4. Climate Change as a Dominant Research Focus**

The study of climate change has emerged as the central research focus in global environmental politics over the past three decades, fundamentally reshaping the field's priorities and analytical frameworks. As Dauvergne and Clapp (2016) demonstrate, this climate-centric turn has yielded significant scholarly advancements in understanding three key dimensions: the emergence of transnational governance networks, the development and performance of carbon market mechanisms, and the complex interconnections between climate change and other environmental issues. The field has produced sophisticated analyses of hybrid governance arrangements that blend state and non-state climate actions, exemplified by the proliferation of city-led climate initiatives and corporate decarbonisation pledges alongside international climate agreements.

However, this dominant focus on climate change has generated important debates about its consequences for the field's breadth and balance. While generating valuable insights into climate governance, the overwhelming emphasis on this single issue has come at the expense of research attention to other critical environmental challenges. As Dauvergne and Clapp (2016) caution, pressing concerns such as biodiversity collapse, marine pollution, and freshwater scarcity have received comparatively limited scholarly attention, potentially creating blind spots in our understanding of interconnected ecological crises. This narrowing of empirical focus raises questions about the field's capacity to address the full spectrum of planetary environmental challenges.

The political dimensions of climate change have proven particularly contentious within the field of GEP scholarship. Van Der Heijden (2006) highlights how fundamental North-South divisions over responsibility, financing, and technology transfer have structured global climate negotiations since their inception. These enduring tensions between developed and developing nations reflect deeper structural inequalities in the global political economy that complicate collective climate action. Kopnina (2010) brings a unique psychological and anthropological perspective to these debates, arguing that effective climate solutions require an understanding of how basic human drives—such as innovation, status, and short-term gratification—interact with and often undermine sustainable socio-economic systems.

Despite its scientific urgency and growing public salience, climate change continues to face political marginalisation in many policy arenas. Ward's (2003) prescient observation about the relatively low prioritisation of climate action compared to traditional security and economic concerns remains relevant today. This political challenge stems from multiple factors: the long-term temporal horizon of climate impacts, the distributed nature of emission sources, and the concentrated economic power of fossil fuel interests. Together, these factors create what climate governance scholars have termed the “super wicked problem” of climate change, characterised by time constraints, conflicting stakeholder interests, and the absence of a central authority to impose solutions (Levin et al. 2012). This complex political reality continues to shape research agendas in GEP as scholars seek to understand and overcome barriers to meaningful climate action.

## 5. Justice and Equity in Global Environmental Politics

The field of global environmental politics (GEP) has undergone a significant normative turn, with justice and equity emerging as fundamental analytical lenses and political imperatives. Stevis (2010) and Van Der Heijden (2006) demonstrate how environmental justice frameworks have transformed the study of transboundary ecological issues by centring the disproportionate burdens borne by marginalised communities, from indigenous populations facing extractive industries to developing countries confronting climate change impacts they did little to cause. This justice-oriented approach represents a direct challenge to the dominance of technocratic and market-based solutions that characterised earlier environmental governance, advocating instead for participatory decision-making processes that empower affected communities (Schlosberg 2013).

The limitations of current governance approaches become particularly apparent when examining the role of environmental NGOs in advancing justice agendas. Ward (2003) provides a nuanced assessment of these organisations' advocacy efforts, showing how even well-established groups often struggle to transform entrenched global governance structures. Her analysis of Bryner's *Gaia's Wager* reveals a fundamental tension in environmental activism: while incremental policy reforms can achieve measurable gains, they often fail to address the root causes of ecological crises, which stem from the growth imperatives and consumption patterns of global capitalism. This critique underscores the necessity for more radical visions of sustainability that address systemic inequalities in resource access and environmental decision-making authority (Newell 2021).

Contemporary scholarship has significantly expanded our understanding of environmental justice beyond its initial distributive focus, revealing three interconnected dimensions that now shape global environmental politics (GEP). First, recognition justice challenges Western-centric policy assumptions by centring Indigenous rights and traditional ecological knowledge in sustainability efforts (Whyte 2017). Second, procedural justice highlights how marginalised communities, disproportionately affected by ecological degradation, remain excluded from decision-making, prompting calls for more inclusive governance (Sze et al. 2022). Third, restorative justice has gained prominence through concepts like “loss and damage,” which demand accountability for historical environmental harms, rather than just future prevention (Bakhtaoui et al, 2022). Together, these dimensions now fundamentally inform GEP research on climate migration, conservation conflicts, and energy transitions, marking a paradigm shift in which equity concerns—once peripheral—now drive core policy analysis and decision-making. This tripartite framework reflects the field's maturation from technical problem-solving to addressing colonialism, power asymmetries, and reparative governance in environmental systems.

The shift in justice in GEP has also sparked important methodological innovations. Where early scholarship often relied on quantitative measures of environmental inequality, contemporary research increasingly employs participatory action research and community-based methods that centre the experiences of affected populations (Temper et al. 2018). This shift reflects both an ethical commitment to inclusive knowledge production and a recognition that effective solutions must emerge from the communities themselves that are impacted. However, significant challenges remain in translating these academic advances into policy changes that substantially address power imbalances in global environmental governance (Kalfagianni, Fuchs, & Hayden, 2020).

## 6. Pedagogical Innovations in Global Environmental Politics

The evolution of GEP has been accompanied by significant innovations in pedagogy, reflecting the need to prepare students for active engagement in addressing global environmental challenges. Habib (2018) documents the use of

blog-based assessments in his Global Environmental Politics course, illustrating how online platforms can integrate theoretical, professional, and activist learning objectives. This approach encourages students to develop metacognitive skills, build professional networks, and engage with real-world actors in the field.

Ward (2003) emphasises the importance of selecting texts that inform, challenge, and engage students. She critiques some works for their lack of theoretical clarity but highlights others, such as Brent Steel, Richard Clinton, and Nicolas Lovrich's *Environmental Politics and Policy: A Comparative Approach*, for their innovative use of case studies and online resources. Such texts provide valuable tools for introducing students to the complexities of environmental governance.

Global Environmental Politics (GEP) has emerged as a distinct field that transcends traditional International Relations (IR) through four key innovations. First, it expands beyond IR's state-centrism to analyse multi-actor governance networks involving corporations (Falkner, 2019), Indigenous communities (Whyte, 2017), and transnational activists (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Second, GEP uniquely integrates Earth system science (Rockström et al. 2009) to analyse planetary boundaries and tipping points—a material-ecological focus absent in conventional IR theories (Biermann 2014). Third, the field explicitly incorporates justice frameworks that examine North-South equity (Roberts & Parks, 2007), Indigenous rights (Watson, 2018), and intersectional environmentalism (Sultana, 2022), thereby rejecting IR's purported value-neutrality. Finally, GEP employs diverse methodologies, ranging from political ecology (Martinez-Alier 2002) to participatory action research (Tschakert et al. 2019), which better capture socio-ecological complexity than IR's state-level analyses. This interdisciplinary approach enables GEP to more effectively analyse contemporary challenges, such as the implementation of the Paris Agreement, which involves corporate net-zero pledges, scientific uncertainty, and grassroots movements alongside interstate diplomacy (Ostrom 2010). By centring on ecological constraints, justice imperatives, and plural governance forms, GEP has evolved beyond an IR subfield into a transformative domain that redefines global governance for the Anthropocene (Dryzek & Pickering 2019).

## 7. Challenges and Future Directions

Today, global environmental politics has evolved into a vibrant field that examines environmental governance across multiple levels and through diverse theoretical lenses. Current research explores pressing issues such as climate justice (Roberts & Parks, 2007), the political economy of decarbonisation (Newell & Paterson, 2010), and the governance of emerging technologies (Low & Buch, 2020). The field continues to grapple with fundamental questions about power asymmetries in international negotiations, the effectiveness of multilateral environmental agreements, and the role of grassroots movements in driving systemic change. This ongoing evolution ensures that GEP remains at the forefront of analysing one of the most critical challenges facing the international community in the 21st Century.

Despite its advancements, GEP faces several challenges that warrant further attention and consideration. Dauvergne and Clapp (2016) and Van der Heijden (2006) identify the risk of narrowing the field's empirical and theoretical scope, particularly due to the dominance of climate change research and the focus on neoliberal governance mechanisms. They advocate for a more inclusive approach to GEP, addressing a wider range of environmental issues and incorporating diverse perspectives.

Kopnina (2010) emphasises the importance of incorporating human universals into the analysis of environmental challenges, arguing that these traits can be leveraged to drive sustainable solutions. Ward (2003) emphasises the importance of pedagogical approaches that encourage students to critically engage with foundational debates and envision transformative change.

## Conclusion

Over the past three decades, global environmental politics has transformed from a niche subfield of international relations into a dynamic, interdisciplinary domain that redefines how we understand environmental governance. This evolution reflects the growing complexity of ecological crises, from climate change to biodiversity loss, and the need for innovative approaches that transcend traditional state-centric models. The field's expansion—marked by its embrace of justice frameworks, non-state actors, and critical methodologies—demonstrates its capacity to address the interconnected socio-political and biophysical dimensions of environmental challenges.

Yet, as GEP matures, critical tensions persist. The dominance of climate change research risks overshadowing other pressing issues, while market-based solutions often fail to address the systemic inequalities that drive ecological degradation. The field's normative turn toward justice and equity, though vital, has yet to fully translate into transformative policy changes. Additionally, the tension between academic rigour and real-world impact remains unresolved, underscoring the need for more engaged scholarship that bridges theory and practice.

Looking ahead, GEP must continue to diversify its theoretical and methodological toolkit while resisting the narrowing of its empirical scope. By centring marginalised voices, interrogating power structures, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, the field can better address the root causes of environmental crises. As the planet

faces unprecedented ecological upheaval, GEP's role in shaping equitable and effective governance will only grow in urgency and relevance.

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