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Managing Biodiversity from global to local : the ‘ecosystem approach’ at the Convention on Biological Diversity

by Monica Castro (Ehess) and Guillaume Ollivier (Inra)

Abstract

To shed light on the intricate ways that science and policies for biodiversity management are mutually constructed, we studied The Ecosystem Approach concept (EsA). Today, EsA is a fundamental principle for biodiversity management for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to national and local levels. Its worldwide applicability has been questioned, raising issues about the suitability of such a hegemonic concept to cope with very diverse local problems. To understand these complains, we studied the dynamic process leading to EsA hegemony at international. We apply the theoretical framework of critical political ecology, which provide a great insight for the analysis of "environmental orthodoxies" production. To identify EsA genealogy and the epistemic communities participating to its construction, we used scientometric and content analysis of documents circulating between scientific and political arenas and direct observations of the decision-making process. EsA was shaped in the American socio-political and environmental context. Even though private rights advocates contested EsA, it raised as a political paradigm during a policy window opened when democrats arrive to the White House in the 90s. International institutions looking to develop management principles for biodiversity conservation took the American EsA up to the CBD. Its policy-making process is designed to give every actor the opportunity to express but only Parties have the right to vote and decide. Nevertheless, by providing key documents framing the information used to build the EsA, some non-Parties actors have the power to shape the political process. Southern states are mostly absent from decision, because their lack of scientific knowledge production and diplomatic capacity ; to be present through the political process, they have to form alliances with strong NGOs. Indeed, only two epistemic communities (IUCN-WWF vs. European agencies) influenced the construction of EsA principles, by opposing their visions on the scientific consistency and operational value of EsA as well as their conception of nature, but agreeing over the shift from the State to stakeholders as the most efficient actor for nature's management. Indeed, this weakening of the State creates an empty niche filled by NGOs and environmental societies. This paper argues that the asymmetries in knowledge and power distribution among different actors lead to the production of a concept unable to properly perform at all local levels.

Monica Castro is a PhD student at the EHESS (Paris) in comparative research and development studies. Her research focuses on international environmental policy making process and its effects when applied on the ground in southern and northern countries. In academic terms, her work is located in Political Ecology ; science and technology studies ; and environmental governance. Actually she is working on the emerging neoliberal environments, particularly through the study of the notion of “ecosystem service”.

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