

Learning Unit 7: Governing the environment

GGH2604



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Sources to consult

- **Atlas:** New Orleans, Louisiana; Houston, Texas; Everglades, Florida; Sahel Region in Africa.
- **Prescribed book:** Chapter 7: Governing the environment, pages 123–142 in Whitehead (2014)
- **Case study 7:** Regional and global cooperation in environmental governance
- **Additional resources on myUnisa:** YouTube videos and Podcast 7.7

Learning Outcomes

- Identify and explain the links between governance and environmental degradation
- Discuss the consequences of environmental degradation associated with nation states
- Assess the impacts of natural weather events and their consequences on human life
- Describe how remedial actions can reduce or prevent environmental degradation through regional and global cooperation

Protecting people from nature or protecting nature from people?

- According to official estimates, Hurricane Katrina was one of the five most deadly hurricanes to strike the US. The total cost of the damage has been estimated at \$108 billion and 1 833 deaths were directly linked to the effects of Katrina.
- The problems that Katrina generated were to these ends, as much a product of human (in)action as they 'were acts of nature'.
- The floods that followed Katrina were a result of the failure of the levee system that had been designed to protect the urban populations in New Orleans from the water held in Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River.

Protecting people from nature or protecting nature from people?

- In many respects, the most serious problems associated with Hurricane Katrina were not caused by the physical impact of the hurricane itself, but are related to technological and political failures within local, national and state governments.
- **Vote** in Poll 7.3 on myUnisa. The poll question is:
 - In August 2017, heavy rainfall from Hurricane Harvey flooded Houston, in the US state of Texas. Following the intense rainfall event, a levee gave way and a dam overflowed. Do you think the reasons for the consequences of Hurricane Harvey is similar to Hurricane Katrina?

A brief environmental history of the nation state

- Nation states are territorial entities; however, few would claim that their power stops at the border. The contemporary role of the nation state is closely tied to the practices of government.
- For Foucault, governing involves a sense of care within the operation of states; a care that is directed at national populations, and seeks to ensure that society is ordered in such a way that it can function effectively in relation to the economic production of wealth.
- Foucault also recognises that the goal of government means that nation states must carefully regulate the relationship between people and the environment, to ensure that the welfare of the population is not compromised in the long term.

A brief environmental history of the nation state

- The emergence of early civilisations in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia was based on the control and management of water resources.
- According to Wittfogel, it was the management of water in arid areas, in the forms of flood defences, irrigation systems and domestic supply, that necessitated the formation of large-scale political bureaucracies.
- Given the limited sources of available water in such areas, and the need to distribute water over large tracts of land, effective water management could not be achieved at a local level: it required the formation of what Wittfogel describes as *hydraulic empires*.

A brief environmental history of the nation state

- During the 18th century, forest resources were a vital source of fuel and building material (used both in the construction of houses and ships) for early state systems.
- Forests also represented an important source of fiscal wealth: A product that could be taxed and traded to consolidate a nation's wealth.
- Scientific forestry enabled state systems to centralise knowledge about forest resources and to predict likely shortfalls and overproductions of timber.
- The establishment of nation states went hand-in-hand with the simplification and standardisation of the natural world. These processes of standardisation and simplification did not apply only to forests but also to water resources, agricultural land and mineral deposits.
- Governments consolidated their territorial power by developing sophisticated maps of their environmental resources. These maps and surveys increasingly deployed standardised volumetric measures in, and through which, nature could be subject to government calculation.

Thinking about state-environment relations: Green arbiters and ecological leviathans

- With regards to human-environment relations, anarchists argue that the formation of modern states has resulted in the following three processes:
 - The environmental dispossession of people who lose access to commonly shared resources that are controlled by the state (including woodlands and water courses)
 - A decline in the ecological knowledge of people whose previous engagements with nature are now administered by state officials and experts
 - The general alienation of people from the natural world
- **Vote** in Poll 7.5 on myUnisa. The poll question is:
 - Henry David Thoreau argued that “not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realise where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (1995 as cited in Whitehead 2014: 130). Do you agree with this statement?

Thinking about state-environment relations: Green arbiters and ecological leviathans

- The ecological leviathan theory of the modern state suggests that it may have a more positive influence on human-environment relations. Therefore, the state plays a crucial role in protecting the collective interests of society – which may include the sustainable use of natural resources or the preservation of clean air and water.
- These resources are regarded as common goods that would be neglected if individuals were allowed to simply follow their own selfish interests.
- It is in this context that states can regulate environmental externalities such as air and water pollution, to ensure that those who economically benefit from causing environmental harm are held accountable.

Thinking about state-environment relations:

Green arbiters and ecological leviathans

- The central environmental message of Marx's work is that capitalism leads to the subordination of environmental values to those of commercial interest.
- Marxism tends to see the state less as a referee when it comes to environmental issues and more as an instrument of the ruling economic class.
- Since wealth creation in capitalist societies is based upon the transformation of nature from its primary forms (wood, minerals, crude oil) into tradeable commodities (furniture, aluminium foil, petroleum), Marxists argue that states tend to do two things, namely:
 - Enable the corporate control and transformation of the natural environment into commodities
 - Prevent the enforcement of rules, laws and regulations that would hinder the corporate exploitation of natural resources

Thinking about state-environment relations: Green arbiters and ecological leviathans

- An example of state-sponsored exploitation of the environment is the historical role of the Brazilian government in facilitating the exploitation of the Amazonian rainforest.
- Brazilian governments in the past not only failed to protect rainforests, but also used subsidies and military power to support the interests of logging and ranching corporations over and above those of indigenous communities and the environment.
- **Participate** in the Discussion Forum Topic 7 on myUnisa:
 - “Although humans may be responsible for more and more of what goes on in the global environment, their actual awareness and sense of responsibility for such actions may be diminishing” (Whitehead 2014:129). Debate whether you agree with this statement.

Governing the air: The case of the London fog disaster

- Since the 1307 Royal Proclamation, which forbade the burning of sea coal, state authorities have been involved in a constant struggle to regulate the air quality in London.
- During the 19th century, the situation deteriorated. Chemical emissions produced by the alkali industry mixed with the soot and sulphur produced by the burning of coal in industries and residences to create what came to be known as 'pea-soupers' (black fogs).
- Despite the various forms of national and local legislation that were enacted to regulate air pollution during the 19th and early 20th centuries, such actions only achieved limited success. It was very difficult to monitor and prosecute corporations that broke air pollution laws.
- In large cities, it was often very difficult to attribute smoke production to any given factory. Moreover, early laws on air pollution tended to only apply to industries rather than residences.

Governing the air: The case of the London fog disaster

- The problems of governing air pollution came to a head in London in December 1952 when a thick fog settled over the city. Cold weather conditions in early December resulted in the burning of high levels of coal within households throughout the metropolis.
- On 5 December, these high concentrations of soot and sulphur dioxide combined with the cold weather conditions, perpetuating and deepening the fog. These climatic conditions persisted for five days. While London was no stranger to fog, the following three features made this pollution incident particularly problematic:
 - The unusual length of its duration
 - The thickness of the fog, with naturally produced fog combining with emissions of smoke to produce a dense smog
 - The large geographical area that was affected by the fog

Governing the air: The case of the London fog disaster

- These conditions conspired to generate social and economic chaos within the city of London. Early analyses claimed that 4 000 deaths could be directly attributed to the fog disaster, but this figure has recently been revised to almost 12 000.
- The British state established an expert Committee on Air Pollution in 1953. The various recommendations of the Committee on Air Pollution led to the 1956 Clean Air Act. The 1956 Act banned the emission of dark smoke from industrial and domestic chimneys. It also created smokeless zones and smoke control areas in many cities. Finally, it established long-term provisions for the relocation of power stations away from urban centres. These actions reveal the ability of states, when freed from the influence of narrow class interest, to take authoritarian action on environmental issues that can be applied in a uniform way right across a national territory.
- **Watch** the YouTube video titled “The invisible killer: London mayor launches Air Pollution Plan” from the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6Ts7KHoNCI>

Rivers of grass: The US State and the Florida Everglades

- **Listen** to Podcast 7.7 titled “The US State and the Florida Everglades” on myUnisa.

Beyond the state: The rise of international systems of government

- While nation states continue to be prominent actors in the regulation of human environmental relations in the Anthropocene, it is important to acknowledge that environmental government capacity is increasingly being developed at international levels.
- In the context of the forms of large-scale environmental issues that cross national state boundaries – such as climate change, ozone depletion and acid rain – it has become increasingly apparent that multilateral action is required to effectively address these challenges.

Beyond the state: The rise of international systems of government

- **Read** Case study 7: Regional and global cooperation in environmental governance
- **Watch** the YouTube video titled “The world's largest lesson part 1” from the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBxN9E5f7pc>

- **Watch** the YouTube video titled “The world's largest lesson part 2” from the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cEUhHTIcDU>

Thank you

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