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## **Environmental Planning**

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### **Introduction**

As knowledge concerning the effects of human activity has grown over time, so has the necessity to manage human impacts effectively. Environmental planning is a mechanism to influence decisions relating to land and resources in order to balance the freedom to develop against the need to consider the consequences for society as a whole. It has a wide role that encompasses elements such as permitting new buildings or regulating certain polluting activities, and deciding how future development should occur, like creating protected areas, or changing the use of land to allow for economic growth. It is therefore both reactive in determining development proposals and proactive in shaping how land should be used in future decades.

The easiest way to see the value and purpose of environmental planning is to take a moment to reflect upon your local neighbourhood or city and think about how land and resources are currently used – from where people live, work and play, to the quality and quantity of green space, to the ways that people or wildlife can move around - all of that was partly shaped by environmental planning. Now imagine a society without those policies, practices and processes. How may investments, resources or impacts be distributed differently? Would green spaces be built on, would the water or air quality be lower, would there be more neighbourly disputes due to insensitive building?

While there is no clear answer to these questions, the exercise is useful as it enables the discussion to turn to how environmental planning is much more than a series of statutory or non-statutory tools. It acts on behalf of society to mitigate some of the consequences of capitalism, such as those associated with the inherent desire to minimize costs or externalize pollution. As such, it can lay a strong claim to be a 'public good' that brings often unseen benefits that may last for generations.

This perspective gives the field a broad spatial and temporal remit that ties it closely to geographical thinking, while also linking it to related fields such as politics, economics, or law. Taking a step backward to see the bigger picture we can now see how the field is situated in a challenging interdisciplinary location that links land and resources, people and places, and politics and power. While there are many aspects to environmental planning, it may be simply defined as a mechanism to help societies manage how space and natural resources are used over time. White (2015: 12) sums it up in this way: "to live on this planet is to affect it: societies need to develop land and consume resources, and there will be impacts from this, but where, who or

what is affected, and to what extent?”. Environmental planners seek to answer this question in a reasoned and accountable way.

This definition also serves to illustrate the scope, connectivity and complexity of environmental planning, which in theory has significant power, but is tempered by the real world political realities that need to balance public and private interests, and deliver what are sometimes competing economic, environmental and social objectives.

## **The Development of Environmental Planning**

The birth of what we would now recognise as environmental planning began during the midst of the Industrial Revolution. Population growth and industrial activity were producing both significant changes to the environment and providing a poor quality of life for people. In the United Kingdom, the initial response was on regulating water pollution and improving conditions in the urban slums, while in the United States conservation of wilderness areas was an early policy, leading to the formation of the world’s first National Park, Yellowstone, in 1872.

During the twentieth century the scale and rationale of environmental planning continued to develop in scope and sophistication. Daniels (2007) handily categorizes the major ideas that emerged in the United States during this time as being a series of sequential eras, starting with a primary focus on parks and conservation, being gradually influenced by the rise of science, ecological knowledge and assessments, to the more recent arrival of sustainability and global concerns.

Appreciating the historical development of the subject is important as it emphasises two aspects. First, that the mandate and methods of environmental planning are rooted in the environmental, social and political contexts of the time, as such it will continue to change in conjunction with aspects, such as the nature of the impacts, changes in science and technology, or societal expectations. Second, that the scale and complexity of both problems and responses has changed dramatically since its original inception. This issue is worth exploring a little further.

## **Changing Scale and Complexity**

In contrast to the visible and localised human impacts of a century ago, environmental planning in the current context provides a more substantial and complex managerial challenge. The spatiality of environmental concerns now ranges from the very local to encompass our entire biosphere, while the temporal remit is similarly wide-ranging and considers intergenerational equity and the possible effects on people who are not yet born.

This creates a friction between the nature of problems and the means to address them. Not only do global issues, such as climate change, mesh poorly onto the traditional boundaries and policies of national, regional and local governments, but they have opaque and dispersed causal chains when compared to the more identifiable smoke, pipes or deforestation of a century ago. As such, it can be frequently hard to link problems to reasons and potential solutions. For instance, just

who is responsible for climate change and how, specifically, should they change their behaviour? Or precisely which farm in the catchment is causing diffuse pollution of a watercourse?

The governance of environmental planning is also much more fragmented than in the past. No longer does the national or local state simply solve problems by regulation, now sectors as wide ranging as forestry, energy, water or agriculture are all seen as playing a role in improving the environment, and partnership working with the private sector or community organisations is commonplace. In part this is a response to the nature of concerns, which may challenge traditional managerial boundaries, but it also relates to changes in politics more generally, which has witnessed a shift away from a centralised, top-down approach to environmental management. The state now plays more of an enabling role that can achieve objectives by working with stakeholders to engender behaviour change, design best practice examples, or supply incentives, rather than relying merely on the blunt laws or regulations that are more obvious.

These aspects emphasise that environmental planning is an intensely political activity. You may initially appreciate how a mechanism associated with determining development proposals or the protection of places will involve a degree of conflict between parties, but the discipline itself is subject to wider political debates concerning its power, approach or priorities. For example, cross border issues may demand negotiation between political actors and agencies, as without a consistent approach you may simply move an unsustainable practice from one area to another where rules are not so restrictive.

As such, the spatiality of environmental plans and policies also links to the spatiality of impacts and capital. Countries and cities are in economic competition and so the perceived 'red tape' in one place can serve to move capital elsewhere. While this may lead to fears of a 'race to the bottom', it is increasingly apparent that if the environment isn't attractive it can be difficult to attract skilled workers or mobile multi-nationals. Therefore, the slightly simplistic notion of environmental planning mediating a conflict between economic and environmental interests is a little simplistic. In reality, good environments can attract capital and many citizens value the environment whether they happen to run a business or not.

## **Conclusion**

At first glance, environmental planning appears to be a very practical subject concerned with using designation, regulation or consents to manage resource use. But by delving a little deeper we can see how there are multiple geographies and spatial tensions at play, from the scale of problems, to the politics and administrative areas of the agencies concerned, to the boundaries of natural ecosystems (Haughton, 2017). As a consequence, environmental planning targets some problems more successfully than others. Regulating industrial activity at the site scale is much easier than tackling problems that may be rooted beyond national boundaries and demand international agreements. Indeed, the continued existence of many environmental issues despite scientific

awareness and public concern signifies that they may fit poorly onto the means by which societies manage land and resources.

Above all, environmental planning is a state-led activity. As such it is influenced by wider trends in economics, politics and science that both reflect the extent to which the state should intervene in how markets or businesses operate, and what is of value to citizens. After all, the environment doesn't have a voice, it relies on society to do that, and environmental planning is one of the ways by which we collectively manage that shared resource.

## **Learning Resources**

This report is a good source for learning more about the benefits of environmental planning and the various instruments and tools that can be used. The Cities Alliance (2007) *Liveable Cities: The benefits of urban environmental planning*. Retrieved from: [http://www.unep.org/urban\\_environment/PDFs/LiveableCities.pdf](http://www.unep.org/urban_environment/PDFs/LiveableCities.pdf)

This link provides a resource to a variety of articles that discuss planning and sustainability <http://www.sustainablecitiescollective.com/all/11?ref=navbar>

The United Nations Urban Environmental Planning site provides a quick explanation of the benefits of environmental planning and has more links to other relevant policy and resources: <http://www.unep.org/resourceefficiency/Policy/ResourceEfficientCities/FocusAreas/UrbanEnvironmentalPlanning/tabid/101663/Default.aspx>

## **Bibliography**

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