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Electronic Green Journal

Title

Review: Knowledge and Environmental Policy

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/50d0t4qj>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(34)

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/G313415467

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Review: Knowledge and Environmental Policy: Re-Imagining the Boundaries of Science and Politics

By William Ascher, Toddi Steelman, and Robert Healy

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Ascher, William, Steelman, Toddi, and Healy, Robert. *Knowledge and Environmental Policy: Re-Imagining the Boundaries of Science and Politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2010. 280pp. ISBN 9780262514378. US \$23.00, paperback.

Knowledge and Environmental Policy continues the complex and variegated environmental policy discussion of the evidence-action interface and the contentious relationship between science and politics. The authors, who maintain that they are not “antiscience relativists” (p.5), are up front about their stance on the science-politics relationship: “science is thoroughly embedded in social and political practices” (p.5). Science, like other forms of knowledge they argue, is “not simply an input into the policy process; it also changes in many different ways the governing processes associated with it, from the institutions of decision making to the principles that these institutions employ in environmental policy and management” (p.21).

The book showcases how knowledge generation processes complicate environmental policy decisions that aim to be evidence-based decisions. The reason for this complication, according to the authors, is twofold. First, they contend that knowledge generation for environmental decision making is rarely “a systematic process” (p.29). Second, and perhaps the greatest crux environmental policymakers face, is the fact that “knowledge generation is a political process” or a process “affected by the value systems of institutions, professions, and individuals” (p.29).

The politics of knowledge are what make up the active ingredient of the so-called “boundaries” of science and politics, and the authors are optimistic in their view that such boundaries can and ought to be “re-imagined” to create progressive environmental policies for the 21st century. The book argues that “Reimagining boundaries means being explicit about how biases influence the knowledge generated, transmitted, and used” (p.163) to make environmental policy decisions. In other words, “We need to raise awareness of the filters that come into play when knowledge moves from generation and transmission to use” (p.163).

Knowledge and Environmental Policy makes one key recommendation that provides a strong backbone for the book, which is the need for greater “integration of local knowledge and public-preference knowledge into decision making” (p.174). While the

democratization of environmental policy is well on its way and civic engagement is standard environmental policy making practice today, the authors base their integrationist and collaborative knowledge generation model on contemporary citizen-science collaborations that seek to mesh expert and non-expert knowledge to make decisions. The book supports such democratization of knowledge production and suggests that this approach to environmental policy making is most relevant in a “postnormal science world” marked by increases in open-access knowledge (p.189).

The one glitch in the book that might be a common hurdle faced by progressive environmental policy theorists writ large, is that while it may be a laudable move to make environmental policy more attentive to social context and local knowledge, there are always unintended consequences or problems that can emerge from the institutionalization of local knowledge. The authors write that “The foci of knowledge generation would benefit from more input from processes that institutionally legitimize non-experts’ perspectives” (p.191). On the surface this sounds great, but non-experts—the lay public—may find this a slap in the face when put in a position where the State uses its power to approve public “perspectives” and accept those “perspectives” as legitimate. In this way, the book doesn’t adequately solve a key problem of power shaping the knowledge-policy interface, and that is that State power and the power of expertise are often reinforced when non-expert perspectives are institutionalized because they have become legitimate forms of knowledge.

Overall, this book will be a great resource for students and scholars of environmental policy, environmental studies, political science, environmental social sciences, as well as science and technology studies.

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Electronic Green Journal, Issue 34, Winter 2012, ISSN: 1076-7975