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Chris Sneddon

Coleen Fox

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Understanding Transboundary Water Conflicts and Cooperation: Contributions From Political Ecology and Critical Geopolitics

By: Chris Sneddon and Coleen Fox

Chris Sneddon
Department of Geography/Environmental
Studies Program
Dartmouth College
6017 Fairchild
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755
Phone: (603) 646-0451
Fax: (603) 646-1601
Email: CSSneddon@dartmouth.edu

Coleen Fox
Department of Geography
Dartmouth College
6017 Fairchild
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755
Phone: (603) 646-3379
Fax: (603) 646-1601
Email: Coleen.Fox@dartmouth.edu

Chris Sneddon is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Program in Environmental Studies at Dartmouth College. He received his PhD in Geography from the University of Minnesota and MS in Natural Resources Policy and Planning from the University of Michigan. His most recent work focuses on the political ecology of water conflicts in the Mekong and Zambesi river basins, as well as the challenges associated with constructing management regimes at a basin scale. He has also written on the theoretical and practical connotations of discourses of “sustainability” and “sustainable development.” At Dartmouth College, Mr. Sneddon is developing a research proposal on comparative water politics in the Lower Mekong, Zambesi and Upper Mississippi basins, and teaches courses in environmental history, the environmental politics of Southeast Asia, qualitative research methods, and environmental policy and politics.

Coleen Fox is currently a visiting professor in the Department of Geography at Dartmouth College. She received her Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Oregon. She received her MA in International Studies, also from the University of Oregon. Her research and teaching interests focus on the intersection of human societies and ecological processes. She is particularly interested in the political dimensions of human-environment relations. Underlying much of her research are questions about the political implications of environmental changes and how cooperation around environmental problem solving might facilitate democratization and peaceful relations. Her current research revolves around the political-economic and cultural dynamics of transnational rivers and the politics of conservation.

ABSTRACT

Efforts to understand the geographical and political complexities of transboundary river basins—both within national jurisdictions and at international levels—must embrace critical interdisciplinary perspectives. Two such perspectives, political ecology and critical geopolitics, have recently been employed by a wide range of social scientists to shed light on the power relationships and discursive strategies inherent to ecological conflict and cooperation. In this paper, we argue that the approaches encapsulated within the terms

political ecology and critical geopolitics focus attention on underdeveloped aspects of transboundary water conflicts and cooperation. These aspects—eg, the way multiple actors in transboundary basins are linked to various geographical scales; how control over water is perceived and exercised; and how ecological and hydrological knowledge is integrated with policy imperatives—are of both theoretical and practical importance. Research focused on building local, basin-wide, transnational and cross-scale institutions for the effective management of transboundary basins must account for these types of consideration, and political ecology and critical geopolitics can help draw such concerns into the policymaking process. We draw on case studies of conflict and cooperation over transboundary waters in Southeast Asia, southern Africa and other regions to illustrate our argument. We also contend that scholars and practitioners engaged in political ecology and critical geopolitics have inexplicably ignored water as a fulcrum of social conflict and cooperation. Ultimately, our aim is to complement ongoing research and policy debates concerning transboundary waters by applying novel conceptual approaches from social theory. Conversely, social theories need to account for the complex socio-ecological settings exemplified by transboundary river basins.