

Environment and Climate

Written by Raul Pacheco-Vega

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RAUL PACHECO-VEGA, MAY 19 2022

This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.

Our planet carries approximately eight billion people. Yet its capacity to provide for each one of these individuals is threatened by population growth, climate change, deforestation, collapse of fisheries, desertification, air pollution and scarcity of fresh water. The full extent of our shared global environmental problems goes far beyond the well-publicised challenge of climate change. In fact, one of the elements often forgotten is the complicated relationship between human beings and their environment. In the early years of the conversation around environmental protection, some argued that the planet's resources were there for our collective consumption. However, there are limits to growth and this raises a range of important global issues. The human population quadrupled between 1900 and 2000. This growth, which continues, coupled with abrupt climate change events and further compounded by rapid industrialisation and urban expansion, have combined into a perfect storm of negative processes that put pressure on the capacity of Planet Earth to sustain life. Within the global system, the environment is one of the areas where much work remains to be done, particularly because cooperative approaches to environmental protection have had a mixed record despite the grave implications of failure.

Perhaps no issue is more international than climate change. The earth's climate has never been constant. Yet, over the last century the effects of human activity – principally the burning of fossil fuels such as oil, coal and natural gas to fuel our economy and lifestyles – have driven global warming and a resulting large-scale shift in weather patterns. Climate change is a dynamic process that increases the severity of extreme weather events such as hurricanes, droughts and flooding as the earth continues to warm. Biodiversity is a term that describes all the life forms on earth – in all their various forms, from the smallest bacteria, to plants, insects and the largest mammals. The different elements within earth's biosphere rely on the others to survive. Due to industrialisation and human activity, biodiversity loss is reaching critical levels. Sustainable development concerns retooling how a state's development occurs so that it is cleaner, more aware of impacts on natural systems and produces fewer emissions and pollutants than in traditional industrial processes. This is all the more important as the large number of 'developing' states need to follow a development path in order to improve the lives and prosperity of their citizens and reduce poverty – much as the states of the Global North already have. If they do not do so sustainably then it will exacerbate climate change and biodiversity loss and endanger the health and security of future citizens.

Developing new, and improving existing, ways to tackle environmental and climate challenges requires better integration between international initiatives and domestic policy strategies. This means creating the conditions for a model of governing the environment that is flexible and cuts across different levels, from the local to the global. It is also clear that frameworks based on ideas of global public goods and global commons are useful to aid our understandings of the shared opportunities and risks we face within the global system. However, at the same time it is important to recognise that these debates are daunting – and a rising tide of denial is perhaps an understandable, if unhelpful, reaction to this. Collective action on any scale, especially climate change, is an enormous challenge for humankind, the likes of which we have not faced in our history. Trying to find mechanisms, models and strategies to ensure cooperation across different levels of government, across a broad variety of issue areas and across a range of political and policy actors is a problematic and difficult process, as experience has shown. But the hope is that progress may continue, despite evident setbacks, and consolidate so we can all live healthily and happily on Planet

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Earth.

Text adapted from Pacheco-Vega, Raul in McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

Below is a collection of multimedia resources that help unpack, and explain the importance of climate and environment to International Relations.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – Youtube channel

Women, climate change and disasters in the Pacific – podcast

Climate Security: Bringing Climate into all Sectors – podcast

The 2020 Human Development Report – website

Voices for Peace and Conservation – podcast series

Climate Diplomacy Podcast – podcast series

The climate crisis: Is capitalism the problem? – video

Theory in Action: Global Justice and Climate Change – article

Climate Change Is a Fourfold Tragedy – article

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