PLS 209 – Environmental Politics
Mark T. Imperial

Topic: Human Values and Problem Definition

Defining Problems

- Problem definition is a medium through which we discover what we realistically want and how we may go about obtaining it
  - We don't discover a problem "out there" - we make a choice about how we want to formulate a problem
  - Ralph Waldo Emerson noted that we see what our experience has prepared us to see
  - Hemple (1996) "environmental problems are not just naturally revealed, they are – like conceptions of wealth, knowledge, and politics- socially constructed."
- A problem requires a cognitive judgment that the situation is alterable
  - Problems are situations
  - Discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be"
  - Not a problem if you can't do anything about it
- Your perspective on a problem is likely to depend on your education, background, training, experiences, etc.
  - This background is also likely to lead you to favor certain policy options. For example, water quality problems may be viewed by:
    - Economists in terms of market failures/incentives/externalities
    - Engineers may see the problem in terms of poor planning and design, technical design flaws, etc.
    - Biologist may focus on impacts to wildlife
    - Educator may view the problem in terms of poor public education
    - Political scientist/public administrator may view it as an institutional design problem
    - Planner may view as a growth management problem
- Big difference between defining policy problems in objective versus subjective terms
  - Most, if not all, policy problems are socially constructed
  - Nature and causes of environmental problems are often defined in ways that yield political advantage for one group over another
  - Selective perception/strategically define problems to lead to predefined policy problems
- Different goals, policies, objectives, and solutions often imply different definitions (interpretations) of a problem or even different problems
- Beware of the type III error
  - The probability of solving the wrong problem

What Can Happen to a Problem?

- It can be *eliminated* entirely by the policy as it is implemented and no other problems emerge
- It can be *reduced* to such a low level that there is no further need or demand for action

- It can be *succeeded* by another problem that has less serious effects or can be solved more easily
- It can be *exacerbated* by the policy and/or replaced by more difficult problems, with still other problems created in addition

Describing a Problem

- Examine the severity of the problem
  - Crisis
    - Emergency vs. non-emergency
  - Novelty
    - Unprecedented vs. familiar
  - Incidence
    - Growing, stable, or declining
    - Social patterns: class, age, cohort, etc.
    - Characteristics of the problem population
  - Proximity
    - Personally relevant vs. general societal concern
- Examine the causes of the problem
  - Intended vs. accidental
  - Blame can/can't be allocated
- Simple vs. complex
- Nature of the solution
  - Available vs. non-existent
  - Acceptable vs. objectionable
  - Affordable vs. Unaffordable

Problem Framing (Bardwell 1991)

- Environmental Issues present a challenging arena for problem solving
  - They are complex, plagued with uncertainty, and extremely political
  - They often seem intractable because they are ill structured
  - They are "wicked" problems in that they are complex, there are many ways of looking at the problem, there are many possible solutions, the problems are connected to other problems, and there is rarely one solutions
  - Solving the problems often involves questions of "transscience" in that the problems can be defined in the language of science but cannot be solved by science – some political or value judgments must be made
  - Making choices involves more than just finding a technical solution. Environmental choices reflect politics, values, and expectations as much as scientific facts
- Problem definition often guides the strategies and actions taken to address a problem
  - Problems are often defined in terms of the actions taken to address the problem
- Problem framing focuses on how problems are defined and consciously examines different interpretations of that problem
  - Need to avoid casting new problems as being like old problems
  - Don't overlook options or potential solutions
  - Avoid jumping to conclusions without adequately examining the problem

  - The process of reframing or redefining problems can enhance one's understanding of that problem
  - It involves asking questions that explore different aspects of a problem
  - Avoid the tendency to push for closure quickly and be biased towards finding quick solutions
  - Conflicts often occur when people have already decided on a definition of a problem and established solution and the definitions and/or solutions are in conflict
- Much time is often spent
  - Solving the wrong problem
  - Stating the problem so that it cannot be solved
  - Solving a solution
  - Stating the problem too generally
  - Trying to get agreement on the solution before there is agreement on the problem

Hemple (1996) draws attention to 3 overlapping perspectives on how people define environmental problems

- Contamination (pollution)
  - Environmental problems are nothing more than problems of pollution – biochemical contamination
  - Environmental destruction results from the failure to control the byproducts of human activity
  - Most common prescription for addressing the problem is limiting contaminants or cleaning them up
  - Essentially, human responsibility ends with pollution control
  - Protecting the integrity of ecosystems is at best a secondary consideration
  - Many federal laws focusing on human health are examples (e.g., controlling toxic chemicals)
- Ecosimplification (decreased ecological complexity)
  - Environmental problems are the result of homogenization and simplification of naturally complex systems
  - Environmental damage is largely the result of lost biodiversity/lost habitat
  - They don't deny contamination is a problem but would argue that the prominence it receives distracts us from the more important problem of lost diversity
  - For ecologists, an ecosystem requires more than an absence of pollution to be unspoiled
- Natural resource consumption (resource depletion)
  - Environmental problems can also be construed of as a resource economics problem in which the combination of a resource's availability, accessibility, an renewability determines the degree of environmental protection needed
  - Emphasis is on the environment as a source of natural resources for human consumption
  - Externalities, unsustainable consumption, and the failure to distinguish man-made capital from natural capital are fundamental to how damage is defined
  - Those who subscribe to this perspective are not blind to the other two perspectives, rather they relate to nature as consumers and reduce harm by regulating the consumption of scarce natural resources

- Environmental protection involves calculating the maximum sustained yield for renewable resources and developing long-term strategies for nonrenewables. It would also include proposals for natural resource o green accounting
- To those who reject the notion that nature's bounty exists for human benefit, the consumption perspective is not only distorted but dangerous

Environmental Movement (Rosenbaum 1998, chapter 1)

- Environmentalism springs from an attitude toward nature that assumes that humanity is ethically responsible for the preservation and protection of the world's ecological integrity
  - Man should use his scientific genius to manage natural resources
  - It stresses the interdependency of all natural systems (ecosystem concept)
  - Importance of ecological stability
  - Resource sustainability
  - Enormously long time span across which the impact of ecological change occurs
  - Is often critical of marketplace economics
  - Is less hostile to technology itself than the blind faith in its ability to cure whatever ecological ills it creates
  - Nation's dominant political institutions and processes must be reformed because they preserve values that are hostile to prudent environmental management
  - Suspicion of the establishment and fear of the power of an interlocking economic and political structure that cares more about the corporate bottom line than environmental protection
- By the 1990s the environmental movement had become an uneasy alliance of numerous, often discordant political camps spread across an ever widening ideological terrain
  - Pragmatic reformers such as the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation (NWF)
    - Emphasize political action through government, traditional politics such as bargaining and coalition building and national environmental agendas focused on traditional issues such as pollution and resource conservation
    - There is a great deal of ideological diversity with factional conflicts among "preservationist" groups (e.g., Sierra Club) that favor preserving resources rather than their economic or recreational exploitation. Other groups (e.g., Izaak Walton League and NWF) favor prudent resource use for public use and economic growth
    - Another source of conflicts is between the pragmatists and that radical or anti-establishment groups
  - Deep ecologists believe in lifestyle transformation and that humans are, at best, only part of nature and not necessarily the most significant part.
    - They believe that all forms of life have an equal claim on existence and that political and economic institutions should promote ecological vitality and fundamental changes in institutions and lifestyles are needed
  - Radical environmentalists
    - Emerged in the 1980s by environmentalists that are disillusioned with the establishment
    - Favors direct action tactics including civil disobedience, nonviolent demonstrations, and political obstruction

  - Increasingly, protests have included violence and terrorism, although not directly targeted at harming human beings
  - Groups would include Greenpeace and its harassment of whaling vessels on the high seas, Earth First and its tree spiking, and more recently the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and its ecoterrorism
- While groups claim to represent the "public interest", they are no different than other special interest groups and actually represent a small segment of society
  - Membership is mostly confined to middle to upper middle class, well educated, and financially well of citizens
  - Some criticize that they promote wilderness preservation for upscale recreationists, not say better schools for the disadvantaged
  - Membership climbed during the 1980s and early 1990s but has since declined
  - Groups have become increasingly professional in terms of leadership, staff, budgets, etc.
    - Become increasingly bureaucratic
    - Some criticize that they have now become Washington "insiders" and are too concerned with bargaining and compromise
    - Others suggest that there is the danger of the routinization in advocacy, careerism on the pare of staff, and passivity of volunteers
    - Controversy over political loyalty
  - Groups are very good at working the process and getting procedures built into laws and programs that allow them to exert influence
    - Broad standing to sue and citizen suits are excellent examples
  - Some criticize that like other narrow special interests, they promote issues that advance their own agendas and perhaps not the greater public interest
    - EX: pushing for the strictest possible clean-up of superfund sites when a lesser standard could result in more cleanups at less cost
  - Some criticize their continual reliance on the rhetoric of crisis and that eventually it risks losing its public credibility unless it distinguishes between problems that are emergencies or just serious
- Is environmentalism deep?
  - May now be a consensual value but it is "passive consensus" in that there is widespread but not terribly intense support
  - Although the public consistently rates democrats higher than republicans on environmental issues, it doesn't appear to help get democrats elected – the opposite may even be true
  - Environmental bond issues tend to do well in opinion polls but lose at the ballot box
  - Reagan was arguably the President most hostile to the modern environmental movement and he was overwhelmingly reelected
  - Clinton/Gore's public land policies were ultimately a significant source of voter support for republican candidates out west
  - After 1996 election, fewer than 1% of registered voters said the environment should be a high priority, perhaps one reason it wasn't
  - The "greens" dissatisfaction with Clinton/Gore caused some to vote with Nader in 2000 and may have cost Gore the election

The NIMBY Problem

- NIMBYism: often appears as a white collar professional or housewife who is articulate, well educated, and politically sophisticated
  - NIMBYism is a source of contradiction within the environmental ethic with the movement's commitment to participatory democracy and its insistence on rapid, effective environmental regulation
  - NIMBYism thrives because numerous federal, state, and local laws and decision-making processes provide opportunities for citizen participation and standing to sue. There are also numerous national, statewide, and local groups who organize and educate citizens about the potential problems of living near hazardous waste facilities, nuclear power plants, utility lines, etc.
  - Public hearings are often excellent opportunities for politicians and citizens to vent their fears and concerns
  - Critics of NIMBYism often state that the reaction is rooted in the public's scientific illiteracy or irrational fears, a middle and upper class selfishness where they would rather site facilities in someone else's backyard

Is it possible to model the driving sources of environmental problems?

- Paul and Anne Erhlich (1991) view environmental impacts as the product of 3 variables
  - I = P x A x T where I = impact, P = population, A = affluence, and T = Technology
- David Durham (1992) suggests adding a new variable where C stands for cultural value choices (I = PACT)
- Hemple (1996) suggests a more complicated formula with more interactions based on 8 variables or driving forces
- *Core values*: the fundamental belief structures that influence human attitudes towards the environment
  - Anthropocentrism (e.g., sacrificing species to satisfy human wants)
    - Conceives of man as the center for all existence and an over confident belief in human mastery over nature (e.g., hurricanes, Chernobyl)
    - Today it is extremely difficult to experience anything that is not in some way a by product or artifact of earlier human activity
    - Views are not necessarily incompatible with views of environmental protection, but does tend to lead one to conclude that extinction of a species is OK if there is no human benefit
  - Contempocentrism (e.g., Lack of regard for future generations)
    - Preoccupation with the here and now is both a cultural trait and perhaps even a genetically programmed survival trait
    - Politicians tend to have short time frames that are incompatible with the timeframes of ecological problems
    - Economic discount rates tend to favor resource exploitation today and make it harder to justify future benefits (with a standard 10% discount rate you need a $10.83 return on investment in 25 years to forego spending $1 today)
- *Amplifiers*: the instrumental means by which human values, behaviors, and possessions are extended or expanded
  - Population growth (e.g., impacts on world as a result of population projections upwards of 10 billion)

  - J-shaped growth curves (see CPR notes)
  - 5.6 billion on the planet today represent a 1000 fold increase over 10,000 years ago
  - Average population growth has decreased somewhat from about 2% to 1.9% but due to the age structure in many developing countries will increase for decades
  - Big problem is that population growth often leads economic growth in many developing countries
  - Population growth will ultimately test human carrying capacity
- Technology (e.g., unintended consequences of CFCs, waste clean-up technologies)
  - Dual capacities for salvation and ruin make it a complicated and unpredictable variable

- *Consumptive behavior*: The tension between human needs and wants and its ecological consequences as a function of material wealth
  - Poverty (e.g., deforestation for fuelwood in developing countries, raw sewage, unsustainable resource use)
    - Poverty contributes to all three kinds of environmental destruction
    - See figures 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5 in Hemple (1996)
  - Affluence (e.g., high per capita consumption of "throw-away" goods)
    - It is not inherently a cause of environmental destruction
    - It does allow destructive consumption oriented behavior that can displace environmental problems to other countries
    - Wealthiest countries consume far more resources than poorest countries
    - At the same time, wealthiest countries also do more to protect the environment
    - Danger is that "catching up to America" could become the ultimate driving force behind global environmental destruction
- *Political economy*: The dominant economic structure and ideology used to explain environmental problems
  - Market failure: (e.g., unpriced costs of acid rain pollution or mineral extraction)
    - The price we pay for goods and services seldom reflects the environmental harm incurred in providing them
    - Think in terms of consumption of energy, water, and raw materials in production, development, transportation, marketing, use, and disposal. Many hidden impacts
    - Coase (1960) argued that it does not matter who internalizes externalities so long as the property rights to land, water, air, etc. are allocated in ways that allow the parties to bargain or compensate the polluter for their abatement costs or compensate the one accepting the damage
    - Economists typically believe that the free market is the best way to achieve efficiency in resource allocation
    - Environmental critics conclude that the problem is that the markets may be working too well
  - Failure to have markets (e.g., overfishing as a "tragedy of the commons")
    - Plenty of common property resources (CPRs) that lie outside of the market and suffer the consequences for being free for the taking.
    - Absence of market structures and incentive systems explains the corresponding environmental problems and resource depletion
    - See CPR notes.

Ethical beliefs, norms, and values

- Normative beliefs and values are frequently ignored or downplayed in the policy process
  - Often norms/value choices are implicit and create logical contradictions
  - Why is saving whales a towering symbol of ecological virtue but the slaughter of sharks for their fins is ignored
  - People rally to save the African elephant, Asian tigers and pandas but people don't care as much about the hippopotamus or endangered plants or insects
  - Large sums of money can be raised to save Rhinos but not crocodiles
  - People used to care about the killing of seals but now many killings are ignored
  - At the "earth Summit" the "right" to a clean environment competed with the "right" to economic self determination
- Hemple (1996, chapter 8) notes several norms that could/should guide policy in the future
  - Common heritage of mankind
    - Ambassador Pardo from Malta proposed that the ownership of deep seabed resources during the Law of the Sea negotiations be regarded as the common heritage of mankind – favored by the group of 77 (now about 130 countries)
    - Implied open access to the resource by rich and poor alike and that the rich nations would compensate the poor for their exploitation – essentially that it will remain a common pool resource (CPR)
    - To avoid the over exploitation of CPRs, some notion of sustainability must be incorporated
    - Each generation should accept the moral responsibility for passing along some portion of nonrenewable resources to future generations
    - Some environmental groups argued that rainforests should be common heritage, but most developing countries disagree
  - Common equity
    - Fundamentally concerned with broad questions of distributive justice across political units and human generations
    - Measured in terms of the degree to which legitimate interests are fairly represented
  - Common security
    - Idealistic and based on the notion that ecological scarcity is a cause and not just a consequence of violent confrontations
    - In the case of global warming, many developing nations would be much more vulnerable to changes in sea level, reductions in agricultural productivity, etc.
  - Deliberative democracy
    - Based on the belief that the procedural norm of democratic deliberation is the only politically sustainable and morally acceptable norm of decision making
    - Potential problem is the tyranny of the majority