

EDITORIAL

Diversity, Scale, and Context in Environmental Governance

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As 2025 dawns, we bring you this first issue of volume eight of *Ecology, Economy and Society – the INSEE journal*. Continuing the tradition of facilitating interdisciplinary conversations across theory and practice, this issue includes contributions in a wide range of formats—from research and review essays, to a commentary, book reviews, and insights from the field. We anticipate that having multiple formats will allow for the emergence of new insights unconstrained by traditional expectations. We hope they engage your interest and engender further conversations.

The rich diversity of social and ecological life in India, which defies standardization, uniformity, and fixity, poses challenges for environmental governance, policy, and planning, which occur at broad spatial and temporal scales. Thus, environmental governance and planning involve some categorical simplification of messy realities to make them more legible and governable, evocatively described as ‘Seeing like a State’ by James Scott (1998). Decentralization in environmental management has emerged as a solution in response to this critique of high modern planning. Simultaneously, increasing understanding of the linkages between temporally and spatially specific actions, and cumulative, planetary, and geological changes, has sparked discussions on the need for regional, national, and global planning. This dialectic of scales, and in particular, the significance of the flows and interactions across scales, is a foundational concern of interdisciplinary frameworks such as political ecology. See, for instance, Blake and Brookfield (1987), who define one of the objectives of the political ecology approach as the bringing together of “the contribution of different geographical scales and hierarchies of socioeconomic

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organizations (eg, person, household, village, region, state, world)” (1987: 17).

The essays in this volume highlight the significance of the local context as well as ecological and social particularities for effective, efficient, and sustainable environmental governance. As Partik Kumar and Veena Srinivasan quote in their essay on the depletion of alluvial aquifers, “Policy reforms that ignore the local context are doomed to failure” (Polski and Ostrom 1999). Applying Ostrom’s institutional analysis and development (IAD) framework for the management of common pool resources, they discuss why groundwater management approaches that are effective in peninsular Indian hard-rock systems may not be suitable in regions with alluvial aquifers. They recommend that contextual design, which considers diverse resource characteristics, its uses, users, and institutions, is needed to inform large-scale efforts alongside systematic support.

The commentary in this issue contributes to global policy discussions by emphasizing the need for contextual interventions. The One Health approach has emerged as an important framework that recognizes the interconnections between human, non-human, and environmental health. Madhuri Ramesh, Sheetal Patil, and Adithya Pradyumna “seek to diversify global policy discussions on One Health by presenting (such) a perspective from India.” They introduce readers to recent post-pandemic interventions in the global One Health discourse (the *Environment–Health Nexus Policy Guide* released by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) in 2022–23). They propose that successfully implementing such integrated frameworks in resource-constrained regions, such as the Asia-Pacific, requires a focus on pragmatic goals, the right to healthcare, and community participation.

Continuing this discussion on the influence of local contextual factors on broader policy, Nita Shashidharan shares insights from the field and the archives on how the agency of actors on the ground (range forest officers) influences how land management in protected areas unfolds. Through a discussion of the *de jure* and *de facto* land management approaches of forest officials in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve (STR), in Erode, Tamil Nadu, she highlights the complexity of and challenges in on-ground implementation.

The valuation of ecosystem services has consistently evolved over the years, and it is the subject of contested debates across disciplines. Baral *et al.* present a systematic review of research articles that apply benefit–cost analysis (BCA) to community forestry restoration efforts. They find that

transaction costs are often underrepresented, while timber resources and carbon sequestration are prioritized in these studies. Evaluation tools such as BCA also need context-specific refining for them to be useful.

Waste management is a major concern in our increasingly consumptive urbanizing world, and it is likely to become even more critical. Two contributions in this issue tackle the topic—a research essay examining best practices for involving private companies in solid waste management, and a thematic essay evaluating research on the development of an eco-technology (constructed wastelands) for wastewater treatment. Poulomee Ghosh *et al.* discuss best practices in solid waste management under initiatives such as the Smart City Mission using case studies of three success stories (the Indian cities of Pune, Visakhapatnam, and Tirupati). Varying degrees of success are seen in the segregation and composting of wet waste, dry waste treatment, and dumpsite remediation, with some lags in the remediation of legacy waste. It is noteworthy that waste producers' willingness to pay for solid-waste management services remains low despite the neoliberal transition in India. Malabika Biswas Roy, Shilpa Saha, and Pankaj Kumar Roy review the research on constructed wetlands (CWs) that mimic natural wetland processes and are designed primarily for wastewater treatment. They conclude that this is an effective and cost-efficient technology, but local contextual challenges such as land requirements, the need for regular maintenance, and public awareness persist.

Three recent books are reviewed in this issue: Merlyn Maria Antony reviews a book by Michael Fabinyi and Kate Barclay, which details the rich fishing livelihoods seen in the Asia-Pacific region, providing insights on governance and policy-making for waterscapes. Kishore Dhavala reviews a synthesis volume of writing spanning diverse themes by two senior Indian economists, M. N. Murty and Surender Kumar (*Three Pillars: Government, Market, and Communities for Environment Management*). The third review by Shailesh Kumar and Diptimayee Nayak takes a close look at Peter A. Victor's *Escape from Overshoot: Economics for a Planet in Peril*, which evaluates the likelihood of current economic growth models leading to an overshooting of planetary resource boundaries. In keeping with the connecting thread of this issue, the three books reviewed use different scales of analysis, ranging from a micro livelihoods perspective to analysing institutions at different scales to discussing planetary boundaries. We could not have planned such a perfect coincidence!

This collection, we hope, will continue to generate interdisciplinary thinking and conversations at the interface of ecology, economy, society, which is the founding objective of this journal.

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