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Editorial

Should mountains (really) matter in science and policy?



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ABSTRACT

This preface to the special issue “Frames on the move: Regional governance in mountain areas” has the following aims. First, it introduces governance in mountain regions as a special and instructive case of regional environmental governance in terms of territorial scaling, policy integration, and actor diversity. Second, the preface elaborates three themes that resonate throughout the articles in this special issue, namely the important role of global agenda setting, the status of mountains as a category of regional knowledge and action, and the dynamics and consequences of policy diffusion. The third aim is to provide an overview of the nine articles. Finally, the preface summarizes what can be gained from examining mountain governance.

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1. Introduction

This special issue of *Environmental Science & Policy* titled “Frames on the move: Regional governance in mountain areas” brings together 20 authors working in multiple disciplines at 12 different institutions in 8 countries. Following the 2009 publication of a special issue in the *Journal of Alpine Research/Revue de géographie alpine* (Debarbieux, 2009), this volume is the most comprehensive overview of mountain governance in journal form to date (for book-length treatments, see for example Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2015).

The contributors to this volume share a common interest in mountain governance from the local to the global level. Since mountain ranges typically cross jurisdictional boundaries, their interests typically concern some kind of regional governance. Notwithstanding the material properties invariably associated with mountains, what constitutes a (mountain) ‘region’ is to be understood as a fundamentally social construction. Although Paasi (2010, 2296–7) suggests that this view is “nowadays almost axiomatic”, we emphasize the constructed nature of regions not only because all mountain regions result from social processes leading to some kind of objectification, but also because this constructivist perspective

constitutes an important point of entry for comparison with other types of regions, as elaborated below.

Much of international environmental governance has always been a regional affair (Balsiger and Debarbieux, 2011; Balsiger and VanDeveer, 2010; Balsiger and VanDeveer, 2012; Balsiger and Prys, 2014). Compared to global approaches, initiatives with a regional focus may benefit from enhanced commonalities in a particular sustainable development challenge, greater familiarity among key actors, and the ability to tailor action to a smaller than global constituency (Conca, 2012). The rationale for this special issue derives in part from the global commitments to international cooperation at the regional level and to fostering concerted efforts to promote sustainable mountain development in the regional context. The significance of the regional level has been recognized in the Outcome Document *The Future We Want* of the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, which “acknowledge[s] the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development” and suggests that “[r]egional frameworks can complement and facilitate effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level, [...] and] “encourage[s] coordinated regional actions to promote sustainable development.”

Regional cooperation can be characterized using the three criteria of coordinating agency, territoriality and sectorality

(Balsiger and VanDeveer, 2010). Respectively located on a continuum, coordinating agency can range from purely intergovernmental to multi-actor cooperation; territoriality can range from jurisdictional to ecoregional application areas; and sectorality can range from single-issue agreements to a cross-sectoral focus. Although recent trends have shown a tendency away from intergovernmental, jurisdictional, single-issue governance, the more challenging multiactor, ecoregional, sustainable development agreements are still the rarest kind. Regional governance in mountain areas in many ways fits this rare class of regional governance, both in terms of what is promoted through the global agenda and what is often found on the ground. In stark contrast to most other issue areas with 'their own' Agenda 21 chapter, however, scholars have barely begun to address mountains as a policy domain deserving concerted analysis. Could a closer look at mountain governance tell us something about regional governance in other issue areas?

At first glance, chances of cross-fertilization are limited because scholars working on mountain governance often begin their analysis by noting the specific, if not exceptional features of mountain regions. They point to features that distinguish governance challenges in mountain areas from other regions, including topological and climatological complexity, water and biodiversity richness, climate sensibility, isolation, marginality, inaccessibility, and diverse cultural heritages. Mountains are said to make up 24% of the world's land area, to be home to 20% of the world's population, to provide 60–80% of the world's freshwater, and to harbour 50% of globally recognized biodiversity hotspots (SDC et al., 2012). The Rio+20 outcome document reiterates that "the benefits derived from mountain regions are essential for sustainable development," particularly because they "play a crucial role in providing water resources to a large portion of the world's population," and stresses that "continued effort will be required to address poverty, food security and nutrition, social exclusion and environmental degradation in these areas."

At second glance, other types of regions are frequently approached with a similar framing. As seen in the case of mountains, one way this is done is by making reference to the share of the earth's territory that is covered by such ecoregions. Wetlands, to take one example, are said to "occur everywhere, from the tundra to the tropics, [...] making up roughly 6% of the Earth's surface (UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre, cited in Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2013, 8). Transboundary river basins, to take another example, are estimated to cover 46% of the globe's terrestrial surface (UN Water, 2013). To highlight the importance of integrated coastal zone management, the European Commission notes that 40% of European citizens live near coastlines, stretching from the North-East Atlantic and the Baltic to the Mediterranean and Black Sea (European Commission, 2012). To establish the exceptional importance of a certain ecoregion, promoters begin by citing how widespread they are.

A second way to frame ecoregional exceptionality is to highlight actual and potential benefits to humans. To return to the same examples, wetlands are said to be "among the world's most productive environments [...] cradles of biological diversity, providing the water and primary productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals

depend for survival [...] important storehouses of plant genetic material [...] hence] access to safe water, human health, food production, economic development and geopolitical stability are made less secure by the degradation of wetlands" (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2013, 8). Similarly, coastal zones are considered "among the most productive areas in the world, enjoying high ecological and economic value" (European Commission, 2012).

If all else fails, special sensitivity to global warming is a very useful framing device for attracting policy attention. To illustrate, it is argued that "the ability of wetlands to adapt to changing conditions, and to accelerating rates of change, will be crucial to human communities and wildlife everywhere as the full impact of climate change on our ecosystem lifelines is felt" (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2013, 8). According to the European Commission, coastal zones are considered "among the most vulnerable areas to climate change, [...] hence] it is essential to make use of long-term management tools, such as Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), to enhance the protection of coastal resources while increasing the efficiency of their uses" (European Commission, 2012).

The larger point of this introduction is that just as mountain (and other types of) regions are not just out there to be discovered but are instead political objects constructed in social relations, claims of regional specificity are similarly socially constructed. What emerges, paradoxically, is that the principal feature that is special about mountain governance is that it is not so special after all, precisely because the process of creating mountains as objects for governance – through global agenda setting, creating mountains as categories for regional knowledge and action, and circulating mountain governance models and practices – is a social process that can be observed in all regional governance. Mountain governance is thus both generic (as a governance process) and specific (as a concrete manifestation of a governance process). This in turn opens the door to comparing with and learning from other regions.

2. Key themes in regional mountain governance

The proposed special issue addresses three analytical themes: global agenda setting, mountains as a category of regional knowledge and action, and policy diffusion.

2.1. Global agenda setting

International concern for environmental and sustainable development issues in mountain regions has been building up for fifty years (Debarbieux and Price, 2008; Rudaz, 2011). The origins of these concerns can be found in major scientific conferences (Munich in 1974; Mohonk in 1986) and research programmes (UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Project 6 on mountain ecosystems and arid and semi-arid lands) from the 1970s. Building on scientific knowledge generated through these activities, policy entrepreneurs since the 1990s have shaped the political agenda by means of intense lobbying at the UN and its specialized agencies, resulting in Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, the designation of 2002 as the International Year of Mountains, and a mountain section in the Rio+20 outcome

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