

# Social justice in coastal erosion management: The temporal and spatial dimensions

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Received 23 February 2007; received in revised form 12 June 2007

## Abstract

Coastal erosion management is primarily based on economic considerations (cost–benefit analysis). From the perspective of social justice (as a particular expression of the wider concept of human rights), however, several arguments can be advanced regarding public intervention in coastal defence management when private property is threatened by coastal erosion. In this paper we examine these arguments at both the short-term local scale and the long-term large spatial scale and consider the merits of inclusion of a social justice dimension in coastal erosion management. The coast provides a range of resources that benefit society as a whole. Coastal residents and property owners face a direct financial loss from coastal erosion but the general public also stands to incur losses other than purely financial if there is public intervention for the benefit of these property owners. The arguments for public intervention are strongest at the local and short-term scales but they weaken (and even reverse) at geographically larger and longer time scales. At larger scales, the costs to society increase as intergenerational equity, non-coastal residents, climate and sea level change, and the environment are considered. Because of the intensity of interest involved at the local level, we argue that the necessary hard decisions must be made nationally if a sustainable policy is to be adopted. Social justice considerations provide a potential improvement on the traditional economic cost/benefit-based decision-making process of coastal erosion management but they only contribute to sustainability if viewed at the national level.

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*Keywords:* Coastal erosion; Social justice; England and Wales; Sustainability; Environmental management; Coastal management

## 1. Introduction

Management of coastal erosion is an issue of globally widespread concern. Traditionally, decision-making in this management process is dominated by economic considerations manifest in a cost-benefit analysis approach. In the case of high density urban developments (major cities) the value of defended infrastructure easily outweighs the costs of defence. It is widely considered that such cities would likely be defended against coastal erosion at all costs (Granja and Carvalho, 2000), although the scale of impacts, engineering complexity and mounting costs may

eventually blur the simple decision to defend. Such is presently the case in Venice, where the enormous costs of engineering to defend against sea level rise are becoming evident. The Hurricane Katrina disaster has also prompted reappraisal of the coastal management options in New Orleans (Pilkey and Young, 2005). Future projections of very large sea level rise (Tol et al., 2004), if realised, will place unprecedented pressure on economic systems if a defence policy is to be sustained. Recent considerations of the costs of maintaining defences in the light of sea level rise and climatic change have, however, prompted a reappraisal of public funding of some sea defences in parts of England and Wales. This has been accompanied by a call from those whose property is affected by such decisions and some of their political representatives for ‘social justice’ to be considered in the decision-making process. In

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this paper we examine the social justice arguments relevant to coastal erosion management and assess its implications for future management. We use the situation on the coast of England and Wales as an example, but the principles and arguments have general application.

## 2. Conceptions of social justice

The term “social justice” came to prominence in the industrialisation of the nineteenth century, when it was first used in the debate regarding the relationship between the ruling classes and the new urban poor (Novak, 2000; Barry, 2005). One definition (Edmund Rice Centre, 2002) maintains (p. 1) that “*social justice reflects the way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society*”.

The concept of social justice has had a long currency in social policy (Barry, 2005) and it has recently been applied in the area of environmental management (Syme and Nancarrow, 2001; Kasperson and Kasperson, 2001). The term has various definitions and applications. It is widely regarded in contemporary thinking as encompassing one of the three (social, economic and environmental) elements in sustainable development and this has led to some debate as to its relationship to sustainability (Dobson, 1998, 1999). Dobson (1999, p. 2) maintains that, social justice and environmental sustainability are both elements to be considered in the search for sustainable development, but they relate to different aspects: “justice is about distributing benefits and burdens, while sustainability is about maintaining life support systems”. He also contends that there is likely to be a tension between the two as governments seek to pursue both as policy goals. In any case both social justice and environmental sustainability are imprecisely defined and therefore are contested concepts (Dobson, 1998) as the following range of definitions attests.

Social justice is regarded by Novak (2000) as being social in two ways. Firstly, it involves individuals working together with others to accomplish a work of justice without turning to government: the goals can only be achieved by the group and are social in that regard. It also acquires the label ‘social’ when its benefits accrue to the whole community. It is thus social in its means and in its ends. Novak (2000) notes that this conception of social justice “allows for people of good will to reach different – even opposing – practical judgments about the material content of the common good (ends) and how to get there (means). Such differences are the stuff of politics”. Hardin (1987, p. 83) similarly notes that ‘strong, interpersonally comparable value judgements’ are an important element of social justice. The value judgements involved in social justice are also stressed by Barry (1995, p. 97) who states that “social justice does not determine the level or organizational form of health care, education or social security. In a modern society, social justice certainly does require that all of these should be provided, but it leaves a good deal of scope for variation beyond that”.

Social justice is taken by Miller (1999) and Dobson (1999) to relate to a system of principles that govern the distribution of benefits and burdens that arise from that system. Achieving equity in the distribution is key to the social justice goal and Barry (2005) notes that “social justice is, and is normally understood to be, a question of *equal opportunities*”.

Some theories of justice stress procedures over consequences i.e. the justice of a situation is determined by how it was arrived at rather than what it actually is (Dobson, 1998). Hardin (1987) also recognised these two different aspects of social justice, noting that it can be considered to mean either the equitable distribution of resources or the use of an equitable procedure. From a practical perspective, fairness (the way in which benefits and costs are distributed through society) as implied in social justice is an important consideration for environmental policy. Policies are more likely to attain popular support and compliance if they are seen to be fair (Field and Field, 2002). Equally, from a procedural perspective, Barry (1995, p. 7) contends that “it would widely be acknowledged as a sign of an unjust arrangement that those who do badly under it could reasonably reject it”.

Novak (2000) argues that labelling unfortunate results as “social injustices” is inappropriate. However, at present the concept is poorly and/or variously defined and is therefore amenable to be invoked in this way as a bargaining tool, whether appropriately or not. Novak (2000, p. 11) asserts that social justice is in fact often used as “an instrument of ideological intimidation, for the purpose of gaining the power of legal coercion”. In such misuses social justice is used “to blame somebody else, to blame the system, to blame those who (mythically) “control” it.” (Novak, 2000, p. 11).

Social justice can be considered at different scales from the large or even whole-society level to the very small group level (Hardin, 1987). At both extremes the core social justice problem is a conflict in which one party bears a cost in order that another party or group may benefit.

A related concept is that of ‘environmental justice’ which is based on the supposition that environmental ills are disproportionately suffered by the poor or marginalised (Dobson, 1999). It is concerned with achieving an equitable distribution of benefits and ills on this basis. It is usually concerned with problems such as pollution or flooding, which arise from living in societally undesirable locations.

## 3. Coastal erosion and its management

Coastal erosion is a natural process by which coastlines adjust to varying sea levels, energy levels, sediment supply and existing topography. Over most of the ten millennia of the Holocene Period (characterised by generally rising global sea levels), coastlines have undergone substantial erosion and deposition to gradually assume their current configuration. Some continue to evolve through large-scale redistribution of sediment through erosion and deposition.

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