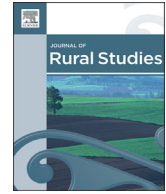


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Forest governance as neoliberal strategy: A comparative case study of the Model Forest Program in Canada



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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the often chaotic and confounding implications of neoliberalism as it applies to environmental governance in the Canadian forest sector. On one hand, neoliberal governance strategies are said to enhance collaborative and partnership approaches to forest management that empower local stakeholders and communities. On the other hand, these same strategies can entrench market discipline and optimize mechanisms for economic development at the expense of broader public interests. We explore these contrasting perspectives through a comparative case study of two Canadian Model Forest initiatives: Resources North and the Manitoba Model Forest. Results from interviews and document analysis reveal that local capacity development for collaborative management at the regional scale was limited and unevenly sustained. We identify intentions within the Model Forest program that migrated from wide-ranging public concerns toward more narrowly defined private-sector interests, such as forest certification. These outcomes resulted from strong federally mandated “action at a distance.” Results also reveal that while some initiatives provided for local empowerment at the beginning of the Model Forest program, over time, these initiatives became more prescriptive. Hence, there remained ongoing limitations of neoliberal governance in fostering capacity development for environmental governance at local scales.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, the Canadian forest sector has experienced a period of far-reaching economic globalization. This change is characterized in part by conflicts over international trade, particularly with the United States, requiring more substantial concessions by Canada in return for the opening up of international markets. For example, British Columbia opened markets for the sale of timber in response to US demands for equity in softwood lumber disputes (Hessing et al., 2005). Similarly, the regulation of the industry itself is now subject to more rigorous market discipline

through forest certification schemes such as the [Sustainable Forestry Initiative \(2005\)](#).

This general thrust toward market-friendly forest policy and environmental practices amidst deeper market penetration is often described by scholars as a form of political and economic neoliberalism (McCarthy, 2005; Klooster, 2010). According to some scholars, neoliberalism involves a set of cementing forces centred on the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent an optimal mechanism for economic development at the expense of broader public interests (Brenner et al., 2010). In contrast to this view of neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology, there are also more nuanced perspectives that look at the multiple (and often competing) ways in which this market-friendly orientation results in varied outcomes across time and space. These authors describe neoliberalism as a political agenda that “has devolved responsibilities from government agencies to individuals and communities, fostered individuals’ entrepreneurial capacities, and favoured market-based instruments as a ‘first-choice’ policy option” (Lockwood, 2010, p. 755). As such, neoliberalism represents a

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set of chaotic projects and processes with complex and often contradictory outcomes and implications (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Castree 2008).

Against the backdrop of economic globalization and political neoliberalism within the Canadian forest sector, the 1980s and 1990s were marked by a period of intense and protracted disputes about destructive logging practice, declining community benefits and growing Aboriginal discontent - the so-called 'War in the Woods' (Hayter, 2003). As one response to these protracted conflicts, the federal government initiated a collaborative governance initiative in 1992 through a nationwide Model Forest Program. This program was introduced as an important milestone in demonstrating new, sustainable approaches to forest management to the international community (Dobell and Bunton, 2001; Davis, 2009). The federal government's idea behind the initiative was to allow an initial ten Model Forests (MFs) across the country to act as demonstration sites for sustainable forest management while the government provided core funding and leadership to the program. By the mid-1990s, the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers stated that the goal of sustainable forest management was to "maintain and enhance the long-term health of our forest ecosystems for the benefit of all living things, both nationally and globally, while providing environmental, economic, social, and cultural opportunities for the benefit of present and future generations" (CCFM, 1995, p. v). Within the Model Forest Program specifically, the mandated structure called for an industrial partner as well as a commitment to accommodate additional stakeholders, including First Nations and Métis (i.e., indigenous peoples of Canada) and the environmental community. These expanded partnerships were intended to reflect the spectrum of values associated with respective land bases, and consequentially exemplify an alternative approach to resolving long-standing conflicts and tensions in the forest sector through dialogue and cooperation. Since the federal government and the model forests had no forest management authority, the federal government provided the funding and initial leadership in hopes that by working on projects in a multi-party context, the model forests could influence public and private sector politics and practices. This movement toward greater engagement of local level organizations reflects a trend in many parts of the world toward the regional governance of natural resources (Wallington and Lawrence, 2008).

Given the basic purpose and structure of the Canadian Model Forest Program, the following questions are addressed in this paper: (1) how are the precepts of the Model Forest Program connected to a neoliberal agenda, and (2) what are the implications of neoliberal governance for managing forests more collaboratively? Through this analysis we seek to add further insights into the mechanisms of neoliberal governance in the forest sector. We explore these questions first with a review of the literature on neoliberalism and then with an analysis of initiatives in two Canadian model forests operating for the duration of the program – Resources North (formerly the McGregor Model Forest in British Columbia) and Manitoba Model Forest.

2. Neoliberalism in the Canadian forest sector

Neoliberalism is a political economic idea that is open to interpretation but is characterized by policy instruments and governance arrangements with wide-ranging implications. Brenner et al. (2010) point to the consequent set of diverse interpretations of neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism is understood variously as a bundle of (favoured) policies, as a tendential process of institutional transformation, as an emergent form of subjectivity, as a reflection of realigned

hegemonic interests, or as some combination of the latter. Some scholars see these trends as signalling an incipient form of regulatory convergence or hegemony; others continue to call attention to significant flux and diversity, even if they cannot yet determine a singular countercurrent (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 183).

More specifically, in a popular two-mode formulation of neoliberalism, Peck and Tickell (2002) introduced the idea of 'roll-back' neoliberalism, which emphasizes privatisation and subsequent measures to reduce state control; and 'roll-out' neoliberalism, summarised as the purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberalised state forms, modes of governance and regulatory relations. Among other features, roll-back neoliberalism involves public-private partnerships with a discursive focus on empowering local governments and communities rather than on slashing central government (McCarthy, 2005; Graefe, 2005). In theory, this form of neoliberalism allows for the governance of forests to include a wide range of other voices – in particular the interests of Aboriginal people and the environmental community (Stevens, 1997; Hayter, 2003). While the state remains a key facilitator of this process, changes in the mode of governing – to exhibit collaboration, participation, deliberation, learning and new forms and mechanisms of accountability – further remove the state from being the sole arbiter of legitimate action (Holley et al., 2012). A range of institutions and actors operating beyond the state are posited as having a strong influence over the way natural resources are managed (Rose and Miller, 1992). This notion of roll-back neoliberalism is also reflected in some aspects of adaptive co-management where the focus is on multi-level systems of management and coordination, learning and adaptation, the sharing of knowledge and information, and the promotion of collaboration and dialogue around goals and outcomes (Armitage, 2007). Under this formulation of neoliberalism, the state takes on a role as facilitator and navigator (Berkes et al., 2003) and is involved with governing at a distance. Local private and public sector stakeholders take on more prominent positions within local governance arrangements.

Critical scholarship on this roll-back approach to neoliberal politics suggests that the introduction of neoliberal strategies do not necessarily empower local actors, even if the power of the nation state is reduced (Reed and Bruyneel, 2010). For example, Norman and Bakker's (2009) examination of water governance across the Canada–USA border suggested that raising the number of local actors involved in governance did not increase local institutional capacity or dilute the power of the state (Norman and Bakker, 2009). In Australia, research by Harrington et al. (2008) tells a similar story. Here, state powers were notionally transferred to regional and local governments and nongovernmental organizations to manage ecosystems at the landscape scale. Yet there remained limited engagement of key stakeholders, and the level of autonomy conferred on regional organizations was low because the organizations lacked adequate tools or resources to undertake the very complex tasks of priority setting, implementation and evaluation. Historically marginalized social groups – conservation organizations, indigenous organizations and local government – remained so. Similarly, Marshall's (2008) review of two decades of executing Australia's National Conservation Strategy revealed that the 'regional delivery model' for natural resources had decentralized progressively greater powers to the community level, but the key decisions in environmental governance remained centralized. Finally, within the Canadian context, Young and Matthews (2007) observed that forest-based communities have experienced greater fluctuation in private and public investment,

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