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The development of assisted migration policy in Canada: An analysis of the politics of composing future forests

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ABSTRACT

One could argue that the development of western larch assisted migration (AM) policy in British Columbia was the result of a "policy window" largely caused by factors external to the actions of policy actors: western larch plantations in northern BC indicate that the species thrives even if planted far beyond its current range, thus representing an economic motive for AM; climate change projections and the mountain pine beetle epidemic represented a crisis situation that facilitated the deployment of a new and controversial policy option, the assisted migration of western larch, in forest policy in British Columbia. However, this "policy window" explanation disregard the relationship between the performative meaning of AM in its social and ecological context, and masks the actual politics of the discursive practices enlisting particular actor-networks in the western larch AM policy process. My analysis suggests that the western larch AM policy emerged from the relationship of specific policy actors with specific non-humans actors—including exotic and invasive species. Yet, aware of potential political risks of deploying this controversial practice, policy actors in British Columbia carefully circumscribed the purpose of western larch AM, distancing the western larch AM policy from exotic and invasive species. Additionally, western larch AM was framed as a natural extension of current tree regeneration standards and best practices in BC—thus seemingly representing "business as usual", rather than a major reassemblage of the actor-networks structuring forest policy in BC. Comparing western larch policy discourses to policy discourses on AM in other provinces suggest that the differences in what actor-networks are enlisted largely explains why no other province in Canada has yet to develop an assisted migration policy. The policy implications of this study are that in the composition of Canada's future forests we should keep exotic and invasive species present in view.

Introduction

For the last decade, the scientific community has been engaged in a heated debate over the idea and practice of moving species beyond their natural range to help them survive climate change impacts or enable them to thrive in ecological communities projected to be suitable in a future climate—otherwise referred to as the assisted migration (AM) of species (Marris, 2011). Proponents of AM argue for a measured and cautious deployment of the practice, in part because of the risks of creating new invasive species or disrupting recipient communities (Hewitt et al., 2011), and also because of the risk that AM be implemented by private actors or environmental organizations without proper regulation and monitoring frameworks (Camacho, 2010; Klenk and Larson, 2013). Given the growing evidence that suggests that the northward migration of North American trees is failing to keep pace with climate change (Zhu et al., 2012) and that particular populations of tree species may be maladapted to current and future climates (Rehfeldt and Jaquish, 2010; Gray et al., 2011; Kremer et al., 2012; Mimura and Aitken, 2007), in Canada, the first explicit assisted migration policy was developed to enable the movement of western larch (*Larix occidentalis* Nutt.) from southern British Columbia to northern parts of the province (*Chief Forester's Standards for Seed Use*).

According the Rehfeldt and Jaquish (2010), western larch is the most productive of the three *Larix* species native to North America. And while its distribution in BC—limited to the upper Columbia River Basin of southeastern BC—is relatively small compared to other trees, it remains commercially important as demonstrated by the breeding program put in place in BC since early 1980s (Jaquish et al., 1995). Thus, to sustainably manage western larch

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populations in the context of climate change, Rehfeldt and Jaquish (2010) argued that managers must adjust seed zone boundaries and seed transfer guidelines to ensure that planting stock remains physiologically suited to the planting sites. Accordingly, on June 3, 2010, Jim Snetsinger, the Chief Forester at the time, amended the Chief Forester's Standards for Seed Use. The purpose of these amendments is "to expand the seed transfer limits of western larch to increase species diversity, and address the potential forest health and productivity impacts associated with a changing climate. Specifically, this amendment provides for the range and population expansion of western larch beyond its contemporary range (historical and current climate envelope) in areas projected to be climatically suitable in the year 2030." The recently revised AM policy for western larch consists of two new seed planning zones and makes provisions for agreement holders to plant up to 10% of western larch seedlings planted each year to be planted further north in these three new zones (Lee, 2010a,b).

While some scholars have analyzed the legal contexts and challenges to the implementation of AM in North America (Camacho, 2010; Shirey and Lamberti, 2010; Pedlar et al., 2011), there is a need to understand the politics of AM policy development in the context of the controversy that surrounds this practice in the scientific community. Furthermore, thus far commentaries on the AM debate have not addressed the potential role of non-human actors in the uneven deployment of this controversial practice. To address this science-policy gap, I ask: What has been the role of non-human actors, including but not restricted to the focal species of AM, in advancing AM policy development in British Columbia more quickly than in the rest of Canada?

This manuscript begins with a description of the theoretical lens used to examine AM policy development in Canada: a materialist conception of discursive institutionalism, from which I derive my analytical framework. Next I describe my qualitative discourse analysis methods. I then present and discuss my results in relation my research question.

Theory

There are many institutional theory lenses used to explain policy development and change (Schmidt, 2011). Some theories stress structural factors, such as socio-economic and political incentive structures and rationalist interests (i.e., rational choice theories); path dependencies that get instituted due to an accumulation of past decisions and the reinforcement of particular practices (i.e., historical institutionalism); and, social norms embedded in social and political systems such as normative socioeconomic paradigms, moral standards, and professional codes of behavior (i.e., sociological institutionalism) (Schmidt, 2008). These theories provide useful tools for explaining why policies persist even though they may no longer be effective or are no longer relevant to current policy problems. In these theories, change is often explained by reference to external factors to the policy process. These external drivers of change include historical events or crises in which current policies have failed and could prove to be politically, economically or socially liabilities if not changed. Such 'policy windows' or 'critical junctures' may lead to 'paradigm shifts' or radical changes to current policies and institutions (Schmidt, 2011). But more often than not, such revolutionary changes to policy programs do not happen. Instead, change occurs at a smaller scale and at a slower pace. New ideas may be layered upon older ideas, policy objectives may become distorted or drift from their original intent, and news ideas and values may be blended in ad hoc or in a concerted way to adapt older or current policies to new problems (Béland, 2007). While these descriptions of 'minor' change are not inconsistent with the institutional theories described above, these theories cannot explain why such incremental change happens, because such change is not the result of external drivers, but rather, such change is explained by reference to the agency of actors mobilized in the policy process (Schmidt, 2011).

'New institutionalism' theories have come to focus on the role of ideas, practices and discourses of policy actors to explain policy and institutional change giving rise to new social orders (Schmidt, 2011). Ideas, practices and discourses constitute social orders in that they give meaning to and direct the implementation policy programs and institutional behavior. Once instituted, ideas, practices and discourses can become sedimented social practices and modes of thinking, speaking, and doing (Schmidt, 2008; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Mouffe, 2005). However, as Mouffe stresses (2005, p. 18): "What is at a given moment considered the 'natural' order—jointly with the 'common sense' which accompanies it—is the results of sedimented practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to the practices that bring it into being." Hence, ideas, practices and discourses can be questioned, re-interpreted, contested and modified by policy actors because there is never a perfect alignment between processes of identification and discourses that have become sedimented (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Mouffe, 2005). In other words, policy actors may come to change policies and institutions by changing the discourses that give shape to these social orders (Schmidt, 2008). The way they do so is through discursive practices that embody particular grammars, logics and rhetoric. Thus, these discursive practices involve politics, to the extent that the choice of one among many alternative and contingent grammars, logics and rhetoric establish boundaries that divide what is considered appropriate and necessary to a particular social order and on the flip side, what is considered inappropriate and alienated from this social order (Feindt and Oels, 2005).

For the purpose of this study, I enlisted Vivien Schmidt's theory of discursive institutionalism as a critical component of my analytical framework, to examine both the meaning content and interactive aspects of discourse and practice (Schmidt, 2008). For Schmidt, 'discourse' refers to both the substantive content of ideas as well as how one talks about one's ideas (Schmidt, 2008). A key analytical perspective in discursive institutionalism is not only examining what is said in a discourse, but whom it is said to (e.g., *coordinative discourse* refers to what policy actors say in policy analysis and development and *communicative discourse* refers to what policy actors say about a policy to the general public). Coordinative discourse may remain in closed debates out of public view, "either because they might not be approved or because the issues are too technical to capture the sustained interest of the public." (Schmidt, 2008, p. 311). Hence, there can be a disconnect between the discourse internal to the process of policy development, and the discourse communicated about policy development or implementation to the general public. Hence, Vivien Schmidt's discursive institutionalism provides an opportunity to examine the role of policy actors in making a compelling case for particular policy ideas, norms and values, and practices that may in turn restructure institutions. These analytical distinctions help us pay attention to the internal politics of policy development and how these are or are not communicated to interested publics.

Moreover, the politics of policy development have important ontological implications for the social order(s) being articulated. For Mouffe, there is a clear difference between politics and 'the political'—the former refers to the set of practices and discourses through which an order is created, while the latter refers to the dimension of antagonism which she takes to be constitutive of human societies. "In the domain of collective identifications, where what is in question is the creation of a 'we' by the delimitation of a 'them', the possibility always exists that this we/them relation will turn into a relation of the friend/enemy types" (Mouffe, 2005: