



Research article

The construction of feelings of justice in environmental management: An empirical study of multiple biodiversity conflicts in Calakmul, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

A failure to address social concerns in biodiversity conservation can lead to feelings of injustice among some actors, and hence jeopardize conservation goals. The complex socio-cultural and political context of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, Mexico, has historically led to multiple biodiversity conflicts. Our goal, in this case study, was to explore perceptions of justice held by local actors in relation to biodiversity conflicts. We then aimed to determine the following: 1) people's definitions of their feelings of justice; 2) the criteria used in this assessment; 3) variability in the criteria influencing them; and 4) implications for environmental management in the region and beyond. We worked with five focus groups, exploring three examples of biodiversity conflict around forest, water and jaguar management with a total of 41 ranchers, farmers and representatives of local producers. Our results demonstrated that people constructed their feelings of justice around four dimensions of justice: recognition (acknowledging individuals' rights, values, cultures and knowledge systems); ecological (fair and respectful treatment of the natural environment), procedural (fairness in processes of environmental management), distributive (fairness in the distribution of costs and benefits). We identified a list of criteria the participants used in their appraisal of justice and sources of variation such as the social scale of focus and participant role, and whom they perceived to be responsible for resource management. We propose a new framework that conceptualizes justice-as-recognition and ecological justice as forms of conditional justices, and procedural and distributive justices as forms of practical justice. Conditional justice allows us to define who is a legitimate source of justice norms and if nature should be integrated in the scope of justice; hence, conditional justice underpins other dimensions of justice. On the other hand, procedural and distributive address the daily practices of fair processes and distribution. We propose that the perception of justice is a neglected but important aspect to include in integrative approaches to managing biodiversity conflicts. Addressing demands of justice in environmental management will require us to consider more than the distribution of costs and benefits among actors. We also need to respect the plurality of fairness perspectives and to recognize the benefits of dialogical approaches to achieve more successful environmental management.

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1. Introduction

Top-down biodiversity conservation plans have often enforced

conservation measures irrespective of locals' interests and rights (Negi and Nautiya, 2003; Paavola, 2004). The imposition on local communities of the responsibilities of environmental protection and the resulting conflicts have opened up debates regarding environmental fairness (Yearley, 2005). A potential paradox emerges: while environmental protection is required to contribute significantly to global well-being, it often depends on local communities' support; yet these communities can experience

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disproportionately high costs and thus perceive unfairness (McShane et al., 2011). Decision-making in biodiversity conservation therefore needs to not only ensure ecological integrity, but also to integrate social justice among other dimensions of sustainable development.

The question of social justice in biodiversity conservation is vital, as biodiversity conflicts often stem from feelings of injustice, with involved parties sometimes strongly defending the rights of individuals, communities, future generations and the environment (Clayton, 2000; Clayton et al., 2016). In this research, biodiversity conflict is defined as occurring when the interests of two or more parties in some aspect of biodiversity compete, and when at least one of the parties is perceived to assert its interests at the expense of another (Marshall et al., 2007). It is proposed that in such conflict, perceived justice may even be a better predictor of environmental attitudes than self-interest (Clayton, 2000; Reese and Jacob, 2015), and very often guides the assessments, feelings, and behaviours of the parties involved (Kals and Russell, 2001). For example, perceived fairness in a procedure leads to higher acceptance of the outcome, satisfaction with the result, support of decision-makers, and trust in authorities (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Syme and Nancarrow, 2012). We support the proposal of Ohl et al. (2008) that the feeling of justice (i.e. fairness) in biodiversity conservation is a prerequisite for effective biodiversity conflict management. Considering people's concerns regarding fairness and justice, rather than just individual interests, can help us to understand the causes of biodiversity conflict and address injustice (Clayton, 2000; Müller, 2011).

A complex socio-cultural and political context around the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Mexico has led to multiple biodiversity conflicts in the region. We used three of these identified conflicts as examples to explore feelings of justice in environmental management: forest, water and wildlife management. For this study, we conducted focus groups with local actors to investigate their perception of justice regarding these conflicts, the criteria on which they build their perception, and the variation among those criteria. We proposed that local actors would have diverse ways of seeing 'justice', and that justice appraisals would be tentative and likely to vary across communities, issues, and contexts, as suggested by others (Kals and Russell, 2001; Kellerhals et al., 1997; Paavola, 2004). Specifically, we asked the following research questions: 1) How do people feel and define their notions of justice regarding environmental management? 2) Which criteria do they use to assess the fairness of environmental management in the region? 3) What are the sources of variation in these criteria? 4) What are the implications for environmental management in the region and beyond?¹ We first explore the debates surrounding environmental justice and ecological justice as they may apply within environmental management. Secondly, we test the variability in local actors' justice appraisals. Finally, we explore how the theory of and the practical quest for subjective justice help us to understand and address biodiversity conflicts and contribute to our pursuits of sustainable development and environmental management.

1.1. Feelings of justice in environmental management

In this section, we critically analyse the debates within the literature around environmental justice and fairness, particularly considering our instrumental focus on achieving enhanced biodiversity conservation. We take some distance from the dominant debate around justice theory (Rawls, 1971) and adopt an empirical approach acknowledging the social construction of 'feelings of justice', which is also referred to as 'fairness judgment'. The way justice is perceived is by nature subjective: the injustice lies in "the eye of the actor", and what is considered just by one might be seen

as unjust by another (Gross, 2011; Lauber, 1999). Feelings can differ widely depending on individual views of justice, values, needs and attachment to nature, with no single understanding of what is morally right (Martin et al., 2013; Müller, 2011). Furthermore, individuals might use different criteria of justice depending on the situation. For example, in Western societies, the right to vote is based on equality, while job attribution is based on merit (Deutsch, 2011). Our approach recognizes that justice claims are plural and contextual, and that to improve biodiversity conflict management, we will have to identify sources of variation in the perception of justice and which dimensions of justice prevail against others.

Previous attempts to reconcile social justice and environmental integrity have been attempted under the environmental justice framework (Schlosberg, 2013; Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina, 2015; Walker, 2012). 'Environmental justice' is a concept once employed in cases of environmental harm (e.g. chemical pollution) imposed by humans on other humans (Čapek, 1993). Its use has since broadened to other issues such as climate change (Agyeman et al., 2016) and wildlife management (Dawson et al., 2017; Jacobsen and Linnell, 2016; Lauber, 1999), ranging from local to global focus (Walker, 2009), and developed conceptual depth such as giving moral consideration for nonhuman nature (Schlosberg, 2013). Recent works in environmental justice have also attempted to look beyond the concern of fair resources distribution, to other concerns such as decision-making, identity and power-relations (Lauber, 1999; Martin et al., 2013, 2014; Schlosberg, 2007; Walker, 2012). These different debates have thus explored the notion of justice in diverse ways.

Early research towards the construction of environmental justice appraisal focused mainly on the distribution of environmental benefits and negative impacts through *distributive* and *procedural justices* (Cohen, 1985; Deutsch, 1975). *Distributive justice* explores the fair and equitable distribution of resources at individual and societal levels (Deutsch, 1985). For example, Loomis and Ditton (1993) highlighted the importance of understanding the perception of *distributive justice* in the allocation of fishery quotas when resources are scarce. Their study demonstrated that there is little guidance on how 'fair' can be qualified and quantified, and how the concept can be applied or evaluated in management decisions. There was then an emphasis on exploring the dimension of *procedural justice*: the decision process leading to the distribution of costs and benefits (Lind and Tyler, 1988). An example is the Natura 2000 zone in Europe, for which there was insufficient public consultation in the decision-making process leading to its establishment, resulting in mistrust and a reduced list of designated protected sites in France (Paavola, 2004). While often approached separately, distributive and procedural justices interact, as acknowledged early on by Lind and Tyler (1988). Fair perceptions of the decision-making process increase potential perceptions of a fair distributive outcome, while a fair outcome might make actors evaluate the procedure more positively (Van den Bos et al., 1997). Similarly, perceived unfavorable outcomes might make actors more likely to find fault with a decision-making process (Bies, 1987).

The construction of justice, however, is not only about how decisions are taken and costs and benefits shared; it is also about who should be considered during these processes. This is where the dimension of *ecological justice* is relevant, as it recognizes the right to live of other species (Clayton, 2000; Parris et al., 2014). *Ecological justice* is defined in the field of social psychology "not so much by a particular philosophical perspective (e.g. equality of rights, individual or group level) as by the inclusion of remote entities, such as the environment or future generations, in one's consideration of a just resolution to a conflict" (Clayton, 2000, p. 467). Ecological justice thus allows inclusion of non-human entities in the scope of consideration of justice and has been used to support

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