

Chapter 24: Environmental issues

- In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, international environmental politics was strictly limited, but from around 1960 its scope expanded as environmental problems acquired a transnational and then a global dimension.
- The process was reflected in and stimulated by the three great UN conferences of 1972, 1992, and 2002.
- The most important role of these UN conferences was to make the connection between the international environmental and development agendas, as expressed in the important concept of sustainable development.
- International environmental politics reflected the issue-attention cycle in developed countries and relied heavily on increasing scientific knowledge.
- International environmental meetings serve political objectives alongside environmental aims.
- A key function of international cooperation is transboundary regulation, but attempts at environmental action may conflict with the rules of the world trade regime.
- International action is needed to promote environmental norms, develop scientific understanding, and assist the participation of developing countries.
- International cooperation is necessary to provide governance regimes for the global commons.
- Climate change, because of its all-embracing nature and its roots in essential human activities, poses an enormous challenge for international cooperation.
- A limited start was made with the Kyoto regime, but this was later undermined by the withdrawal of the US and other major emitters.
- Although the 2009 Copenhagen Conference was a disappointment to climate activists, subsequent meetings mapped out a new universal basis for international climate cooperation.
- The 2015 Paris Agreement involved 'bottom up' national contributions by all parties, stressing the importance of adaptation and additional funding for developing countries. Its success will depend on the ratcheting up of ambition and the level of national efforts.
- The environment has been a growth area for IR scholars interested in identifying the conditions under which effective international cooperation can emerge.
- Scholars attach varying importance to different explanatory factors in their analyses of international environmental governance, including crude calculations of the power and interests of key actors such as states; cognitive factors such as shared scientific knowledge; the impact of non-governmental actors; and even the extent to which the system of states is itself part of the problem.
- IR scholars are also interested in the extent to which the environment in general and particular environmental problems are now being seen as security issues in academic, political, and popular discourse.
- Debate exists over whether the securitization of the environment is something to be welcomed.