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### Losing the Message: Some Policy Implications of Anthropocentric Indirect Arguments for Environmental Protection

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OPEN PEER COMMENTARY

# Losing the Message: Some Policy Implications of Anthropocentric Indirect Arguments for Environmental Protection

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The value of anthropocentric indirect arguments (AIAs), as stated by Elliott (2014), is to focus on non-environmental benefits that derive from actions or policies that also benefit the environment. The key difference with these *indirect* arguments—from more direct anthropocentric arguments—is they focus on human benefits *unrelated* to the environment. So, for example, less coal burning power plants means less respiratory illness and higher worker productivity. The air is cleaner, but rather than clean air being the goal in arguing for less coal burning power plants, healthier people is the goal. Or as Elliott notes, clean energy can create jobs, and energy efficiency in military operations can save taxpayer money.

Anthropocentric indirect arguments are attractive when seeking a wider audience than environmentalists to support policy directions. Why limit an economically and socially compelling argument to the *environment* when it can resonate with a wider public audience? And this is certainly true at a time when the environment, as a concept, ranks behind other more immediate priorities, particularly the economy. Elliott cites Nordhaus and Shellenberger (2007, p. 32) for this very proposition, which establishes a foundational prong for his argument; if the environment is a low priority in the minds of most American voters, then environmental goals are better served when AIAs provide a basis for support. The goal of environmental protection is still met, but there is a greater chance of public support when the goal is described in terms of advancing the needs and concerns of human beings.

There are two concerns I find with Elliott's argument when I view it from a public policy lens of *issue-attention* and the public's role in supporting specific environmental goals (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Downs, 1972; Young, 2002). The first concern focuses on the consequences of decoupling the concept of *environment* from policies honestly aimed at protecting the environment. The second concern focuses on the lack of *anchoring* that can result from decoupling the concept of environment from policies aimed at supporting the environment.

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### Taking the Concept of *Environment* out of Environmental Policies

Historically, policies aimed at protecting the environment have emerged from strong public opinion in support of environmental goals coalescing around *focusing events* that allow for policy formation (Repetto, 2006, pp 1–4). Examples today of legitimized environmental policies like the Endangered Species Act in the United States provide evidence that the concept of *environment* is often critical to helping move environmental goals forward. One may wonder how a policy like the Endangered Species Act could be passed into law when it provides protection for species and habitat even at the expense of economic wellbeing. Many would argue the US National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is another example: economic interests are held at bay while many anthropocentric projects are analyzed for potential environmental impacts before they are begun.

The fact is the concept of *environment* is often a critical and necessary piece in the development of environmental policies. And often it is *the reason* why a policy is passed in the first place. Indeed, Elliott notes this reality for many environmental policies. He is not suggesting the environment be removed from all arguments in support of a policy direction, and he is in support of using the environment as a means of support for most environmental policy, just not the sole support. But what is being argued is that the primacy of the environment as a singular goal becomes diminished in the service of casting a wider net of public acceptance. A potential problem with this argument is the environment is often the rallying point for environmental policies.

Historically, many of our most important environmental policies were passed due to the overwhelming support for the environment, not because of job creation, public health, or other ancillary justifications. Engendering the use of AIAs may dilute the importance of the environment in defining and justifying new policy directions. And this can be troubling when we consider just how complicated many environmental issues are for the public to understand today. While there certainly is value in responding to public perceptions, we must be careful that we do not confuse *public priorities* with *public sentiment*. Environmental policies often emerge from opportune moments that draw on public sentiment, even during times when the public priorities disfavor the environment when compared to other factors such as economic wellbeing. Diluting the concept of *environment* from a proposed policy direction may result in the unintended consequence of limiting public approval when these opportune moments emerge (Repetto, 2006).

### The Concept of *Environment* Acts as an Anchor for Public Support

Policymaking observed as a *process* becomes highly dependent on public support, particularly in a system of government like the United States. With public support in hand, and the coalescence of a myriad of other factors, a policy can make its way from a proposal to legitimization and implementation. The myriad of factors allowing for *policy windows* to occur are not fully understood and likely vary depending on the circumstances presented in a particular policy setting (Kingdon, 1984). However, a strong *public sentiment* favoring the environment has historically been a key factor in passing environmental policies (Guber, 2003).

To contextualize the importance of public sentiment, Scruggs and Benegal (2012) show how public opinion of climate change varies in relation to economic conditions,

specifically unemployment rate. When unemployment rates increase, the relative prioritization of the environment is lower. However, this does not suggest a diminished public sentiment towards the environment, but rather sentiment for the environment is brought into conflict with other strong sentiments. For example, the desire for personal wellbeing through financial security can be heightened in times of economic malaise, which can momentarily overcome a more amorphous concept of *environment*. But this effect has been shown to be temporary: when economic conditions improve, public sentiment towards the environment increases (Dunlap, 1991; McCright & Dunlap, 2011).

The National Environmental Policy Act (1971) and Endangered Species Act (1973) were mentioned earlier in this open peer commentary. What was not mentioned is these two federal environmental laws were passed during tough economic times. Other similar environmental laws passed during economic downturns include the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (1976) and the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977. During a recession in the 1980s, the public rejected a proposal by the Reagan administration to curtail existing environmental policies (Gilroy & Shapiro, 1986). These examples suggest a relatively stable public sentiment over time favoring environmental protection, and decadal data interpretations of public sentiment towards the environment support this proposition (Dunlap, 1991; Guber, 2003).

Policy formation is an inexact science: there are a multitude of factors that affect whether a policy proposal will make its way to legitimization and implementation. And this is true of environmental policy. But what is certain under our current understanding of environmental policy formation is that the concept of *environment* is crucial. Elliott is right in that AIAs can expand the audience of potential public supporters for environmental goals. However, in a world where public attention is sparse and fleeting, losing the *environment* as a primary goal of environmental policies carries heightened risks that should not be undervalued.

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