Global environmentalism and
the greening of international society

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As the world has been conquered, it is now a question of preserving it.

Paul Sarasin, 1910[1]

With courage and faith, I believe that we can meet our responsibility to our people, and the future of our planet.

President Barack Obama, 2009[2]

A hundred years separate the first International Congress for the Protection of Nature in Paris (1909) and the United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen (2009). Both international conferences mark important stages on the long road towards a greener international system. Both witnessed a clash between the idealistic ambitions of environmentalists and the harsh reality of international diplomacy. Both have been described as failures. As world leaders gather in June 2012 at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) in Rio de Janeiro, held 20 years after the Rio 'Earth Summit', many observers will no doubt conclude that, despite a century of global environmental rhetoric, green norms continue to be flouted by the Great Powers. Species extinction, deforestation and the destruction of ecosystems continue unabated, while the unmitigated global warming trend threatens global climate stability.

This article strikes a different chord. It argues that the rise of global environmentalism has had a lasting, and potentially transformative, impact on international relations. Over the last hundred years, international society has slowly but steadily been 'greened', despite the many setbacks in the search for practical solutions to specific environmental problems. Environmental ideas and norms have gradually been woven into the normative fabric of the states system. To be sure, the greening of international society is an ongoing, long-term, process. As the global climate crisis testifies, it may not produce timely responses to the

various ecological threats that humanity faces. Yet, given its potential to alter the social structure of international relations, the rise of global environmental responsibility deserves to be recognized as a major example of the normative expansion of international society.

A comparison of the state of international diplomacy in 1909 and in 2009 demonstrates the extent to which the underlying normative structure of international society has shifted. The 1909 International Congress for the Protection of Nature culminated in the first ever call for the creation of an international environmental body. Subsequent lobbying by Paul Sarasin, the founder of the first national parks in Switzerland, led the Swiss government to convene a world conservation conference in 1913. The conference was attended by 17 countries including the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Russia. It ended with an agreement on the creation of a Consultative Commission for the International Protection of Nature, a body originally proposed by Sarasin in 1910. However, the outbreak of the First World War prevented the commission from taking up its work, and a planned international conference on transnational environmental problems never took place. Postwar efforts to revive the commission came to nothing as the international system gradually disintegrated and a new military confrontation appeared on the horizon. Despite lobbying by scientific bodies and some government officials, no major power was willing to champion the cause of global environmental protection during the interwar years.[3]

Fast forward to the UN climate summit in 2009, which attracted the largest ever gathering of diplomats and observers, with well over 100 heads of government in attendance during the high-level component of the conference. Officially entitled the Fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP-15) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Copenhagen summit was tasked with agreeing a new treaty that would replace the Kyoto Protocol. In the end, the two-week-long meeting did not succeed in agreeing a legally binding text, but last-minute talks by leaders of the major powers resulted in the Copenhagen Accord, a political framework agreement on voluntary mitigation measures that was formally integrated into the UNFCCC a year later at COP-16 in Cancún. Despite widespread resistance to binding climate rules, leading emitters such as China, India and the US did not simply walk away from the climate talks. Having acknowledged their joint responsibility to protect the global climate, they felt compelled to work towards a politically feasible compromise.[4]

When measured against the scale of the global climate threat, the Copenhagen conference results can only be described as disappointing. However, focusing on what remains to be done to avert large-scale environmental damage misses important changes in the normative structure of international society. Over the last century, the ideas and values of global environmentalism have slowly but steadily

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[3] On the early efforts to create an international environmental body, see John McCormick, *Reclaiming paradise: the global environmental movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 22–3.
[4] On COP-15, see Daniel Bodansky, 'The Copenhagen Conference: a post-mortem', *American Journal of International Law* 104: 2, 2010, pp. 230–40.

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moved from the margins towards the centre of the international agenda. They have led to the creation of an increasingly complex set of international environmental institutions, the expansion of international environmental law, and the emergence of a distinctive practice of multilateral environmental diplomacy. Critically, international society has absorbed some environmental norms and has come to accept responsibility for the planet as one of several moral claims on states. The states system may be slow and inadequate in its response to environmental problems, but the emergence of the green international agenda points to a profound change in international relations, one that is easily overlooked if the focus is on the shortcomings of environmental diplomacy and UN summitry.

This article examines the greening of international society and asks how the discipline of International Relations (IR) can contribute to a better understanding of this process, its potential and its limitations. It engages a broadly conceived international society tradition, which builds on the English School and includes contributions from constructivism and historical sociology, in an effort to make sense of the international normative impact that the rise of global environmentalism has had over the past century. The next section reviews recent developments in English School theory with regard to the study of deep-seated institutional and normative change. The subsequent section discusses global environmentalism and the environmental responsibility norm to which it has given rise. The final section considers how this emerging norm relates to, and clashes with, existing fundamental norms in international society.

Greening international society: an English School perspective

As world leaders gather in Rio de Janeiro for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012, they will take stock of 20 years of global sustainability politics since the 1992 Rio 'Earth Summit'. A week, let alone two decades, may be a long time in politics, but if we want to understand the greening of international society, we need to consider an even longer historical period, stretching back to the early twentieth century and even further. With their deliberations focused on the here and now, diplomats and state leaders rarely have the luxury of considering the *longue durée* in international politics. Students of international relations, in contrast, need to step back from current affairs and consider the underlying trends that shape international politics in the long run.

How should we conceive of the greening of international society? A number of theoretical approaches have sought to capture and explain long-term processes of international change that encompass the rise of environmental values and norms. This article puts forward an alternative perspective that builds on English School theory and insights from related approaches such as constructivism and historical sociology. This section briefly sets out the key elements of this perspective and contrasts it with other approaches.

One approach can be described as *functionalist*. It emphasizes the scale and urgency of environmental problems and argues that an unprecedented level of

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international cooperation is required to avert a global crisis. As humanity comes to understand the profound threat that it faces, it will develop forms of collective action to counter the various environmental degradation trends. Functional necessity is the handmaiden of a new form of global environmental cooperation. Many environmental writers have presented the ecological crisis in stark terms and have outlined the need for a radical overhaul of the global political system.[5] Daniel Deudney has taken some of these arguments one step further and sketched a vision of how an effective global environmental rescue would alter the fundamental structure of world politics.[6] Deudney specifies two main mechanisms of global environmental change. On the one hand, environmentalism gives rise to a growing web of international institutions, which to some extent works with the grain of state-centric international relations. On the other, it produces a powerful cultural shift that leads to a decentring of the nation-state and the growth of cosmopolitan identities. A new green culture 'could be both universal enough and substantively rich enough to form the basis for a worldwide cultural formation capable of displacing nationalism'.[7] The awakened environmental consciousness thus becomes a transformative force, turning international politics into domestic politics.

A second approach employs a *sociological* lens. Sociologists associated with the Stanford School adopt a world society perspective and locate the sources of global change outside the traditional realms of interstate relations.[8] In their view, growing transnational webs of scientific discourse and of environmental mobilization and association, and the creation of multiple global organizational structures, all add up to a 'world environmental regime'. Global change is located at all levels of a wider global polity, and its origins are firmly rooted outside the states system. It is the growth of a world culture based on scientific rationality that makes global collective action possible, even if the anarchic states system cannot provide the required steering capacity. For the Stanford School, nation-states belatedly respond by forming environmental agendas and intergovernmental institutions. However, the institutional structure of international society is epiphenomenal to the mobilization and organization of world environmental responses.

Both the functionalist and the sociological perspectives offer relevant insights into the transformative potential of global environmentalism. They identify world society, that is, the beliefs and activities of transnational societal actors such as scientists and environmental campaigners, as the source of the greening of international society. But their analysis is limited by the way in which they

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[5] In their classic book *Only one Earth: the care and maintenance of a small planet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), Barbara Ward and René Dubos spoke of 'a new sense of partnership and sharing in our "sovereign" economics and politics' and 'a wider loyalty which transcends the traditional limited allegiance of tribes and peoples' as the pointers to the 'new necessities' of the ecological age (p. 290).

[6] Daniel Deudney, 'Global environmental rescue and the emergence of world domestic politics', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz and Ken Conca, eds, *The state and social power in global environmental politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 280–305.

[7] Deudney, 'Global environmental rescue', pp. 293–4.

[8] John W. Meyer, David John Frank, Ann Hironaka, Evan Schofer and Nancy Brandon Tuma, 'The structuring of a world environmental regime, 1870–1990', *International Organization* 51: 4, 1997, pp. 623–51.

downplay international society as a key site of normative contention and change and as a critical conditioning factor for the evolution of global environmentalism. Functionalists expect state-centric politics to lose significance and ultimately to fade away from the ecological equation. Their transformationalist logic turns the greening of international society into a process of transcendence and obscures the role that the states system itself plays in shaping global environmental responses. The Stanford School, by contrast, still expects a strengthening of intergovernmental processes to emerge out of the growth of global environmentalism. However, by treating world society as an analytically prior concept, it ends up treating normative change in international society as a secondary, derivative, phenomenon, thereby precluding closer analysis of how the structure of international society in turn shapes the growth and orientation of global environmentalism.

As I argue in this article, English School theory provides a sounder theoretical foundation for examining the greening of the states system and the interaction between international and world society. English School thinking is particularly well suited for studying long-term changes in the underlying normative structure of international society. For one thing, English School theory conceives of the international system as a social system, composed of norms, rules and institutions that govern interstate relations. It views international society as historically situated and rejects the notion of an unalterable nature of international relations. In other words, it seeks to establish how the society of states has emerged in the past, how it functions today, and how it might evolve in the future.[9] Furthermore, the English School is sensitive to different types of international change, going beyond the issue-specific contexts of international regimes to consider the constitutive institutions of international society.[10]

Finally, despite having gained a reputation for a narrow state-centricity, the English School is not necessarily blind to the growing interaction between international and world society. In fact, recent theoretical advances point to a more systematic engagement by English School theorists with the role that non-state actors play in promoting international change.[11] World society has, of course, never been completely absent from English School theorizing. In fact, it has animated a lively debate between so-called pluralists and solidarists, over the extent to which international society remains predominantly state-centric and based on a minimal set of international norms (the pluralist position) or is evolving towards a higher degree of international institutionalization and universally accepted values (the solidarist argument).[12] While the role of human rights has long been the dominant

[9]   Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society: a study of order in world politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Richard Little, 'The English School and world history', in Alex J. Bellamy, ed., *International society and its critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 45–63.
[10] Andrew Hurrell, 'International society and the study of regimes: a reflective approach', in Volker Rittberger, ed., *Regime theory and international relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 49–72.
[11] Barry Buzan, *From international to world society? English School theory and the social structure of globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ian Clark, *International legitimacy and world society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[12] John Williams, 'Pluralism, solidarism and the emergence of world society in English School theory', *International Relations* 19: 1, 2005, pp. 19–38.

focal point in this debate, some English School authors have recently identified environmentalism as a source of solidarist development.[13]

That this article is framed within an English School context may come as a surprise to some. With a few notable exceptions,[14] English School writing has been largely absent from the large body of environmental scholarship in IR.[15] This is unsurprising if we consider the work of the first generation of English School authors (such figures as Charles Manning and Martin Wight), which was produced well before environmental issues arrived on the international agenda in the early 1970s. Even later English School authors tended to view environmentalism as a marginal factor. In *The anarchical society*, for example, Hedley Bull discusses, but quickly dismisses, environmentalism as a force for international change.[16] By framing the discussion in the context of the wider debate on the obsolescence of the states system, he cuts short any serious engagement with the transformative potential of ecological ideas. Environmentalism, as Bull the pluralist argues, is unlikely to overcome the state-centric international society and create an overarching global political community or indeed a world state, despite its growing popularity.[17] Many of those following in Bull's footsteps have, therefore, tended to dismiss suggestions that the ecological challenge acts as a signpost towards an emerging solidarist international society.

However, as I argue, the study of global environmental politics would benefit from closer engagement with English School theory, and particularly its distinctive understanding of international institutions. In contrast to both realism and neo-liberal institutionalism, the English School offers a rich account of the institutional phenomena that define the durable patterns and historically bound character of international society. It shifts the focus away from the international regimes that govern specific environmental problems, such as ozone layer depletion, climate change or biosafety, and towards the embedding of environmentalism in the social structure that defines contemporary international relations. It thus offers a vantage point from which to examine the challenge that global environmentalism poses to international society.

The English School's understanding of institutions is distinctive in a number of ways. It views institutions as having evolved over time. Whereas regime theory focuses on intentionally created issue-specific regimes, the English School directs its attention at institutional phenomena below that level.[18] Like constructivism,

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[13] Buzan, *From international to world society?*, p. 150; Andrew Hurrell, *On global order: power, values, and the constitution of international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 224–8.

[14] Over the last two decades, Andrew Hurrell has developed the most systematic body of work on global environmental politics from an English School perspective.

[15] Matthew Paterson speaks for many environmental scholars when he dismisses English School theory as a starting point for the study of global environmental politics ('Global environmental governance', in Bellamy, ed., *International society and its critics*, pp. 163–77).

[16] Bull, *The anarchical society*, pp. 293–5.

[17] But see Bull's later interest in questions of justice and solidarism, as evident in his *Justice in international relations: the 1983 Hagey Lectures* (Waterloo, Ont.: University of Waterloo, 1984).

[18] Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell, 'International society and the academic study of international relations', in Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell, eds, *Hedley Bull on international society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 20–53.

the English School considers institutions and the states that make up international society as mutually constitutive.[19] Institutions such as sovereignty, diplomacy and the balance of power define what it means to be a state in the international system, while the repeated interaction between states serves to reproduce those very institutions. From an English School perspective, international change thus consists of a change in the institutions that define actors' identities and the rules of the game.

It is this focus on the deeper social structure that is at the heart of Buzan's notion of 'primary institutions', which are 'relatively fundamental and durable practices, that are evolved more than designed' and 'constitutive of actors and their patterns of legitimate activity in relation to each other'. They stand in contrast to 'secondary institutions' that are broadly synonymous with regimes.[20] Other authors have made similar distinctions. Hurrell speaks of 'stable and on-going social practices' within which issue-specific 'sets of norms and rules' are embedded.[21] Holsti also focuses on social institutions that resemble primary institutions but subdivides them into 'foundational institutions', which establish international actors and define the rules by which they act, and 'procedural institutions', which are made up of the 'repetitive practices, ideas, and norms that underlie and regulate interactions and transactions'.[22] Finally, Reus-Smit engages constructivist ideas to develop the notion of a constitutional structure of international society, with fundamental institutions and the moral purpose of the state defining the historically situated nature of international society.[23]

The notion of primary institutions not only serves to identify the underlying social structures that give permanence to international relations; it also provides markers for establishing deeper and long-term forms of international change.[24] This means that, if environmentalism is to effect lasting change in international society, we should expect it to leave traces at the level of primary institutions. The creation of international environmental regimes and organizations may indicate profound normative change, but should not be mistaken for the greening of international society as such.

This perspective is beginning to develop resonance in recent English School writings, though it is yet to be fully developed and empirically substantiated. In *The global covenant*, for example, Robert Jackson claims that environmental protection has emerged as a new fundamental norm in international society. In a brief but important passage, Jackson points out that the growing body of domestic and international law has come to express a new environmental ethic that defines humanity's responsibility to protect the global environment.[25] Combining

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[19] Buzan, *From international to world society?*, pp. 161–2.
[20] Buzan, *From international to world society?*, p. 167.
[21] Hurrell, *On global order*, p. 59.
[22] Kal J. Holsti, *Taming the sovereigns: institutional change in international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 24–5.
[23] Christian Reus-Smit, 'The constitutional structure of international society and the nature of fundamental institutions', *International Organization* 51: 4, 1997, pp. 555–89.
[24] Buzan, *From international to world society?*, pp. 181–2; Holsti, *Taming the sovereigns*, p. 18.
[25] Robert Jackson, *The global covenant: human conduct in a world of states* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 175–8.

Kantian ethics with English School solidarism, he argues that the norm applies to all individuals but is specifically aimed at state representatives, chiefly owing to the privileged and powerful position in which they find themselves. Representatives of the state become 'chief trustees or stewards of the planet … because they have the authority and power to address the problem'.[26] Buzan follows this line of reasoning in *From international to world society?*, claiming that the list of primary institutions now includes 'environmental stewardship' alongside sovereignty, territoriality, diplomacy and the market, among others.[27] Alluding to the notion of trusteeship, Buzan suggests that as 'the physical vulnerability of the planetary environment to human activity has increased, so environmental stewardship rose in prominence as a primary institution of interstate and international society', a process that is strongly rooted in the activities of non-state actors.[28]

Reus-Smit similarly argues that the normative framework within which states define and pursue their interests is changing, but is more ambiguous about the degree to which environmental values have permeated the international constitutional order. He focuses on the moral purpose of the state as the site of the (potential) greening process. For environmentalism to bring about a deep revolution in the relationship between international society and nature, it would need to produce a change in the very economic purpose of the state, which has been defined by a focus on industrial growth and the concomitant exploitation of nature. Reus-Smit suggests that the rise of environmentalism in the late twentieth century may have challenged this industrial purpose, causing 'a period of ideological reevaluation', but cautions that 'the results of [this shift] remain unclear'.[29]

The premise of this article is that the notion of primary institutions provides a useful conceptual lens through which to view the long-term effects of the rise of global environmentalism on international society. In what follows, I seek to flesh out an English School account of how global environmental ideas and values have become embedded in the normative structure of international society. The interaction between environmentalism and the anthropocentric, modernist and state-centric norms of the international system has been at its most intense in the last three decades of the twentieth century but has of course a longer prehistory. The next section discusses the historical context of the greening of international society, while the subsequent section examines the tensions that exist between the emerging institution of environmental responsibility and the established institutions of sovereignty, international law and the market.[30]

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[26] Jackson, *The global covenant*, p. 176.
[27] Buzan, *From international to world society?*, p. 187.
[28] Buzan, *From international to world society?*, pp. 262, 247–8.
[29] Christian Reus-Smit, 'The normative structure of international society', in F. O. Hampson and J. Reppy, eds, *Earthly goods: environmental change and social justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 119.
[30] Owing to space constraints, I am concentrating on the three primary institutions on which environmentalism has left its most notable mark.

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The emergence of global environmental responsibility

Environmentalism, like other political ideologies, is a broad church based on a wide range of ethical and political beliefs.[31] It seeks to rebalance the relationship between human society and the natural environment and is driven by a concern for the survival of individual species and the health of ecological systems overall. There are many varieties of environmentalism, as there are of liberalism and conservatism. What the different environmental traditions have in common are two core convictions: an empirical belief that many of the planet's ecosystems and species are under threat, and a normative belief that humans should take greater care of the environment. Translated into the world of international relations, environmentalism posits the need for states, but also for other actors, to protect the global environment. It gives rise to a distinctive norm of environmental responsibility, which has also been referred to as planetary stewardship or environmental guardianship. Until recently, it has had no locus in international society. As I argue in this article, it is now emerging as a primary international institution.

Environmental responsibility is a somewhat ambiguous, but potentially demanding, norm. It represents an ambitious expansion of the normative landscape within which states define their purpose and identity as international actors. Traditionally, this included only the responsibility to secure the national interest and survival. More recently, as English School and liberal theorists have argued, the growth of an ever denser network of norms and rules has led states to accept responsibility for maintaining the stability of the international system. Within the English School, scholars of a solidarist persuasion have gone one step further in arguing that the growth of human rights after the Second World War has pushed the boundaries of the international moral landscape beyond state rights and towards the rights of human beings.[32] Following this logic, it can be argued that environmentalism adds a further circle of moral responsibility, pushing the concept of state responsibility beyond the human-centred world to include the rights of species and the natural environment overall.[33]

How did this moral revolution come about, when did it start and how far has it come? The roots of environmentalism can be found in the late eighteenth century, when a diverse range of thinkers gave expression to a new form of environmental sensibility. As the industrial revolution spread from England to continental Europe and North America, naturalist writers and Romantic poets

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[31] For a history of ecological thinking, see Donald Worster, *Nature's economy: a history of ecological ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On varieties of green political thinking, see Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley, eds, *Political theory and the ecological challenge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[32] R. J. Vincent, *Human rights and international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler, eds, *Human rights in global politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[33] On the expansion of state responsibility, see Jackson, *The global covenant*, pp. 169–78. In 'The problem of harm in world politics: implications for the sociology of states-systems', *International Affairs* 78: 2, April 2002, pp. 319–38, Andrew Linklater combines English School and cosmopolitan thinking in pointing to a growing international obligation to prevent unnecessary harm. On the ethical revolution brought about by environmentalism, see Roderick Frazier Nash, *The rights of nature: a history of environmental ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

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turned the aesthetic appreciation of nature into a concern for nature's integrity and survival. Over the course of the nineteenth century, environmental sentiment was channelled into more practical programmes of nature protection, giving rise to a growing conservation movement. In the US, conservation groups such as the Sierra Club campaigned for the creation of natural parks, while forestry experts such as Gifford Pinchot advocated a more sustainable approach to forestry management. Conservationism also took root in the major European countries and their colonial territories, and the first membership-based conservation organizations were created around issues such as bird protection and African wildlife.[34]

Nineteenth-century conservationism addressed some of the first transnational environmental concerns of the time, but remained a predominantly national movement in outlook and organization. It had little impact on international relations and left no traces in the normative structure of nineteenth-century international society. To be sure, some conservationists argued that a certain degree of international cooperation was needed and formed transnational alliances and organizations, especially ones that focused on wildlife and bird protection issues within the British empire. Some states even reached agreement on the first international conservation treaties, such as the 1902 treaty to protect birds useful for agriculture.[35] But such agreements remained isolated instances, elite-driven initiatives that relied heavily on close links between a small number of scientists and government officials within a national setting. What they lacked was a broader political basis in domestic and international society. The first proposal for a dedicated international body for nature conservation arose as early as 1909 but was short-lived. The Swiss government convened an international conference in 1913 at which agreement was reached to establish such a body, only for the outbreak of the First World War to put a halt to this initiative. Even though conservationists renewed their efforts in the interwar years, the League of Nations did not make nature protection part of its mandate.[36] Until well after the Second World War, the leading powers continued to view environmental matters as part of domestic politics. Global environmental protection did not emerge as a primary institution, not least because the underlying environmental ideas were insufficiently globalized.

The situation changed dramatically with the birth of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s. Modern environmentalism differed from nineteenth-century conservationism in three important ways: it turned a predominantly elite and scientific concern for nature conservation into a mass-based movement with wider political appeal; it expanded the environmental agenda from the narrow and often isolated issues of wildlife conservation to a broader concern for the consequences of modern industrialism and the survival of the planet; and it redefined ecological concerns as inherently global issues, turning environmentalism into a transnational movement that challenged core norms and practices of international

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[34] McCormick, *Reclaiming paradise*, ch. 1.
[35] Robert Boardman, *International organization and the conservation of nature* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 27–8.
[36] Anna-Katharina Wöbse, 'Oil on troubled waters? Environmental diplomacy in the League of Nations', *Diplomatic History* 32: 4, 2008, pp. 519–37.

society. For the first time, world society actors conceived environmental responsibility in unambiguously global terms, calling for a profound change in the way in which the international political and economic system was organized.[37]

Within a relatively short period of time, the environmental movement left a lasting mark on both domestic and international politics. The 1960s and 1970s can be considered as the critical period in which the intellectual, political and institutional foundations were laid for environmental responsibility to emerge as a primary international institution. The first UN conference on the environment in 1972 provides an initial indicator of this change. In the Stockholm Declaration, the signatories accepted a general responsibility for the environment by stating that 'the protection and improvement of the human environment' is 'the duty of all Governments'. This general duty is defined in principle 21 in terms of harm prevention: states accept 'the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction'.[38] At the same time, however, principle 21 balances this responsibility with the sovereign right of states to exploit their natural resources. As discussed below, environmental responsibility was from the beginning framed within the context of sovereign statehood. The latent conflict between these two institutions was left unresolved and would resurface repeatedly as the demands of global environmental responsibility gained greater prominence in subsequent years.

Over the next two decades, global environmental responsibility gradually gained near-universal support. In 1972 the Soviet Union and most East European countries boycotted the Stockholm conference on account of West Germany's refusal to accept participation by East Germany, while many developing countries expressed strong reservations about what they perceived to be a northern environmental agenda. By the time of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, however, a broad North–South and East–West consensus had emerged on the need to anchor environmental responsibility in international society, despite continuing differences over how to balance environment with development. Helped by the end of the Cold War and a renewed effort to accommodate developing countries' concerns, the Rio 'Earth Summit' of 1992 attracted near-universal participation and support. Its Rio Declaration comes closest to what might be considered a universally accepted constitutional text for the emerging primary institution. In it, states reiterated the harm prevention principle in principle 2 and added further principles that specified how states should implement their general environmental responsibility. These included the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (principle 7), promotion of a 'supportive and open international economic system' (principle 12), the precautionary approach (principle

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[37] The creation of transnationally organized environmental campaign groups (e.g. Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace) played an important role in this discursive shift; see Paul Wapner, *Environmental activism and world civic politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[38] Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Enviroment, 16 June 1972, http://www.unep. org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.Print.asp?documentid=97&articleid=1503, accessed 24 Feb. 2012.

15), and the polluter pays principle (principle 16).[39] Many of these principles were reasserted in the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development of 2002, pointing to the lasting international acceptance they had achieved by then.

It should be noted that the Stockholm and Rio Declarations are not legally binding. They do not constitute legal commitments as such; but they do give rise to what international lawyers refer to as customary international law. Legal form, of course, is not an essential criterion for the existence of primary institutions. What matters is that they represent an explicit manifestation of an implicitly assumed and broadly accepted fundamental norm. Evidence for the social reality of such an institution cannot be found in a single treaty but needs to be established from a wide range of indicators. These include the myriad international environmental treaties created since the 1970s, the institutions that service them, the density of transnational and transgovernmental networks that link environmental actors across boundaries, and observable changes in state practices. Some of this evidence can be presented in quantitative form,[40] though most of it will be of a qualitative nature requiring interpretation rather than measurement.

Looking back over the past century, three features of the greening of international society become apparent. The first is that states have come to accept a basic form of global environmental responsibility that has grown into an emerging primary institution. It was introduced to international relations by non-state actors, making this a classic case of 'normative transference' between world society and international society.[41] The contrast between the early and late twentieth century is striking. Before and after the First World War, environmental problems were considered as part of domestic policy-making and not as a pressing international concern. After the 1960s, all major countries heeded environmentalists' calls for the creation of an international environmental agenda.

Second, the emergence of environmental responsibility has had the most striking impact in the form of an international environmental citizenship norm, which obliges states to participate in multilateral environmental policy-making. Many key international environmental treaties and institutions enjoy near-universal support and all major powers now engage in environmental diplomacy as a matter of routine, whether or not they intend to be bound by the resulting agreements.

Third, environmental responsibility is only an emerging primary institution; and it competes, and partly clashes, with other, established institutions. Its status within the normative order of international society remains contested, and continuing global environmental degradation suggests that its specific environmental obligations are honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Indeed, while major powers now accept the demands of international environmental citizenship, their substantive commitment to global environmental sustainability is lagging far behind this procedural commitment.

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[39] Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, June 1992, http://www.unep.org/Documents. Multilingual/Default.Print.asp?documentid=78&articleid=1163, accessed 24 Feb. 2012.

[40] For an example of a quantitative analysis of the growing density of global environmental governance, see Meyer et al., 'The structuring of a world environmental regime'.

[41] Clark, *International legitimacy*, p. 13.

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To better understand the discrepancy between the rise of environmental responsibility on the one hand and its limited influence on global environmental sustainability on the other, we need to examine more closely the relationship between global environmentalism and key primary institutions of international society.

Environmentalism and the established institutions of international society

Environmental responsibility poses a challenge to the main primary institutions in contemporary international society, most notably sovereignty, international law and the market. For one thing, the modern environmental movement has considered the division of the world into territorially defined political units as ecologically dysfunctional. Environmental conceptions of global political action tend to clash with the sovereign nation-state's status as the ultimate source of political authority and primary reference point for individual loyalty. Environmentalists are also critical of the growth paradigm that is inherent in the market-based capitalist system. In several important ways, therefore, environmental responsibility can be seen as a challenger norm in international society, potentially playing a vanguard role in the progression towards a solidarist international society. At the same time, constructivism reminds us that norm change is most likely to succeed if an emerging norm resonates with the existing normative framework; and this principle applies to global environmentalism. As environmental ideas have been taken up in international relations, environmentalists have slowly come to embrace the nation-state as a source of regulatory authority at both domestic and international level. They have also adopted a discourse of sustainable development and green growth that seeks to make environmental responsibility compatible with the global liberal economic order. International norm change is a complex process of give and take, with emerging norms both challenging and adapting to existing ones. This final section of the article examines how environmental responsibility has related to the existing primary institutions of sovereignty, international law and the market.

Sovereignty

The very concept of global environmentalism directly challenges the institution of sovereignty. From an ecological perspective, the division of the international system into territorially defined sovereign units is highly problematic. Political boundaries do not reflect the boundaries of the earth's ecosystems, and protecting natural migratory species, preventing tropical deforestation and combating global climate change require a degree of international cooperation that the fragmented international system is unable to deliver. The nation-state's claim to sovereign control over a defined territory is often viewed by environmentalists as the main hindrance to an effective collective response to global environmental problems.[42]

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[42] Karen T. Litfin, 'The greening of sovereignty: an introduction', in Karen T. Litfin, ed., *The greening of sovereignty in world politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 1–27.

In this sense, the emergence of global environmental responsibility can be expected to weaken the legitimacy of the sovereignty principle.

In reality, the rise of global environmentalism has not posed a fundamental challenge to sovereignty's pivotal role, even if it has introduced important innovations in global environmental governance. Global green politics has augmented the range of governance mechanisms at work and enhanced the role that non-state actors play in them. The rapid expansion of the international environmental agenda after the 1972 Stockholm conference has produced a number of legal instruments and governance mechanisms that suggest a move beyond a strict Westphalian interpretation of sovereign statehood. Some environmental agreements reach deeply into the domestic arena of sovereign states and serve to empower pro-environmental actors within government and civil society. Global environmentalism has led to an ever denser web of treaty commitments, institutional linkages and actor networks that nudge states into routinized international environmental cooperation, tying them into increasingly transnational networks of global governance.[43]

However, to acknowledge this is not the same as claiming that sovereignty has been eroded. Far from it: the persistence of the institution of sovereignty acts as a constraint on the transformative force of global environmentalism, channelling it into modes of political organization and governance that can for the most part be accommodated within the evolving structures of international society. Moreover, the emergence of global environmental responsibility as a primary institution has gone hand in hand with a reaffirmation of the centrality of state sovereignty as a defining principle of environmental management. From the 1972 Stockholm conference onwards, the international environmental agenda has been defined in terms of the environmental responsibility of states *and* their sovereign right to use natural resources within their national territory.[44] States have accepted an expanding range of environmental duties, from limiting transboundary environmental harm to protecting the global commons, but the expansion of state responsibility has been achieved primarily through a series of intergovernmental agreements and institutions that build on, and to some extent enhance, the regulatory power of the nation-state. Strong solidarist visions of a post-Westphalian form of global environmental governance have had only a limited impact on the international practice of environmental protection. Even though non-state actors such as business play an enlarged role in providing governance functions, the shadow of sovereignty looms large in the background of such private and hybrid forms of environmental governance.[45]

What we are witnessing, then, is the beginning of a limited but notable reconfiguration of the institution of sovereignty and its concomitant state practices. An English School perspective helps us to focus on the socially constructed and historically situated nature of primary institutions, which can take on different

[43] Frank Biermann and Philipp Pattberg, 'Global environmental governance: taking stock, moving forward', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 33, 2008, pp. 277–94.
[44] See principle 21 of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and principle 2 of the 1992 Rio Declaration.
[45] Robert Falkner, 'Private environmental governance and international relations: exploring the links', *Global Environmental Politics* 3 : 2, 2003, pp. 72–87.

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meanings across time and space. In this perspective, the rise of global environmentalism has not marginalized sovereignty but has initiated a change in its meaning and significance as part of the international social structure. This concerns, in particular, the question of what it means to be a modern nation-state in an age of ecological constraints. As Robyn Eckersley argues, modern environmentalism points to 'intimations of a shift in the purpose of the modern state from environmental exploiter and territorial defender to that of environmental protector, trustee, or public custodian of the planetary commons'.[46] This shift has a domestic dimension, in that all major states have incorporated environmental objectives into domestic policy frameworks, and have established domestic laws and agencies that implement environmental objectives and integrate them into other policy areas.[47] It also has an external dimension. Environmental protection has become a routine aspect of modern foreign policy, with dedicated environmental units operating within most foreign ministries. To be fully recognized 'environmental citizens' of international society, states are now expected to participate in the ever-expanding scope of environmental standard-setting and treaty-making.

Thus, to think of sovereignty and ecology in terms of a simple dichotomy of mutually exclusive institutions misses the important transformation that has occurred in the way in which sovereign states identify their rights and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the global environment. Sovereignty remains a vital element of the constitutional order of international society and has structured the way in which states have built global capacity for environmental governance. At the same time, environmental ideas have begun the slow process of redefining what it means to be a sovereign state in the ecological era.

International law

International law is essential to the functioning of international society and is generally regarded by English School theorists as one of its central institutions.[48] The rise of international environmental law is part of a broader shift in international law away from a focus on interstate coexistence and towards cooperation. Whereas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries international law was primarily concerned with the sovereign claims between states in the realms of diplomacy, treaty relations and war, post-1945 developments expanded the scope of legal norms to include human rights and economic development.[49] Originally, environmental concerns were seen through the Westphalian prism of sovereign state rights, with legal disputes arising from transboundary environmental harm that occurred between neighbouring states. The famous *Trail Smelter* case of 1939 established two core legal principles: the duty of states to prevent transboundary harm, and the duty to pay compensation when such harm occurs. From the 1970s

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[46] Robyn Eckersley, *The green state: rethinking democracy and sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 209.
[47] McCormick, *Reclaiming paradise*, ch. 7.
[48] Buzan, *From international to world society?*, pp. 170–1.
[49] Daniel Bodansky, *The art and craft of international environmental law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 18–22.

onwards, however, a broader definition of environmental rights and duties came to be accepted, giving rise to notions of an expanded, and increasingly global, environmental responsibility. Environmentalism has thus added further impetus for moving international law beyond its 'territorially defined "Procrustean bed"'.[50]

To be sure, the expansion of the scope of international environmental law has been a gradual and uneven process, and states remain central to it. Decisions taken by treaty bodies, international organizations, arbitral tribunals and private standard-setting bodies have added to the growing body of environmental law, but it is the rapidly expanding number of international environmental agreements that have been the main source of new legal rules and norms. In this sense, international environmental law has remained wedded to the state-centric origins of international law, with states creating international law while carefully circumscribing its domestic reach. This process can also be seen at work in relation to environmental affairs disputes and jurisdiction, which continues to depend on voluntary submission by states. Although many environmental treaties include references to dispute settlement through third-party adjudication or arbitration, very few treaty-related disputes have been resolved with the help of formal dispute settlement procedures.[51] The International Court of Justice's Chamber for Environmental Matters, which was established in 1993, has remained dormant, and recent proposals to establish a separate judicial body, such as an International Court for the Environment, have so far failed to develop traction in international politics.

At the same time, the growth of environmental norms based on customary law and general principles points to the greening of international law on a deeper level. Such norms give expression to the profound normative shift that environmentalism has initiated, even if their status, legal strength and behavioural impact remain a matter of debate.[52] Among the most important of such non-treaty norms are harm prevention and the precautionary principle. That the duty to prevent, reduce and control transboundary environmental harm is well established has been described as 'beyond serious argument'.[53] The precautionary principle, by contrast, may have grown in prominence in recent years but remains deeply contested.[54] It has been included in operational parts of international treaties, such as the 2000 Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and is being championed by the European Union, but key powers such as the United States resist its wider application. In the end, the expansion of environmental customary law is an important indicator of the emergence of the institution of environmental responsibility, even though behavioural effects among states remain severely limited.

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[50] Peter H. Sand, 'The evolution of international environmental law', in Daniel Bodansky, Jutta Brunnée and Ellen Hey, eds, *The Oxford handbook of international environmental law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 34.

[51] Cesare P. R. Romano, 'International dispute settlement', in Bodansky et al., eds, *The Oxford handbook of international environmental law*, p. 1042.

[52] Bodansky, *The art and craft of international environmental law*, ch. 9.

[53] Patricia Birnie and Alan Boyle, *International law and the environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 106.

[54] Jonathan B. Wiener, 'Precaution', in Bodansky et al., eds, *The Oxford handbook of international environmental law*, pp. 597–612.

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Legal scholarship has identified some more advanced legal concepts that suggest moves well beyond the Westphalian boundaries of international environmental law. Among the most far-reaching arguments are those that claim that species such as whales have achieved an emerging right to life as a matter of customary international law. Others point to duties of protection with regard to large-scale ecosystems threatened by deforestation, desertification or habitat loss. Many of these norms open up the possibility of a solidarist transformation of international society, with global environmental duties counterbalancing and potentially overriding national rights. Still, their legal status can only be described as nascent, at best, or aspirational, at worst. The same can be said about recent moves to establish 'ecocide' or other forms of environmental harm as international crimes. Indeed, the development of international environmental criminal law, which would see the international prosecution of global environmental misconduct by states—potentially also by private actors—remains so far a matter of jurisprudential speculation.[55]

In sum, international law has gone through a distinct process of greening, leading to the growth of a substantial body of legal norms and jurisdiction that deals with transnational environmental harm. Along the way, environmentalism has strengthened the evolution of international law in the direction of more globalist and progressive approaches. These changes have codified some aspects of states' emerging environmental responsibility and go hand in hand with the reinterpretation of sovereignty mentioned above. At the same time, however, the most innovative developments in international environmental law have yet to gain wider traction in international society, and in many cases their legal status remains deeply contested. The primary institution of environmental responsibility has left visible traces in the international legal system, but the Westphalian origins of international law continue to dominate, and constrain, its embedding in the legal realm.

The market

Compared to sovereignty and international law, the market is a relatively recent addition to the constitutional order of international society. Following the rise of liberal economic thinking in the nineteenth century, the idea of organizing economic relations around the principle of market-based exchange gradually became the dominant economic paradigm of the twentieth century. The United States inscribed market liberalism into the post-1945 economic order, and successive waves of globalization and economic liberalization, especially after the end of the Cold War, have further entrenched the position of the market as a primary institution in international society. Even if countries continue to depart from liberal market principles in times of economic crisis, their deep-rooted commitment to market-based capitalism remains unchanged.

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[55] Frédéric Mégret, 'The problem of an international criminal law of the environment', *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* 36: 2, 2011, pp. 195–257.

Environmental ideas are, to a large extent, in direct tension with the principles of market-based capitalism. The modern environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, identified the industrial and expansionist logic of capitalism as a root cause of the global ecological crisis.[56] Indeed, when environmental concerns first emerged on the international agenda, environmentalists and their critics tended to view economy and ecology as fundamentally opposed concerns. The gradual mainstreaming of environmental issues in domestic and international politics in subsequent decades has brought about a certain degree of reconciliation between environmentalism and the market principle. While economists have come to endorse the idea that malfunctioning markets cause some of the worst forms of global environmental destruction—the Stern Review famously described global warming as the world's greatest market failure[57]—environmentalists are increasingly looking to market-based instruments such as emissions trading to cure certain ecological ills. But despite the intellectual and political accommodation that has occurred more recently, environmentalism continues to pose a challenge to the growth imperative of market-based capitalism.

To what extent has environmentalism brought about a greening of the primary institution of the market? This question is usually debated in the context of the emergence of a discourse of sustainable development, which has proved to be a popular if ill-defined concept for describing how states can implement their commitment to environmental protection while promoting economic development. This discourse has helped to introduce a sustainability dimension into economic thinking and practice in that states, businesses and international organizations now routinely assess, and seek to minimize, the environmental impacts of their economic decisions. That environmental concerns need to be integrated into the operation of the market principle is widely accepted, and this recognition has taken many different forms, from the notion of promoting eco-efficiency in industrial production to ecological modernization and green growth at the macroeconomic level.[58] Green norms have in this sense helped to redefine global economic thinking. At the same time, however, the green agenda has had to adapt to and conform with the basic tenets of market-based capitalism in order to gain traction in international politics. As Stephen Bernstein argues, a 'compromise of liberal environmentalism' has become institutionalized at the international level, and this compromise 'predicates environmental protection on the promotion and maintenance of a liberal economic order'.[59] The concept of sustainable development is but one such attempt to mould environmental thinking to fit a market-based template.

While there has thus been accommodation on both sides, environmental responsibility remains the weaker primary institution. The extent to which the main

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[56] Edward Goldsmith and Jerry Mander, eds, *The case against the global economy: and for a turn towards localization* (London: Earthscan, 2001).
[57] Nicholas Stern, *The economics of climate change: the Stern Review* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[58] Arthur P. J. Mol and David A. Sonnenfeld, eds, *Ecological modernisation around the world: perspectives and critical debates* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).
[59] Steven Bernstein, *The compromise of liberal environmentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 213.

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international economic regimes have taken on green principles has not funda-mentally altered their role as expressions and guarantors of the underlying market institution. The World Trade Organization, for example, incorporated sustainable development into its preamble as one of the core principles to guide trade policy. This and other changes to the trade regime have opened up the space for a more accommodating view of environmental concerns within trade policy-making and jurisdiction,[60] even though they have not greened international trade flows as such. Similarly, the World Bank's move to establish an environmental unit and introduce environmental impact assessment has given environmental principles an institutional foothold in the design and implementation of aid programmes but has had a more limited impact on actual multilateral lending practices.[61]

The challenges of designing an effective response to the threat posed by global warming have thrown into sharp relief the difficulties that any green transforma-tion of market-based capitalism faces. As Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson argue in *Climate capitalism*, the scale of the task of decarbonizing the global economy requires not just some adjustments to the operation of capitalism but a novel type of capitalist organization based on a different economic growth model.[62] Some environmental problems, such as ozone layer depletion, can more easily be resolved by a combination of limited state interventions into markets and capitalist compe-tition between different business interests, so-called 'business conflict'.[63] But more protracted ecological problems, from climate change to resource depletion and biodiversity loss, tend to expose the limits of purely market-based environmental solutions.

Conclusion

Most IR research on global environmental issues has been focused on international regimes that promote environmental cooperation between states or transnational governance mechanisms involving non-state actors. While this focus has yielded important insights into the conditions for successful environmental policy-making and norm-creation, it has tended to ignore the question of whether environmen-talism has had a deeper and potentially transformative impact on international society. By employing an English School perspective, which has played a negli-gible role in recent environmental scholarship, this article has sought to help re-establish a research focus on the long-term process of greening international society as a form of deep-seated normative change.

A review of a century of global environmental concern and action suggests that global environmentalism has succeeded in establishing a global norm of

[60] Steve Charnovitz, 'The WTO's environmental progress', *Journal of International Economic Law* 10: 3, 2007, pp. 685–706.

[61] Susan Park, 'World Bank group: championing sustainable development?', *Global Governance* 13: 4, 2007, pp. 535–56.

[62] Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson, *Climate capitalism: global warming and the transformation of the global economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[63] Robert Falkner, *Business power and conflict in international environmental politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), ch. 3.

environmental responsibility. The rise of global environmentalism has initiated the expansion of the nation-state's moral purpose beyond human-centred rights and obligations, with the result that states have come to accept a responsibility for environmental protection beyond their national territory. This planetary responsibility can be considered an emerging primary institution in international society, which is taking its place alongside other institutions such as sovereignty, diplomacy and international law.

This transformation is far from complete, however. It involves an ongoing process of normative challenge and accommodation between environmental responsibility and other established primary institutions, especially sovereignty, international law and the market. The weakness of the institution of environmental responsibility is explained in part by the fact that deep tensions persist between global environmental norms and other, more dominant, primary institutions. To be sure, global environmentalism has left its mark on the last. It has initiated a limited reconfiguration of sovereignty along environmental lines, expanded the scope of international law and stimulated the development of novel legal concepts, and achieved an integration of sustainability concerns into economic thinking and practice in leading states, businesses and international organizations. But the limited degree to which these transformations have succeeded supports the view that global environmental responsibility can only be considered an emerging primary institution.