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Nancy's reaction paper March 1st

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Reaction Paper – 11.363

03/01/2005 Readings: Transnational Environmental Actors and Activism

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The underlying common theme in this week's readings is governance and the role of environmental NGOs in various governance frameworks.

Ludivine and Tamiotti (2001) neatly sum of their chief argument in the conclusion of their paper: "it would be more accurate to conceptualize the complex interplay between states and international institutions, on the one hand, and environmental organizations, on the other, as a strategic relationship of interested actors, rather than as a harmonious governance mechanism" (Ludivine and Tamiotti, 2001). This article aims to provide the reader with a realistic examination of the various roles that environmental NGOs play in global environmental politics. The authors, from the outset, reject the notion that environmental NGOs could or should fulfill the role of the "global citizen" in a global governance arrangement.

The chronology of both ecological concerns – conservation ecology, to political ecology, to global ecology – and the corresponding changing political instruments that influenced each of these three major types of ecological concerns respectively – national and sector related approaches, social movements, and a more comprehensive approach - provides a compelling background from which to analyze the role of environmental NGOs. The authors suggest three broad categories of functions that NGOs undertake: decision-making in international environment-related mechanisms, implementation of international environmental agreements at the national and local level, and monitoring and compliance of multilateral environmental agreements. My initial impression was that these three groups of functions was limited and did not encompass the array of environmental NGO activities; however, if one focuses on only the global environmental politics forum, as the authors have, then these three groups of functions are indeed comprehensive.

Wapner (2002) argues that the cultural aspects of an environmental NGO's work are understudied. Wapner describes the cultural change that NGOs engender as increasing the "ecological sensibility" of citizens around the world. Wapner's take-home message seems to be that he thinks "in the long run, cultural change may be more significant than changes in specific laws or regulations" (Wapner, 2002). This thesis strikes me as quite tenuous because "cultural change" means very different things to different people. Had Wapner, restricted his argument to a certain society or one country in which there is sufficient cultural cohesion then perhaps I would have been more convinced by his argument. But, at first glance, it seems to be little more than a sweeping statement.

Wapner (1995), in my view, reads as a dated piece on civil society and the environment. His use of terms, such as, "transnational activist groups" and "third world countries" are not terms that often seen in the current body of literature on civil society. Wapner underscores that research on world politics and the role of NGOs warrants more emphasis on the actual types of political action rather than the different agents that engage in politics. Moreover, global civil society are "political" not as a result of their interaction with states but as a result of global civil society being adept in employing various governance mechanisms to influence behavior, be it, in local communities, multinational companies, or state politics.

Questions based on the Readings:

- Are there other key functions, in addition to decision-making, implementation, and monitoring/compliance, that Tamiotti and Finger (2001) should include in their list of functions of environmental organization?
- Do you think Wapner's argument that the cultural dimensions of NGO work is

politically superior to others is relevant worldwide?