Prologue

The Human *Environment – The Stockholm Idea*

Several years into preparations for the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), the concept of the "human environment" remained ambiguous. The conference's energetic Secretary General Maurice Strong therefore proposed a clear and concise operational definition: "The term 'human environment' refers to those aspects of man's activities which, by affecting the natural ecological systems of which he is part, affect his own life and well being."[1] Although the term itself today seems anachronistic, at the time "the human environment" articulated a novel conception of the natural world – not simply nature separate from society, but instead entailing the totality of the surroundings that enveloped and sustained human life.

More than fifty years later, it is no longer necessary to attach the qualifier "human" to "environment" to convey the interdependency of the two. The human aspect of "the environment" is largely acknowledged, if not always taken into full account in terms of behavior or policy. Indeed, the conception of the relationship is increasingly becoming that "the environment" *is* "human" and that humans and environment are inseparable. The environment not only surrounds the human, an idea built into the etymology of the word environment and its counterparts in many languages (*environment* in French, *ambiente* in Italian and Spanish, and *Umwelt* in German). Distinct from the notion of "nature," which retains more endogenous autonomy, the environment is also shaped and affected by humans. The environment is moreover deeply

[1] Wade Rowland, *The Plot to Save the World: The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1973).

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attached to human responsibility and accountability, both from past agency and in relation to future action.[2]

We have chosen to take that essential word "human" as a key point of departure for this examination of the emergence and evolution of what has for the past few decades been called global environmental governance (GEG). It is a book in which the 1972 UN Conference in Stockholm occupies a central position and historical presence, primarily because it has had a lasting impression on modern environmental politics around the world, but also because the conference was held in Stockholm, which in and of itself requires some reflection. What made Stockholm assume this role as the convening venue for what turned out to be the first truly global event in addressing concerns over the incipient environmental crisis that had only entered public consciousness a few years earlier? What were the implications of its taking place in that particular location on the northern periphery of the European continent?

A central presence in this book is Stockholm itself, a city that not only hosted the 1972 environmental conference but has also provided the convening power, institutional ingenuity, and material as well as intellectual resources and leadership for multiple policy and scientific interventions over a much longer period. Stockholm, we argue, connected the post-WWII prehistory of UNCHE 1972 – when "environment" rose to a significant position on the international agenda and became a household word – with the long and winding story of assembling knowledge and politics into what has become the current global architecture for environmental governance. It is very much a story of the "human" element of the environment, of human networks and conventions, as well as of the human impacts on nature. And perhaps above all, an environment that gradually, over a period of several decades, enters the realm of the polity and hence also exits the exclusive domain of the natural where it was once firmly located.

The book examines the distinct human dimension of the history of environmental governance: a social sphere of individuals, the networks they operated within, and the institutions they helped build. Focusing on

[2] "The environment" is historicized in Paul Warde, Libby Robin & Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). On the concept of "nature," see Kate Soper, *What Is Nature?* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995); Noel Castree, *Nature* (London: Routledge, 2005); and the eternal classic, Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967). On the "surrounding" properties of environment, see also Etienne Benson, *Surroundings: A History of Environments and Environmentalisms* (Chicago, IL & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

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people – primarily scientists and experts, diplomats and government officials, environmental activists, and engaged parts of the private sector – we elaborate *a* "human environment," in and related to Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. *This* human environment, of interacting individuals, has made critical contributions to rendering *the* human environment what it has now become, a *governable object*, which is in and of itself a prerequisite for GEG. This Stockholm story, more than an account of a singular event such as the 1972 UN Conference or of advances made in a particular Northern European location, represents a multidecade environmental history that is deeply intertwined with global-scale scientific and political processes such as the rise of the biosphere, biodiversity, and climate change on the international agenda. With individuals and their networks at the center of the narrative, "human environment" in this book carries multifold connotations. It encompasses *humanity*'s physical operating space, the social and political context from which a *humane* sustainability knowledge and initiatives emerged over the course of some seventy years. It also encompasses the *human* sphere that a city and a culture in a particular historical period could provide in its work to make the environment the responsibility of *humans*. Stockholm brought these qualities to bear, and we will try to demonstrate that this was no coincidence. It was part of what Swedish society and politics was in the second half of the twentieth century, a quite human place for a human environment to take shape.

Over the course of our analysis and narrative, we will touch upon several strands of activities that have been undertaken in Stockholm and through Stockholm-centric networks. We will chiefly look at work in or related to science, the systematic search for knowledge. Stockholm has been a major hub of knowledge production and dissemination, and the city's key role at the core of the GEG enterprise simply cannot be understood without taking this into account. Throughout this book, we will argue that Stockholm's function as an important place for environment, climate, and sustainability was to a very large degree derived from Sweden's attributes as a nation with an ambitious policy for science and scholarship, and an ability to creatively move with the times and change focus to stay relevant. Toward the end, we will pay a great deal of attention to how this role can continue to develop and transform as the cultivation of the human–Earth relationship enters new phases in the age of the Anthropocene. We can see how new concepts and ideas are entering a discourse that is constantly widening and also how darker clouds have arisen on the Stockholm horizon.

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This book is intended as a contribution to these discussions, on how GEG can further evolve and expand and become more effective. It must also be acknowledged that change is, as always, ongoing. As we have witnessed during the crisis and pandemic period at the start of the 2020s, otherwise announced as the Agenda 2030 decade, unexpected new turns in global affairs are almost a given in the modern world. Swedish domestic politics and social trends are no exception. In a remarkably short period of time, surprising shifts in environment and climate policies have put Sweden's green leadership in peril, a theme we will develop towards the end of the book. Whether this is a lasting trend or a short-term concession to geopolitical and domestic circumstances remains to be seen.

Another consequential type of activity, often linked to the development of knowledge, that this book pays particular attention to is meetings, which in the evolution of GEG have typically engaged multiple groups and categories of actors, including scientists, scholars, diplomats, politicians, intellectuals, artists, activists, civil society, and business leaders. The mix has shifted somewhat over time, as have the scientific disciplines that have been most prominent in environmental debates, and the scope has widened. Much of this work, too, can be seen as reactions to or applications of science, for example, science diplomacy, science policy, science organization, science communication, and practices, as will be shown throughout this book, where Sweden has excelled as part of its GEG-related activities, although a great deal of such efforts have also been more loosely organized. We have striven to identify the meeting places, examine the actors and ideas, and determine how these factors have, over a long period since the immediate postwar years, shaped and conditioned the continually unfolding future of people and planet. The "human environment" is now part of the very large and essential, and also "human," enterprise that we call GEG.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STOCKHOLM

First of all, a justification question: Why Stockholm? More than a half century after the seminal 1972 UN Conference, the status of Stockholm as a premier site of international "green memory" has had decades to grow and mature into a de facto brand.[3] Rather than simply providing

[3] Eric Paglia & Sverker Sörlin, "Greening Our Common Fate: Stockholm as a Node of Global Environmental Memory," In: Glenda Sluga, Kate Darian-Smith & Madeleine Herren, eds., *Sites of International Memory* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 237–265.

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a geographic identity or chronological starting point to commemorate a process that has substantially influenced international relations over the past fifty years, the association of Stockholm and 1972 with the emergence and ongoing evolution of GEG has been gradually strengthened over time. A growing international network of institutions, initiatives, ideas, and individuals have centered on the Swedish capital. Stockholm, as a major node in these networks, has been a stronghold of some of the key findings that became building blocks of a modern understanding of the *human–Earth relationship*. Sweden also continued to serve as a meeting point for scientific workshops with a policy angle and for diplomatic activities with bearing on the environment and climate.

An array of scientific concepts, centers of excellence, and environment-oriented international organizations have enduring links to Stockholm: acid rain, the Anthropocene, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Stockholm Environment Institute, Earth system science and the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Planetary Boundaries framework, and Hans Rosling's Gapminder Foundation and Trendalyzer tool are just a few examples. As host of World Water Week and home to the Stockholm International Water Institute, as well as with the late internationally-renowned hydrologist Malin Falkenmark's innovations such as the Water Stress Indicator, water has been a prominent part of Stockholm's sustainability branding. The living legacy of Stockholm as a location of global environmental leadership in the early 2020s is perhaps most powerfully personified by Greta Thunberg, the teenage activist who in 2018 initiated what has become a worldwide movement – School Strike for the Climate, or, as it was later termed, Fridays for Future – on the steps of the Swedish Parliament. Greta follows in a long tradition in Sweden of promoting public understanding, building innovative institutions, and acting upon scientific knowledge on issues related to the environment and its inextricable relevance for humankind, drawing considerable attention from abroad since at least the American journalist Marquis Childs' book *Sweden: The Middle Way* (1936). Childs, who later won a Pulitzer Prize, launched what became a long tradition of books that celebrated Sweden as a realized utopia of science and fairness, mixed, indeed, with an equally lively series of publications that took the complete opposite view, of Sweden as a state run by a band of "new totalitarians."[4]

[4] Marquis Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936). Roland Huntford, *The New Totalitarians* (New York: Stein & Day, 1972). It may be noted that the left-leaning Childs during his period in Sweden produced no less

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A number of important works on international environmental politics devote considerable attention to the 1972 Stockholm Conference. It immediately became a landmark event and historical reference point, and when histories of environmentalism began to appear, Stockholm was rarely omitted. In the late 1980s, John McCormick, who wrote what was arguably the first comprehensive analysis of the global environmental movement, included a discussion on the significance of the Stockholm Conference.[5] His reading was preceded by Lynton Caldwell's book *International Environmental Policy* (1984), in which Stockholm 1972 was portrayed as playing a seminal role. These works were followed by Ramachandra Guha's global environmental history that more decisively included the Global South.[6] By then, in the 1990s and early 2000s, it had become an almost standard feature of any narrative of international environmental politics to include the 1972 Conference. However, very little of this coverage was based on deep engagement with the historical sources, nor was it intended to explain in any more profound way how Stockholm 1972 could have happened, why it took place precisely there, and whether there were any politics of place involved. If the prehistory of the Stockholm Conference was not deeply studied, even less energy was devoted to writing a "posthistory" encompassing the conference's effects and legacies, not to mention Stockholm's more recent links to the rise of GEG.

Rather, the approach in referencing the Stockholm moment was repetitive and ritualistic, reinforcing the significance of the conference and putting forward what was for a long time a linear, evolutionary narrative

than three books that all signaled that there was something to the Swedish model that had to do with balancing power and looking at the collaborative capacity of society. The two others were *Sweden: Where Capitalism Is Controlled* (New York: John Day, 1934) and *This Is Democracy: Collective Bargaining in Scandinavia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1938).

[5] John McCormick, *Reclaiming Paradise: The Global Environmental Movement* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[6] Lynton Keith Caldwell, *International Environmental Policy: Emergence and Dimensions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984); 2nd ed., 1996. Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Pearson, 2000). Stockholm also reached out to the Global South, not least through its official development agency, Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), and its research collaboration unit SAREC (Sida's Department of Research Cooperation), starting already in the 1960s. David Nilsson & Sverker Sörlin, *Research Aid Revisited: A Historically Grounded Analysis of Future Prospects and Policy Options*, The Expert Group for Aid Studies (Stockholm), Report 2017:7, online: https://eba.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-07_Forskningsbist%C3%A5nd_webb_Tillganp.pdf.

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of growing and solidifying institutions of environmental diplomacy and the ever-growing sequence of agreements, without offering much detailed insight. Only in recent years has more comprehensive coverage of the history and legacy of the Stockholm Conference appeared, for example, in work by Iris Borowy, Ken Conca, Stephen Macekura, Perrin Selcer, and Simone Schleper.[7] However, there has to date been no comprehensive analysis of the central place of Stockholm in the evolution of GEG. "Place" here connotes both the city's position in the historical narrative of GEG and, in the geographical sense, Stockholm as a pivotal location where environmental knowledge and political initiatives have been cultivated, not only in the early 1970s but also for the better part of a century. This book is about that place.

[7] Iris Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future: A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013). Ken Conca, *An Unfinished Foundation: The United Nations and Global Environmental Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Perrin Selcer, *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Simone Schleper, *Planning for the Planet: Environmental Expertise and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1960–1980* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019).

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