

Introduction

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Global Environmental Politics began 2020 celebrating twenty years of the journal. Yet, by March, it had become clear that 2020 was a year like no other. We were not just in the midst of a climate crisis, with fires in Australia and the Amazon and flooding in Indonesia serving as a harbinger for a year of horrendous climate catastrophes, but a global pandemic—the likes of which had not been seen since the influenza pandemic of 1919—confronted the entire global community. Thus, that month we put out a call for papers on “The Politics of Crises and Disasters.”

This issue includes a special section based on that call. In it, scholars of GEP examine an array of disasters and crises to inform and provoke academic and policy debates as we seek to make sense of this new “normal.” This special section also appears amidst some signs of hope for a brighter 2021, as science and facts are brought back into the mainstream, vaccines for COVID-19 are starting to be administered, and the United States appears poised to return to the Paris Agreement.

The special section kicks off with Paul Wapner’s forum on a wide array of crises, ranging from climate change and biodiversity loss to COVID-19. “Planetary Disasters: Wildness and the Perennial Struggle for Control” explains how these disasters have come about by focusing on people’s estranged relationship to wildness, and its unpredictability in everyday affairs. To confront these increasingly pervasive global disasters, Wapner asks us to imagine a different path for a collective future. In a second forum, Yixian Sun and Hamish van der Ven explore why the speed and breadth of responses to the dual crises of COVID-19 and climate change have been so different. The comparison generates a framework for assessing expectations for crisis response and identifying policy-relevant lessons from the COVID-19 response for accelerating and deepening climate action.

Lauri Peterson offers a reason for hope in the aftermath of climate disasters in his research article, “Silver Lining to Extreme Weather Events? Democracy and Climate Change Mitigation.” Through an impressive cross-national analysis, Peterson finds little evidence for a general trend of enhanced climate policies post-disaster, but rather finds that *highly functioning democracies* are spurred to greater climate ambition after facing extreme weather events. Peterson’s findings not only contribute to our understanding of the policy implications of external

shocks, but also speak to the ongoing conversation about the role of democracy in responding to the climate crisis.

Timothy Fraser, Lily Cunningham, and Amos Nasongo's research article examines the evidence for "building-back better" after disasters, focusing specifically on the adoption of solar power following the 2011 triple disaster in Japan and Hurricane Sandy in 2012 in the United States. Using both a large-*N* longitudinal matching experiment on cities affected and unaffected by these crises and qualitative case studies, they find greater adoption of solar power in affected cities. They also find that differences in social capital influence the type of recovery strategies chosen, with implications for post-disaster, pro-climate adaptation recovery plans.

Rounding out the special section, Miriam Matejova and Chad Briggs's research note, "Embracing the Darkness: Methods for Tackling Uncertainty and Complexity in Environmental Disaster Risks," seeks to provide tools for predicting impending disasters. Disasters often take scholars and communities by surprise, leaving us to ponder why we didn't see them coming. The authors suggest that we can better cope with the associated risks and the uncertainty of the climate crisis, for example, by using tools such as scenarios and simulations that can detect weak signals. They highlight how many of these tools already have a long history of use in military planning to chart out different futures.

Building on the special section, Chris Armstrong and Jack Corbett examine the impact of sea level rise on low-lying atoll states through the principles of global justice, in "Climate Change, Sea Level Rise, and Maritime Baselines." Armstrong and Corbett underscore the importance of these islands' maritime zones for the livelihoods of communities at risk from sea level rise, including the income they receive from fishing rights. They offer a normative solution based upon principles of global justice that would allow communities to retain their rights to exclusive economic zones if these low-lying atolls become submerged.

Kari De Pryck's article, "Intergovernmental Expert Consensus in the Making," examines the practices through which intergovernmental assessment bodies like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reach consensus on policy-relevant conclusions. She argues that consensus is best understood as emerging through the accumulation and juxtaposition of scientific and diplomatic consensus through a process of layering of compromises at different stages of negotiation, and that such consensus is contingent on different issues and strategies of actors at those stages.

Alejandro Esguerra and Sandra van der Hel similarly look at expert decision-making bodies in "Participatory Designs and Epistemic Authority in Knowledge Platforms for Sustainability." Their focus, however, is on stakeholder participation in order to buttress the authority of sustainability knowledge platforms. This increasingly prominent strategy in sustainability organizations creates tension with principles of scientific autonomy and consensus that have long been understood to underpin the epistemic authority of such bodies. Esguerra and van der Hel explore these tensions through a comparison of the Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and Future Earth.