INTRO: In this episode, Dr. Raul Pacheco-Vega, Associate Professor with the Methods Lab at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) Sede Mexico, helps us get a grasp of the differences between theories and methods when conducting research in Global Environmental Politics. Dr. Pacheco-Vega also shares his thoughts on theories of common pool resources, and explains the difference between commons that have intuitive value, and those that only have value once re-established (aka the 'negative commons').

[00:00:00] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** Feelings are only useful, not only for the actual intellectual purpose of theorizing or thinking how should the world work, but it is even more important that we focus on how we can apply that theory to the research questions that we're applying. So one of the questions I tell my students to ask themselves is: 'What are theoretical expectations of your conceptual framework and how is your research going to answer those theoretical expectations?'

[00:00:41] **Peter Andrée:** Hello, welcome to episode three of the Ecopolitics Podcast, season two, Global Ecopolitics. This is a podcast for university students tackling some of the big questions in the field of global environmental politics. I'm Peter Andrée from Carleton University, co-host of the show, along with Dr. Ryan M. Katz-Rosene from the University of Ottawa who's joining me today and will introduce today's episode. Ryan, what's on the docket for today?

[00:01:09] **Ryan M. Katz-Rosene:** Well, we have an episode centered on theory and methods in the study of global environmental politics. So in our last episode, we were discussing how the field of global environmental politics is in some ways, a relatively new field of study.

[00:01:24] We talked about how some approach it through the gaze of international relations, and we'll talk more about that in an upcoming episode on great power politics and the environment. And others approach the field through more of a geographical or political ecology lens using unsustainability as their entry point. And others still have started off from a more scientifically grounded Earth Systems Framework with the new geological epoch of the anthropocene serving as their foundation for examining contemporary global politics. But the point is, the field is interdisciplinary and it's very rich in terms of featuring a wide diversity of frameworks and approaches.

[00:02:03] And so, to help us unpack that richness, particularly at the level of theory and methodology, we have sought the help of Dr. Raul Pacheco-Vega, who is an Associate Professor with the Methods Lab at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) Mexico.

[00:02:24] For academics who spend time on Twitter like yours truly, Raul needs no introduction. He's developed an impressive following from scholars across the social and natural sciences, arts and humanities, as someone who engages deeply with the 'how' of academic practice. How do you put together a literature review? How do you actually read and retain key information in dense peer reviewed publications? How do you appropriately match your methodological program to your theory and vice versa? And even questions like, how do you take care of yourself as a student or faculty member in an increasingly stressful post-secondary sector?

[00:03:02] So these are just some of the questions that he's helped the broader scholarly community address, but we're especially lucky, Peter, because Dr.Pacheco-Vega's research deals with a number of key themes in global ecopolitics, including notably resource governance and environmental public policy, among other themes. So it's an absolute pleasure to have him on this show.

[00:03:25] And I'm going to start off by asking him a question. Raul, when you think about theory in global environmental politics, what do you see as some of the most interesting theoretical approaches that scholars are bringing to the field and how does it differ from the theoretical approaches of, let's say international relations or maybe political ecology, more generally?

[00:03:52] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** First of all, let me thank you, Ryan and Peter for inviting me to the podcast. I am delighted to be here with you.

[00:03:59] And to answer your question, I think one of the biggest issues that I see is emerging with global environmental politics theories is that it has become now a much broader, much richer and much more interdisciplinary field. So, for example, before you would have mainstream theories of international relations as they pertain to environmental issues.

[00:04:29] So you would think, for example, of theories like realism, which is a mainstream theory in international relations, or institutionalism. But now we are moving away from very disciplinary approaches to a much more interdisciplinary approach. So for example, instead of just centering our conversations on whether or not environmental non-governmental organizations are capable of really pushing forward policy change, what we are seeing now is a shift in the way we approach these questions.

[00:05:09] So we no longer question whether or not non-state actors, like environmental NGOs, or for example, business associations or business interests, will have an impact on global environmental governance. The way we think about it right now is we accept that these are changes that are happening and our analysis, theoretically and methodologically,

focuses on how we can look at these changes and what are the factors that drive those changes.

[00:05:45] And for example, this is different from main political ecology, for example, where there's relevance of scale and of space and power differentials by focusing on the international arenas. So political ecology can be combined with global environmental politics theories by linking what's happening at the local scales to what's globally happening at the more global scale as well. So that's how I would say it's one of the first and most important ones.

[00:06:24] **Peter Andrée:** Thanks Raul for getting us started here. And I think the example you've used there is really interesting where political ecology typically, at least as the this field started, was really focused primarily on quite localized challenges and power relations around resource use and so on. And you're talking now about how that's being brought to the international scale and the conversations theoretically that starts between these theories of international relations and the more localized politics that political ecology may have typically looked at. Tell us more about this relationship between theory and method, and perhaps bringing in examples from your own work.

[00:07:07] How do you see both the relationship between theory and method? And maybe if you can give us some specific examples of how that's developing in this field of global environmental politics.

[00:07:18] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** This is a wonderful question and I am delighted that you asked this question because it's one of the most important things that I emphasize to my students. So I teach research methods and one of the ways in which I teach at is precisely telling my students that they need to link theory with what they're actually expecting to see in the world.

[00:07:40] Let me put an example. So in my co-authored paper with Amanda Murdie, that was published last year, on whether or not environmental NGOs have influence on domestic politics, our theoretical expectation was that, yes, there are circumstances under which environmental non-governmental organizations, non-state actors have influenced some domestic politics. I've never looked at the theoretical framework called the double grid framework where I argued that there are conditions at the local level. So for example, whether or not a country is willing and able to be influenced by external forces, and also whether or not the civil society organizations are well-networked. So the theoretical expectation is yes, there will be change if an environmental NGO coalition is well networked, and if there are domestic conditions in the country where there is more influence.

[00:08:45] In my work on North American environmental activism, I have demonstrated that NGOs have changed the way in which we design environmental policy in Mexico by going to a third party, the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, the CEC. That means that they reset earlier work, both theoretical and empirical that I've done and that others have done, that shows that this is happening, right? There is real change that NGOs bring along to global environmental politics and to the global environmental arena.

[00:09:22] And that's where the link comes between the theoretical expectation and the explanations. So what I tell my students is, if the theoretical expectation is that environmental NGOs will influence environmental politics, show me cases where this is true and show me cases where this is not true. That's how we test theories in global environmental politics. And that's one of the key issues that I teach my students so that they can have a much more robust theory and empirical baggage.

[00:10:03] **Ryan M. Katz-Rosene:** I'm going to jump in here to ask a follow up there and also maybe after draw that linkage again to method. But I was wondering what advice you give to students or colleagues for that matter, who struggle with naming their theoretical approach? What's your recommendation or what's your answer when you get that kind of question? I think there's sometimes a tendency to push towards established theories that already have names out there, but as you invoked in your last question, in that project you were talking about, you named your own theoretical approach, you - for lack of a better word - invented it. So, is that allowable, at what point or what stage of your career are you allowed to invent your own theory? But more generally, how do you name your theory?

[00:10:47] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** This is a fantastic question and I'm going to answer it by saying that I was a junior scholar when I developed this theoretical approach. I was actually in the last few years of my doctoral program when I developed these double grid framework.

[00:11:04] What happens is the following: I think that one of the problems is that we have different theories, different frameworks, and sometimes we need to teach our students how to differentiate between what a theory is and what a framework is and what are our theoretical frameworks, conceptual frameworks, and analytical frameworks.

[00:11:27] And if this sounds confusing to you, don't worry, it sounds confusing to me and to all my students. On my blog, I actually wrote a blog post on theoretical frameworks, conceptual frameworks, and analytical frameworks. Theories are more of the grand level or medium level range conceptual frameworks where you have an empirical result and prove repeated induction, you can detect whether or not there is a theory underlying.

[00:12:01] So for example, the general underlying theoretical approach for institutional analysis is that an institution will guide how different actors will interact with each other, so it establishes the rules. That's a theory, a more general theory.

[00:12:19] IAD, for example, the institutional analysis and development framework, combines elements of institutional analysis with more rational choice with other elements so that we can understand a social and ecological system - that is a framework. And what Lee said, and I agree - that's my approach with my own students - is think about what you're going to use as a framework and from the framework, you can choose several elements of different theories.

[00:12:52] So, for example, rational choice is a theory and it's a theory that establishes that individuals will behave rationally. Institutional analysis and institutionalism are theories that

establish that despite self-interested rational actors, the context and the rules that have been developed through time will also mediate the interactions between actors.

[00:13:20] Those are more grand theories and I, as a scholar or as a student, or I also tell this to my colleagues, I can combine elements of rational choice with institutionalism, with critical theory, with political ecology. Hell, there are so many combinations. So that all those combinations lead me to develop a framework and I call this a conceptual framework.

[00:13:46] And if I use this conceptual framework to guide my analysis, then it is an analytical frame. So I know that this sounds very simplified, but I think that's the best way in which I can describe how we can name a theory. I named this framework more than a theory, I named a framework that's based on several theories and that's how I developed it. And nobody is too young to develop this, but developing new theories really necessitates that we test those theories with empirical data.

[00:14:19]**Peter Andrée:** Thanks Raul. You've brought us right back to where I was hoping to go next. And I just want to say that, I'd love to get into more discussion on this idea of different levels of theory and frames and conceptual frames and concepts and how they all interact. But I think that's going to be for our listeners to do in their various contexts with us as professors or others to guide that conversation. But I think you've set it up really nicely for an interesting conversation there.

[00:14:47]I'd like to switch now to method because you just said, if one of the purposes of theory is to help us predict how we might look at a situation and what might happen, the next step then is to adopt some method for testing to see if that is indeed what is happening and to analyze the situation.

[00:15:08] I wonder if you can speak about, perhaps going back to your example of international NGO influence on domestic policy, what are some of the qualitative and perhaps quantitative methods that one might bring to examining that? And I'd like you to develop this idea that methods and theory need to be connected here.

[00:15:28] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** Thank you, Peter. So the way I would approach it would be - and this is a great question, 'which methods do we use to study global environmental politics theories' - and in this case, the theory/the theoretical framework that we would be examining were the theories of NGO influence on domestic politics.

[00:15:48] So the way I've done it has been primarily ethnographic. So I sat on each and every one of the global environmental discussions of the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, the CEC, specific to a project, the project on North American Pollutant Release and Transfer Registry, the PRTR.

[00:16:12] So I spent three years of my life, literally attending every meeting of non-governmental organizations with the CEC and with governments of Canada, US and Mexico. So that is an ethnographic qualitative approach to studying NGO influence. I also used process tracing, so I literally traced the conversations that we were having at those international environmental meetings and then I noticed whether or not that was translated

into the actual code, into the actual encoding of rules, norms, and the enforcement of the rules and norms at the domestic politic level.

[00:16:56] That said, there are other ways to study global environmental politics and specifically NGO influence by using quantitative methods. So in the paper that I published with Amanda Murdie, Professor of international relations at University of Georgia, she and I ran models to see if there were associations or correlations between reductions in emissions and actual activism measured by intensity of lobbying and measured by intensity of network association.

[00:17:35] So those are two of the different ways in which you can study, whether it varies or not environmental NGO, but that again links with whether or not you have a robust theoretical framework. So Amanda had done a lot of earlier work on quantitatively assessing whether or not norms of human rights and environmental NGOs, had an impact at the domestic level.

[00:18:04] So what we did is we translated those and operationalized our variables in a quantitative way to see if the performance of human rights NGOs could be translated into the performance of environmental NGOs. We didn't just copy and paste, and we didn't just run the same models, but we had to think through very clearly, how might a theoretical model of NGO influence could be actually quantified? The kind of conceptual methods that I've used to develop my theory of NGO influence are very much driven by knowing how NGOs influence global environmental politics; they participate in meetings, they participate in a big way, they write letters, they participate in campaigns, in marches, and so on.

[00:19:01] These are the nomina that can be easily observed by using ethnographic approaches. It's much more complicated to develop a causal or even correlational link between what's happening on the ground in terms of emission reduction, as opposed to, for example, doing the same kind of work with environmental NGOs as you observe them.

[00:19:29] So it is easier to track how NGOs behave and whether or not their behavior has had any influence on the relation and on specific government officials than it is to develop more causal, large, and quantitative approaches. But our work, Amanda and my work, demonstrates that it is possible to estimate the degree to which these two phenomenon linked with each other. And that means that we could ascribe some degree of, if not causality, at least correlation between the two phenomena.

[00:20:09] **Ryan M. Katz-Rosene:** That's great, Raul, really painting some concrete examples of how you've applied this theory in your research. And I want to shift gears a little bit towards another area of your research.

[00:20:21] You've just been talking a lot about how to measure NGO influence in the field of global ecopolitics, but you also do a lot of work at the intersection of waste management and governance of waste, and also water governance, and other topics which really get into theories about common pool resources.

[00:20:38]As I think you may know, many courses in global environmental politics start off with this examination of the commons and a critique of the commons, and it usually goes

back to Garrett Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons, which I think has some problematic assertions about the commons, which we hope to discuss in more detail in some of the feature episodes in this series.

[00:20:59] But I'm curious to get your first level take, your entry-level take on theories about common pool resources and how you use these in the classroom or in your research.

[00:21:11] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** Thank you, Ryan. That's a really great question. I study a very weird or a very strange part of the commons. I not only study water, but I study waste, and I study waste as a form of what I call a 'negative commons'.

[00:21:31] So in general, commons are goods that are subject to congestion. That means if everybody can access the same resource and there are no rules that govern the access, then obviously that source, if it is exhaustible, what happens is that it's going to get exhausted and depleted, and we're not going to have enough for everybody.

[00:21:56] The classic example of a commons is fisheries. If we don't have the rules that govern the access to those fisheries, what's gonna end up happening is that there will be a number of fishers who are going to want to enter the fishery and they may end up fishing too many of the entire load of fish. So that means that there will be a point where there will be no more fish to actually be able to process or even capture. Those are commons that have intrinsic value.

[00:22:27] I focused on resources that only gained value when we, as humans, undertake a profit that gives them value. So waste, trash, refuse, garbage - that's having current waste. We value it if we collect it, and then not dispose of it, but we separate what becomes valuable and then recycle it. So that's an example of a negative commons.

[00:23:01] A 'negative commons', in my definition, is a commons that only gets value after it is revalued and the ones who give revalue, they are human beings. So that's one of the things that I think is important that we differentiate. So yes, I do study water and I do study access to water, but a lot of my work is on bottled water, which gains value by being bottled, specifically in a bottle of plastic.

[00:23:32] I also study waste, which also gains value once it's recycled. And I also study waste water which also regains value once all the pollutants are being removed from the water, and then you can use those pollutants either for the excess energy to heat up heat exchangers or the biological material can be also used for irrigation and for fertilizing product.

[00:23:59] So do they have inherent value? No. These negative commons do not have inherent value, but are they important? Of course. And are they important at the global level? Even more important. In my more recent work, I'm also looking at climate as a global commons. I think that is an area of further research that needs to be more and more developed.

[00:24:23] And I think I asked a former collaborator of the Ostroms and her former students and former associates will definitely work on extending their work into the global climate commons.

[00:24:37] **Peter Andrée:** Raul, you've been speaking about ways of conceptualizing the commons and approaching resource governance problems. And I'm just on your website right now, raulpacheco.org, and the subtitle is: 'Understanding and solving intractable resource governance problems'. And I see that you have a lot of resources here, and I wonder if you can speak a little bit to students again about some of the types of resources that you have on your website, and what are you hoping that students and colleagues can do with these resources?

[00:25:10] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** Peter, this is such an important question and one that I don't get asked enough, so I'm so glad to have an opportunity to answer it. I developed a lot of resources in: how to write, how to do literature reviews, how to use social media in academia, how to take notes, how to breathe.

[00:25:28] I started blogging because I thought, well, this is another way of disseminating academic research. But then I started writing about: how I take notes, how I teach my students, how to have control over their grad studies, and so on. There's always this assumption that students will know how to do a lit review, how to do an annotated bibliography, and I just like uncovering the human curriculum.

[00:25:53] Yes, I am the son of a professor. My mother also has a PhD, but she did her PhD at the same time as I did and as the same time as my oldest brother did. So, none of us actually had any special insight into how to survive a PhD, more, more funny.

[00:26:10] We survived the PhD in some ways by trial and error. And I just want to make things easier for the generations that are coming behind me and for my own students and for the students of other of my colleagues. So do I get a reward from that? Well, I do, I really do.

[00:26:28] **Ryan M. Katz-Rosene:** Well, that's great Raul, and I really do appreciate you sharing your resources and the global public goods that those are offered to our students and to colleagues alike.

[00:26:41] We should wrap it up for the sake of time. Just want to thank you again for sharing your thoughts. You've really helped us unpack the relationship between theory and method. You talked about how to apply theory and you gave us some examples of applying methods within your own research. You tied this into questions of common pool resources, and speaking of resources, you gave us a little sense of what kinds of learning tools and resources you provide on your own website as a global public good, which we really appreciate. So we will leave it at that. Thank you once again.

[00:27:16] And a quick reminder to our listeners to the podcast is made available under a Creative Commons License 2.0, please share it and use it widely, we just ask that you provide appropriate attribution. And please follow us on Twitter @EcoPoliticsP with a capital 'P'. And Raul, where can they follow you on Twitter?

[00:27:34] **Raul Pacheco-Vega:** Well, they can follow me on Twitter @RaulPacheco. My last name is complicated enough to hyphenate it so I just left it at that. And I just want to thank you, Ryan and Peter, and the production team of Global Ecopolitics. It's been fantastic so I just want to say this experience has been wonderful. And I look forward to maybe repeating this when there's another chance. So thank you so much.

[00:28:00] **Ryan M. Katz-Rosene:** [00:28:00] Fantastic. Well, that wraps up the show. The Global Ecopolitics Podcast is produced by Nicole Bedford, support with transcription and captioning provided by Kika Mueller, and Adam Gibbard helps us with artistic design and digital support.

[00:28:14] See you all in our next episode and stay tuned.