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Philanthropic foundations as agents of environmental governance: a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Philanthropic foundations play increasingly prominent roles in the environmental arena, yet remain largely under the radar of environmental governance scholars. We build on the small body of existing research on foundations in environmental governance to outline a research agenda on foundations as agents of environmental governance. The agenda identifies current understandings, debates, and research gaps related to three themes: 1) the *roles* foundations perform in environmental governance, 2) the *outcomes* of environmental philanthropy, and 3) the sources of foundation *legitimacy*. We call for more systematic and empirical research using diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. This research agenda will contribute to literature on agency in environmental governance by providing a more comprehensive picture of who governs the environment and how. Coming at a time when foundations are facing growing public scrutiny, it can also inform contemporary debates and offer practical insights for effective and equitable environmental philanthropy.

KEYWORDS Environmental governance; philanthropic foundations; agency; legitimacy and justice

Introduction

Today's mega-rich direct significant portions of their wealth through philanthropic foundations (Kolbert 2018). Increasingly, foundations play a prominent role in environmental arenas as funders of projects, organizations, policy initiatives, and research activities across a range of issue areas. For example, foundation funding for global marine conservation increased from 252 USD million to 615 USD million between 2010 and 2016 (CEA (California Environmental Associates) 2017, CEA (California Environmental Associates) 2018), with foundations and governments providing roughly equal levels of grant assistance in 2016 (Berger *et al.* 2019). Foundations provided an estimated 1 USD billion in climate funding in 2018

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(ClimateWorks Foundation 2018), a figure dwarfed by Jeff Bezos' recent pledge of 10 USD billion through Bezos Earth Fund (BBC 2020). Social scientists have called for increased research on foundations' power and influence on public policy and governance to understand societal implications of this growing trend in philanthropic giving (Jung and Harrow 2015, Rogers 2015, Goss 2016, Reich 2016, Skocpol 2016). The need for this research is especially urgent as foundations face growing public scrutiny and calls for reform (Giridharadas 2018, LaMarche 2020) that is manifesting in a unique period of 'soul searching' for the philanthropic field (Pitkin 2020).

We respond to this need by advancing a research agenda on foundations as *agents* in environmental governance, where an agent is an actor that steers institutions, structures, and processes through which decisions are made about the environment (Bennett and Satterfield 2018, Betsill *et al.* 2020). Scholarship on agency in environmental governance is associated with a shift from government to governance and the realization that today's complex environmental challenges require involvement of a broad range of public and private actors from global to local levels (Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Armitage *et al.* 2012, Newell *et al.* 2012). Compared to cities, civil society organizations, businesses, and scientific networks, foundations are largely absent from environmental governance research, despite providing substantial funding and other support for many initiatives that have been the subject of scholarship. Some of our own work, for example, in marine conservation (Gruby and Basurto 2014, Carlisle and Gruby 2017, Gruby 2017, Gruby *et al.* 2017) and climate change (Betsill and Bulkeley 2004, 2006, Bulkeley *et al.* 2014) has analyzed foundation-supported environmental governance initiatives without explicitly focusing on foundation agency. Given foundations' increasing prominence and potential influence in environmental governance systems, we see a need to make foundation agency visible, to understand how foundations engage with and impact environmental governance, and to interrogate the legitimacy of foundations as agents of environmental governance.

We begin by elaborating how research on foundations contributes to the broader literature on agency in environmental governance. We then outline a research agenda organized around three core themes in scholarship on agency: (1) the *roles* foundations perform as governance agents, (2) the *outcomes* of foundation agency, and (3) the sources of foundation *legitimacy* in environmental governance. For each theme, we present current understandings and debates through a thematic review and synthesis of the relatively small body of existing research on foundations in environmental governance. We then identify limitations and research gaps, and scope theoretical and applied questions for future research, drawing on related literatures in environmental governance and philanthropic studies where relevant. Our proposed research agenda advances the literature on agency

in environmental governance by providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the diverse agents and forms of agency shaping environmental governance systems.

Why a research agenda on foundations?

We argue that a dedicated research agenda on foundations can advance knowledge on agency in environmental governance in at least three ways. First, such research will provide a more comprehensive picture of who governs environmental issues and how. Largely a US invention, foundations are non-profit grant-making organizations and are the primary organizational form through which private wealth is funneled to public goals (Jung and Harrow 2015, Tedesco 2015, Jenkins *et al.* 2017). Foundations differ on many dimensions with implications for the interests they pursue and the ways they engage in environmental governance (Faber and McCarthy 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, Brulle 2014, Morena 2016, Jung *et al.* 2018). For example, private/independent foundations, such as the Ford Foundation or Rockefeller Foundation, have assets associated with individual or family wealth, and their grant programs reflect particular donor interests in specific issues or geographies. Corporate foundations, such as the Tiffany & Co. Foundation and the IKEA Foundation, are more directly associated with private companies, and their funding portfolios may more closely align with corporate strategy. Conservative, liberal, and progressive foundations may support different types of approaches to similar environmental problems (e.g. market-based vs. community-based mechanisms). Notably, not all foundations engaged in the environmental arena are pro-environment, as in the case of the Koch Affiliated Foundations' funding for the climate change counter-movement (Brulle 2014).

As noted above, foundations are increasingly active in the environmental arena and are associated with many of the initiatives studied in the environmental governance literature. Scholars often make passing reference to foundation support for environmental governance initiatives, but they rarely conceptualize foundations as agents, giving the impression that foundation funding is a neutral act. Yet research from other policy domains, such as education and health care, suggests that foundations affect governance systems in profound ways (Quinn *et al.* 2014, Rogers 2015, Goss 2016), and it seems reasonable to expect similar effects in the environmental governance arena. So long as foundations remain absent in the literature, we have incomplete understanding of the agents involved in environmental governance.

Second, foundations exhibit unique characteristics relative to other environmental governance agents that may expand understanding of how agency is exercised. Environmental governance scholars often situate actors in the

state, market, or civil society, and use these distinctions to explain different forms of agency (Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Nasiritousi *et al.* 2016). Foundations do not sit neatly in any of these spheres. Historically, philanthropy was associated with civil society. However, the foundations active in environmental governance are also closely connected to markets, as direct channels for corporate profit or mechanisms for transferring excess private wealth generated through capitalism. Foundations also are embedded in the state, which determines their legal status and provides privileged treatment of private assets (e.g. through tax breaks) in exchange for investments in the public good (Heydemann and Toepler 2006, Tedesco 2015). This blurring of boundaries makes it difficult to disentangle public from private in studying foundations in environmental governance (Ramutsindela *et al.* 2013). Research on foundations in environmental governance may reveal new 'hybrid' forms of agency as foundations operate across and between the state, market, and civil society (Spierenburg and Wels 2010).

Relatedly, research on foundations can contribute to understanding how the role of the state is being reconfigured in environmental governance (Betsill and Milkoreit 2020). Foundations often work closely with governments on environmental issues through public-private partnerships or co-management arrangements (Delfin and Tang 2006, Spierenburg and Wels 2010). Observers note that foundations fill a void when a state's environmental spending decreases (Foundation Center and Council on Foundations 2018) or when governments retreat from or ignore environmental issues (Delfin and Tang 2006, Fortwangler 2007, Yandle *et al.* 2016). Some scholars contend foundation funding facilitates state withdrawal from environmental regulation (Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Holmes 2012, Jones 2012). Such claims could be investigated through more detailed empirical research on the link between foundation funding and government spending and by engaging with literatures on indirect state governance through delegated authority or orchestration (Abbott *et al.* 2016).

Foundations also differ from other environmental governance agents, including other funders, in their high levels of autonomy, perhaps allowing for 'hyper-agency' (Jung and Harrow 2015). US foundations face few legal constraints beyond a requirement to disburse 5% of total assets each year and minimal reporting obligations (Reich 2016). Unlike governments and companies, foundations have no voting constituency, consumers, or shareholders to whom they must be accountable. Unlike NGOs, they are financially self-sufficient. This autonomy may allow foundations to be more innovative, flexible, risk-tolerant, and nimble than other types of environmental governance agents, including other funders (Mulgan *et al.* 2007, Quinn *et al.* 2014, Reich *et al.* 2016). Development banks, for example, must work through the state, but foundations can more easily work directly with local organizations and communities (Basurto *et al.* 2017). Research on foundations could

deepen understanding of how organizational autonomy (or lack thereof) shapes the exercise of agency in environmental governance.

Third, we contend a dedicated research agenda can address limitations in the small body of existing literature on foundations in environmental governance. We see an opportunity to expand the range of foundations, geographies, and issue areas studied as well as the theoretical lenses used. Most research to date has focused heavily on US foundations involved in local-level terrestrial conservation in North America. Private/independent foundations have received far more attention than corporate foundations. The literature has been dominated by two distinct theoretical perspectives. Most prominent is a critical perspective that views foundations as instruments of elite economic interests perpetuating neoliberal capitalist ideologies through Gramscian and Foucauldian notions of power (Holmes 2012, Jones 2012, Rogers 2015, Tedesco 2015). From this perspective, foundation funding is a form of social control enabling elites to enroll new actors in the capitalist agenda and to silence dissent. A second, but less prominent, perspective is pluralist in orientation and calls attention to differences in motivations and intent across foundations (Delfin and Tang 2007, 2008, Ramutisindela *et al.* 2013). Pluralists view foundations as

a source and leader of innovation, champion of a range of social problems and issues, supporter of multiple perspectives on how these problems should be addressed and engaged in complementing the government by acting on “unpopular” or difficult areas, often over the long term. (Daly 2012, p. 543–44)

Environmental governance scholars bring a rich toolbox of additional perspectives (e.g. polycentricity, networked governance, collective action theory, green governmentality, adaptive governance, etc.) that can offer more diverse ways of thinking about how foundations can and should engage in environmental governance. We now turn to outlining a research agenda on foundations as agents, organized around three core themes that animate agency in environmental governance scholarship.

Governance roles

Existing research on foundations in environmental governance primarily focuses on two roles. Studies of foundations as *funders* emphasize their significant financial assets, while scholars who analyze foundations as *field-builders* consider how foundations deploy non-material or social resources alongside financial resources to advance agendas in environmental arenas. Using the lens of agency in environmental governance, we highlight ways that foundations perform or contribute to other governance roles through their funding and field-building efforts.

Funders

Disbursing grants for specific activities is seen as the primary mechanism through which foundations exercise agency in environmental governance (Delfin and Tang 2007, Bakker *et al.* 2010, Brulle 2014, Nisbet 2018). Studies of foundations in environmental governance thus seek to identify broad patterns, trends, and implications related to the types of organizations and activities funded. For example, in the US, foundations are an increasingly significant funding source for conservation science considering declining federal support, thereby performing the role of knowledge production (Zavaleta *et al.* 2008, Bakker *et al.* 2010). Foundations are also major funders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in environmental arenas as well as related networks and policy initiatives (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, 2008, Tedesco 2015, Morena 2016, Jenkins *et al.* 2017). They support well-established NGOs and networks as well as create entirely new organizations. Foundations help build and sustain social movements, including the US environmental movement (Brulle and Jenkins 2005), the environmental justice movement (Faber and McCarthy 2005), and the climate change counter-movement (Brulle 2014).

Funding enables foundations to influence agendas and the types of organizations working in environmental arenas through ‘channeling.’ Scholars disagree on how channeling works in environmental governance and the subsequent implications for grantees. Critical scholars argue that foundations direct resources to well-established NGOs supportive of market-based solutions, which enables foundations to co-opt NGO agendas and leadership to advance a capitalist agenda. From this perspective, channeling allows foundations to act as gatekeepers and marginalize organizations supporting more radical or structural change (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Faber and McCarthy 2005, Barker 2008, Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Holmes 2012). Alternatively, pluralists see channeling in more instrumental terms and assume foundations direct resources to grantees with the capacity to advance foundation goals or provide capacity-building grants to help organizations develop the technical skills needed to effectively implement projects (Faber and McCarthy 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, 2008).

Both critical and pluralist scholars note a trend towards a ‘strategic’ approach to philanthropy that involves bringing business practices and efficiency goals to funding activities (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, Barker 2008, Tedesco 2015, Morena 2016, Nisbet 2018). Strategic philanthropy is project-oriented with an emphasis on specific, measurable goals with clear metrics and reporting standards. Research should consider whether and how channeling operates differently when foundations use an alternative ‘emergent’ approach that allows for general organizational support, flexible multi-year funding, and evaluation criteria that acknowledge

the capacity of grant recipients (Faber and McCarthy 2005). Proponents of emergent philanthropy argue the strategic approach over-emphasizes the need to demonstrate a concrete return on investment, which may direct resources towards initiatives with easily measurable outcomes (Rogers 2015, Gienapp *et al.* 2017).

Debates about channeling suggest a need to open up the ‘black box’ of foundations to understand how they set priorities and make funding decisions as well as the factors that shape their grant-making approach (Jung and Harrow 2015). Apart from Zavaleta *et al.* (2008), there has been very little research on foundations’ internal operations in philanthropy scholarship related to environmental governance. Scholars conducting such research may face challenges related to data access and perceived conflicts of interest (Rogers 2015). However, our own experience suggests these challenges can be overcome through a participatory research approach embedding foundations within the research process to allow for building the relationships and trust needed to conduct such studies (Gruby *et al.* 2021).

More generally, we call for systematic analysis of how power operates through foundation funding with greater attention to foundation–grantee relations in environmental governance. Such research would address a gap in the agency in environmental governance literature where power is under-theorized (Gerlak *et al.* 2020). Critical scholars emphasize power imbalances and grantee dependency on foundation funding, which may enable foundations to pressure grantees to address particular environmental issues. Power also may operate indirectly when non-grantees feel pressured to alter their priorities and practices to attract funding. Pluralists acknowledge that grantees may shape foundation priorities (Tedesco 2015) and that foundations are dependent on grantees to achieve their goals (Delfin and Tang 2008). This mutual dependency between foundations and their grantees warrants further research to understand how this shapes power dynamics in practice and explore the extent to which path dependencies and desire to work with particular grantees influence foundation funding decisions. Scholars also should consider how foundations invest their non-grant assets to generate financial returns through, for example, impact investing (Mallin *et al.* 2019).

Field-builders

Studies of foundations as field-builders highlight a governance role beyond grant-making (Faber and McCarthy 2005, Bartley 2007, Ramutsindela *et al.* 2013, Tedesco 2015). According to Bartley (2007, 233) ‘building an organizational field means creating an arena that brings a number of different actors into routine contact with one another, in pursuit of an at least partially shared project’ (see also DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Scholars have studied foundation field-building in environmental governance in the context of

forest certification (Bartley 2007), UN climate negotiations (Morena 2016, 2020), the climate change counter-movement (Brulle 2014), and the environmental justice movement (Faber and McCarthy 2005).

Field-building highlights both the material and non-material resources foundations deploy and the ways foundations influence the broader context of environmental governance. Bartley (2007) contends this occurs through relational and cultural channeling. In terms of relationships, foundations play a convening role by facilitating partnerships and networks and/or sponsoring conferences and policy platforms enabling such interactions (Delfin and Tang 2006, Bartley 2007, Morena 2016). Foundations also may use their professional contacts and reputation to encourage stakeholders to work collectively. From a cultural perspective, field-building involves creating shared meanings and discourses that broadly shape understandings of what goals should be pursued and how environmental governance should be carried out (Bartley 2007, Morena 2016, 2020). Notably, field-building efforts can be used to promote or block the pursuit of environmental goals.

Foundations often coordinate their field-building efforts in a particular environmental governance arena by harmonizing their grant-making efforts and taking one another's activities into account (Faber and McCarthy 2005, Bartley 2007, Barker 2008, Morena 2020). This may involve creating new formal venues for collaboration and pooling shared resources (Nisbet 2018). In building the environmental justice movement, progressive foundations collectively hosted educational briefings for other foundations and coordinated messaging around the need to promote NGO autonomy and diversity (Faber and McCarthy 2005). Brulle (2014) observed foundation coordination in efforts to work against climate governance. These collaborative activities may provide additional leverage for foundations to legitimate particular norms and practices and elevate distinct discourses within an organizational field.

Overall, there is a need for more empirical research on the diverse governance roles that foundations play in building environmental governance fields. Research on foundations' internal decision-making could explore whether field-building is an intentional part of their work and what specific strategies and mechanisms they use. We suggest greater attention to changing power dynamics as new actors are enrolled in an issue area (Bartley 2007). Where foundations have collectively agreed on a set of goals and priorities, potential grantees may face pressure to develop and implement projects consistent with foundation interests (Morena 2016). At the same time, networks and platforms created by foundations may empower grantees and other stakeholders to shape subsequent field-building goals and strategies (Bartley 2007). Researchers also should consider how foundations and grantees navigate shifts in foundation funding (i.e. exits) and identify

measures that can be taken to minimize impacts of those shifts on field-building (Kibbe 2017).

We call for research that situates foundations in complex environmental governance systems and considers their relative importance in particular issue arenas (Chan and Mitchell 2020). How and to what end do foundations engage governments and the private sector or environmental policy processes at various scales? To what extent are practitioner communities involved in defining foundation agendas? Environmental governance scholars could turn to theoretical frameworks such as polycentricity (Andersson and Ostrom 2008, Carlisle and Gruby 2017), multi-level or multi-scalar governance (Bulkeley 2005, Armitage 2007), and governance complexes (Biermann *et al.* 2009, Bernstein and Cashore 2012) to explore these kinds of questions.

Finally, scholars should more systematically account for the diversity of governance roles performed by foundations in relation and addition to their roles in funding and field-building (e.g. agenda-setting, knowledge generation, coordination, innovation) (Betsill and Milkoreit 2020). It could be useful to identify which roles are prioritized by individual foundations and/or at the field level to help foundations and practitioners take stock and strategically reflect on diverse roles foundations play – or may play. Such an account could help environmental governance scholars better identify where and how they should ‘look’ for the presence of foundations in their research projects, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of foundation agency in environmental governance.

Evaluating outcomes

Environmental governance occurs in highly complex institutional contexts, making it difficult to identify cause–effect relationships between individual agents and observable outcomes. There are also questions about what should be evaluated: single activities vs. cumulative effects; direct effects vs. catalytic impacts; intended vs. unintended effects (Bernstein and Cashore 2012, Stern *et al.* 2012, Bernstein and Hoffmann 2018). Environmental governance scholars tend to focus on how agents influence governance processes, with less attention given to other social and ecological outcomes (Chan and Mitchell 2020), a pattern replicated in the literature focusing on foundations.

Governance processes

Scholarship on foundations in environmental governance primarily analyzes their influence on grantees’ organizational autonomy (Faber and McCarthy 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, Bartley 2007, Barker 2008), building organizational fields (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Faber and McCarthy 2005, Bartley

2007, Brulle 2014), and neoliberalization of environmental governance (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Delfin and Tang 2007, Brulle 2014, Jenkins *et al.* 2017). We review this work, in turn, noting research approaches and findings often differ depending on theoretical orientation.

Critical scholars tend to argue that foundation influence constrains grantees' organizational autonomy, while pluralists are more likely to acknowledge both enabling and constraining effects (Ramutsindela *et al.* 2013). Findings also vary depending on whether the focus is on projects, funders, patterns in funding flows across organizations, or cumulative effects of foundation activity within an issue area or geography. Delfin and Tang (2008) found grantees held a benign view of foundation effects on their autonomy and recognized funders must make strategic choices on how best to achieve goals (see also Delfin and Tang 2006). However, critical scholars would argue these findings are consistent with co-option where NGO leaders become enrolled in and supportive of a hegemonic agenda advanced by foundations (Bartley 2007, Barker 2008). Faber and McCarthy (2005) found an emergent approach to funding (e.g. multi-year grants, general program support, less burdensome reporting standards) enhanced organizational autonomy and limited co-option (see also Delfin and Tang 2008). Scholars should theorize more explicitly about observable implications of foundation influence on grantee autonomy in light of these mixed results. Closer and more systematic examination of donor–grantee relations also could contribute to understanding the factors leading to different outcomes.

Foundation field-building efforts have been evaluated by examining changes in the number and diversity of organizations participating in the field (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Bartley 2007), changes in funding priorities and practices of other foundations (Faber and McCarthy 2005), partnerships and alliances between organizations (Bartley 2007), and shifts in NGOs goals, rhetoric, and strategies over time (Bartley 2007, Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Holmes 2012). Scholars have used case studies (Faber and McCarthy 2005, Bartley 2007), social network analysis (Brulle 2014), and discourse analysis (Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Holmes 2012) to tease out mechanisms through which foundations influence field development.

Evaluating the link between foundations and the neoliberalization of environmental governance has received considerable attention (Holmes 2012, Jones 2012) and is of growing importance in light of awareness of social justice within the philanthropy field more generally (Rogers 2015, Goss 2016). Critical scholars argue foundations maintain global capitalism by funding status quo organizations and activities, but large-n empirical studies of funding patterns are inconclusive. Several critical studies found foundation funding tends to concentrate in a few well-established NGOs engaged in projects rather than protest (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Brulle 2014, Jenkins

et al. 2017). In contrast, Delfin and Tang (2007) study of California-based NGOs from a more pluralist perspective did not find a privileging of large, mainstream organizations or a preference for project-based grants over other activities. Faber and McCarthy's (2005) study of progressive foundation support for the environmental justice movement challenges assumptions that all foundations are tied to maintaining capitalism (see also Barker 2008, Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Jones 2012, Tedesco 2015). Additional case studies could empirically interrogate these causal claims and identify mechanisms through which neoliberalization operates (or not).

Future research should examine foundation influence on environmental governance processes beyond grantee autonomy, organizational fields, and neoliberalization. To what extent do foundations create enabling conditions that empower communities to self-govern? How is foundation funding connected to environmental policymaking? Under what conditions does foundation support and attention crowd out or mobilize related government initiatives? Do foundations spark innovation in environmental governance approaches? Scholars should assess how foundations shape relationships among grantees as well as between grantees and governments. In exploring how foundations operate, scholars could consider whether foundations can be thought of as 'keystone' actors with a disproportionate role and ability to influence environmental governance systems (Österblom *et al.* 2015). Relatedly, research could explore how governance systems are affected by foundation exits. Do shifts in funding lead to a reorganization with new actors, strategies, priorities, and discourses emerging? Scholars also should consider foundation influence on other social change processes beyond governance processes, such as diversification of economic activities and resource use patterns potentially shaping social and ecological impacts experienced by people and ecosystems on the ground (Gruby *et al.* 2017).

Social and ecological impacts

Few academic studies have evaluated the social and ecological impacts of foundation-supported projects and programs. Instead, monitoring and evaluation often is conducted by foundations or consultants, raising several potential concerns as highlighted by philanthropic studies scholars. The relationship between donors and grantees can encourage 'heroic illusion,' preventing total honesty, and all parties may be reluctant to admit a project did not succeed (Leat 2006). Petrovich (2011) warns of 'obsessive measurement disorder' whereby foundations put too much emphasis on funding initiatives with discrete, easily measurable outcomes. This raises questions about whether assessments accurately reflect broader impacts and how to evaluate goals that change over time (Beadnell *et al.* 2017, Gienapp *et al.* 2017). Foundation assessments may focus on measures of social and

ecological impacts without adequately linking foundation practices to those impacts. Moreover, foundation evaluations are typically for internal use and are not made public, which would otherwise allow for meta-analysis and generalizable findings. Finally, foundations rarely conduct long-term post-project assessment so there is limited knowledge about the effects of exits and long-term durability (Zivetz and Cekan 2017). Academics are positioned to address many of these issues.

The few studies on social and ecological impacts of environmental philanthropy suggest a diversity of impacts (Ramutsindela *et al.* 2013). Larson *et al.* (2016) found a mismatch between areas of high diversity in need of attention as identified by scientists and where foundation resources are directed. Some studies have documented displacement and marginalization of local populations tied to foundation-supported environmental initiatives (Fortwangler 2007, Jones 2012). Delfin and Tang (2006) found that a foundation-supported land conservation project in California resulted in preservation of 300,000 acres, mobilization of additional funding, increased profile of land conservation, and stakeholder collaboration.

Future research should explore foundation influence on a broad range of social and ecological outcomes, working with communities impacted by foundation activities. Scholars should consider factors explaining those outcomes and embrace causal complexity to understand the role of foundations in combination with other factors, such as local context and grantee characteristics. For example, do outcomes vary depending on whether funding flows through large international NGOs compared to grassroots organizations or whether stakeholders and local communities are involved in developing and implementing projects and programs? What differences exist between strategic and emergent philanthropy for social and ecological outcomes? Comparative case studies and research using synthetic approaches such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) could allow for identification of general patterns linking foundations and outcomes (Benney *et al.* 2020, Chan and Mitchell 2020). Scholars should consider both intended and unintended consequences as well as material and perceived outcomes in the short and long term. Here we see an opportunity to conduct a meta-analysis of existing research on outcomes of foundation-supported environmental governance initiatives for insights on foundation influence on governance processes and social and ecological outcomes.

Sources of legitimacy

Today, philanthropic foundations face a ‘reckoning’ linked to broader societal debates about inequality and institutions of power (Giridharadas 2018, Kolbert 2018, LaMarche 2020, Minhaj 2019). We see this as an issue of legitimacy, where legitimacy refers to the justification and acceptance of

the right to exercise power (Bernstein 2011, Lebel *et al.* 2017). According to Heydemann and Toepler (2006, p. 4),

For foundations, the challenge of legitimacy is pervasive and enduring. It exists in every setting in which private assets receive privileged treatment by governments in exchange for an obligation—often very loosely defined—to use those assets for public good.

A foundation's legitimacy is critical to its social license to operate in different geographies and issue areas, and its ability to gain support from stakeholders in achieving desired social and ecological outcomes (Seibert 2017). Environmental governance research demonstrates that non-state actors such as foundations must secure and maintain their legitimacy by shaping the perceptions of those over or with whom they seek to govern (Bäckstrand 2006, Bernstein and Cashore 2007, Bernstein 2011). Scholars have identified several potential sources of legitimacy, frequently differentiating between 'input' legitimacy, which refers to the perceived quality of the governance process, and 'output' legitimacy, which rests on perceived effectiveness in achieving results and solving problems (Bernstein 2011, Lebel *et al.* 2017). Legitimacy may also depend on perceptions related to justice and fairness (Lebel *et al.* 2017, Bennett *et al.* 2019).

Questions of legitimacy generally have not been addressed directly in the literature on foundations in environmental governance. We find limited empirical analysis of how foundation legitimacy is perceived by a range of stakeholders, whether and how foundations recognize and respond to legitimacy challenges, the relative importance of different sources of legitimacy in securing acceptance of foundation authority, or how legitimacy is shaped by the changing social contexts and broader societal attitudes towards philanthropy. Rather, scholars offer general conceptual critiques providing insights on the legitimacy challenges facing foundations as agents of environmental governance. These critiques, reviewed below, focus heavily on issues of input legitimacy, such as transparency, accountability, participation and deliberation, and alignment with local context, as well as questions of justice.

Transparency refers to the availability of information about decision-making processes and/or outcomes and is seen as central to legitimate environmental governance (Mason 2008, Gupta 2010). The lack of transparency about internal decision-making processes leads to perceptions that foundation priorities and funding choices may reflect private rather than public interests (Holmes 2012). Scholars also highlight a lack of transparency around the source(s) of foundation wealth, noting foundations are not required to publicly divulge the details of where their endowments come from or how they are invested (Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Brulle 2014). 'Donor-driven' foundations allow individuals to make anonymous donations for specific purposes, as in the case of the climate change counter-movement

(Brulle 2014). There are additional transparency concerns related to tracking foundation funding flows, especially when foundations partner with government, mixing public and private funds (Delfin and Tang 2006).

Lack of transparency makes it difficult to hold foundations accountable, where accountability requires the justification and acceptance of responsibility as well as the possibility of redress if those responsibilities are not fulfilled (Lockwood *et al.* 2010, Kramarz and Park 2017). Scholars highlight a lack of formal accountability mechanisms for foundations operating in the environmental arena. While foundation staff are accountable to their boards, boards have limited substantive accountability and are largely insulated from public opinion and political considerations that are used to hold other types of actors accountable (Tedesco 2015, Reich 2016). Jenkins *et al.* (2017, p. 1655) argue that foundation funding may alter accountability dynamics within the organizations they fund, shifting control ‘away from active members and toward financial patrons, which reduces the independence of the movement organization.’ Collaboration, partnerships, and a participatory approach to philanthropy could serve as informal accountability mechanisms between foundations and stakeholders (Faber and McCarthy 2005, Delfin and Tang 2006, Pitkin 2020).

Scholars question the apparent lack of stakeholder participation and the concentration of power in determining public environmental goals and how they should be pursued through foundation funding (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Holmes 2012, Rogers 2015). While foundations may strengthen the role of civil society and provide opportunities for public participation in environmental governance by funding NGOs (Delfin and Tang 2008, Tedesco 2015), such funding may crowd out particular (often more radical) voices, strategies and solutions through channeling (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Fortwangler 2007, Tedesco 2015). Scholars also contend that NGOs dependent on foundation funding may feel constrained in voicing positions that contradict foundations’ preferred approaches thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives considered (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, Morena 2016). These effects could be minimized through partnerships and collaboration (Delfin and Tang 2006) or participatory decision-making (Pitkin 2020).

Scholarship on foundations in environmental governance suggests that legitimacy may be jeopardized when foundation interests are misaligned with the local context. This was the case when Conservación Patagónica (a foundation set up by the former CEO of Patagonia) used the puma as a visible symbol of threatened ecosystems in the Peruvian Amazon, ignoring the fact that local communities view the puma as a pest (Jones 2012). In addition to jeopardizing the effectiveness of foundation supported interventions in terms of stakeholder support and outcomes, such misalignment raises broader justice concerns when it results in exclusionary forms of

conservation that alienate and displace marginalized communities (Fortwangler 2007, Spierenburg and Wels 2010).

Scholars also raise justice concerns linked to the relationship between foundations and global capitalism. Critical scholars argue that in redistributing excess wealth generated by capitalism, reportedly for the public good, foundations serve to reinforce and legitimate capitalism as a positive force for society (Spierenburg and Wels 2010, Holmes 2012, Morena 2016). In addition, scholars call for greater reflection on the fact that the many of the environmental problems addressed by foundations were created by the economic exploitation of nature through capitalism (Holmes 2012, Jones 2012).

The extant literature is virtually silent on questions of output legitimacy, with little consideration of whether foundation authority is legitimated by the perceived ability to deliver effective and efficient solutions to environmental problems. This omission is interesting in light of the trend towards strategic philanthropy, where outcomes are a focus. To the extent that grantees and other stakeholders are concerned primarily about input legitimacy and justice, foundations may undermine their ability to secure and maintain their legitimacy by focusing too heavily on measurable outcomes (Faber and McCarthy 2005). However, the lack of attention to output legitimacy in the literature on foundations in environmental governance simply may reflect the dominance of a critical theoretical perspective and lack of scholarship on the social and ecological impacts of foundation-supported projects and programs.

Future research on foundation legitimacy in environmental governance should begin by documenting grantee and stakeholder perceptions of what constitutes foundation legitimacy. Studies should then seek to measure the extent to which foundations meet these legitimacy standards in practice. The field needs to explore how foundation legitimacy is viewed considering changing social context and broader attitudes towards philanthropy. Scholars should identify the formal and informal processes and activities associated with different sources of legitimacy and evaluate stakeholder perceptions on their relative importance. Research could explore the extent to which foundations recognize and attempt to respond to legitimacy challenges. Applied research can draw on this groundwork to identify and assess different strategies and tools that foundations could use to secure and maintain legitimacy.

Conclusion

The involvement of foundations in environmental governance is too important to ignore. With this review, we seek to mobilize a diverse social science research community to focus on foundations as agents of

environmental governance. The extant literature offers a starting point and raises important questions. However, much remains to be done to make foundation agency visible and develop a base of evidence that can inform contemporary scholarly debates and foundation practice. The small number of studies dominated by conceptual work and critical theoretical perspectives should be expanded upon to include empirical research employing more diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.

In summary, future research should focus on how foundations engage with environmental governance processes, and with what effects. There is a need to look at a wider selection of foundations operating beyond North America and across a range of environmental issues from the global to the local level. Broad understanding of foundations as agents of environmental governance requires deeper knowledge of how foundations operate internally and manage their financial and non-monetary resources. Further, researchers should broaden understanding of foundations' diverse governance roles beyond funders and field-builders and develop more sophisticated understandings of how foundations operate in the context of complex governance systems. We also call for more systematic empirical evaluation of how foundations influence social and ecological outcomes across geographies, scales, time, and issue areas as well as the factors that lead to those outcomes. Finally, there is a pressing need for empirical research on questions of legitimacy to inform current conversations about how foundations approach their work and how grantees and other stakeholders engage with foundations.

Overall, this new research agenda will bring greater nuance, complexity, data, and evidence to research on foundations and broader discussions of agency of environmental governance. This area of scholarship also will contribute to interdisciplinary literature in philanthropic studies where the environment has largely been overlooked and can contribute to contemporary debates on the role of foundations in democratic societies. Most importantly, additional research on foundations' governance roles, outcomes, and legitimacy will provide practical insights that can assist practitioners, stakeholders, and donors in achieving more effective, equitable, and enduring environmental governance.

Disclosure statement

Consistent with a knowledge co-production approach, we have embraced a multifaceted relationship with our funders who also serve as research participants and research subjects at various stages of the project. We have convened an external research advisory committee to help manage any conflicts of interest that arise from this arrangement.

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