

# Interview with Professor Oran R. Young:

*“Dealing with the challenges of the Anthropocene will require substantial changes in the existing world order”*

by José Augusto Drummond and  
Gabriela Litre

## Interview

---

*For the last 40 years, Professor Oran R. Young, a leading authority on global environmental governance, has been doing cutting-edge research focusing on collective choice and social institutions. He has also conducted applied research dealing with issues pertaining to international environmental governance and to the Arctic as an international region. Working on issues of Arctic governance allowed him to participate in the policy world, while still maintaining his role as a scientist. This contributed to overcoming what he considers a major obstacle to progress: the gap that frequently separates members of the policy community and members of the scientific community. Young believes that navigating the Anthropocene - an unprecedented era with regard to the impact of human actions on the Earth's biophysical systems - requires governance systems that are effective and resilient in turbulent times. In this interview, conducted by e-mail, Young revisits some of the key concepts of governance, admits that the concept of governance itself may have become to some extent “fuzzy”, and explains why there is still no general theory about environmental governance. Regarding what is called the “death of real environmentalism”, Young points out that most members of the public do not take the issue of climate change seriously, and that many governments are more interested in the politics of the situation than in its substance. To him, the question in the coming years is whether world leaders such as Xi Jinping and Barack Obama, both securely installed in their roles, can forge a coalition between China and the US, which together now account for ~45% of GHG emissions, to break the current international deadlock regarding the issue.*

**SeD - As it happened with the concept of “sustainable development,” the term “environmental governance” has been gaining increasing recognition all around the world. Widespread use, however, has been followed by growing ambiguity, so that today the term is employed within a very broad spectrum of meaning.**

**Has the concept of governance been trivialized? If so, how can we restore some rigor to the underlying idea of governance?**

Young - It is the fate of many concepts to lose precision as they become increasingly popular. As the community of users grows, the core idea becomes fuzzy. To some extent this has happened with the concept of governance. But the central insight remains clear. Governance is a social function centered on steering societies toward good outcomes and away from bad outcomes. Governments are organizations that often play roles in fulfilling the function of government.

**SeD - You have stated that the existence of a government in the ordinary sense of the term is neither necessary, nor sufficient to perform the function of governance effectively. How extensive is the acceptance (in academia and in other circles) of this - rather liberating - proposition that government has been conceptually encompassed by governance?**

Young - The point of drawing a distinction between governance and government is to explore the relationship between the two. Under what conditions can we solve problems of governance without creating a government? When do governments created to meet needs for governance become corrupt or degenerate into oppressive regime? This way of thinking is now widely accepted in the scientific community. Not surprisingly, there is some resistance in the policy community, especially among those who are government officials.

**SeD - Among your basic concepts, environmental/resource regimes as specialized institutions call our attention because they seem to be a recent addition to an older and well-established set of institutions/regimes (for diplomacy, war, commerce, cooperation etc.) and because they are designed to deal with a newer family of problems (resource scarcity, pollution, loss of biodiversity etc.). Is this true? If so, how did the older institutions/regimes "receive" environmental/resource regimes?**

Young - Of course, there is nothing new about the creation of regimes to address needs for governance, especially in stateless settings like international society. What is new is the set of problems we seek to address through the establishment of environmental/resource regimes. Particularly striking are problems involving planetary boundaries like climate change or the loss of biological diversity.

**SeD - A common observation is that governance systems work relatively well at the national level but poorly or not at all in efforts to solve global problems. Well-known examples of the failure of international environmental systems include the climate regime and the arrangement created to combat desertification. Still, you seem optimistic. What would be the key factor towards effective international environmental governance systems?**

Young - Governance failures are common at all levels of social organization. So, there is nothing special about efforts to solve global problems in these terms.



What is new is that the consequences of failure may be especially severe in this setting. It is often said that the absence of enforcement mechanisms is the Achilles heel of efforts to solve global problems like climate change. I am not convinced by this argument. Successful governance systems at all levels are those that subjects buy into in terms of both the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness.

**SeD - Since rules of state and non-state actors in global climate governance continue to change, and non-state actors are increasingly governing climate-related activities, by what means can society hold these new agents of earth system governance accountable for their actions?**

Young - For those who regard the anarchic character of the states system as the core of the problem, the growing influence of various nonstate actors is a welcome development. As nonstate actors, including multinational corporations, become more and more powerful, however, the issues of transparency and accountability regarding the actions of these actors will become more and more prominent. I believe this is destined to become a major concern in the coming decades. Paradoxically, states may play a role of some importance in addressing this problem.

**SeD - Many political scientists argue that governance systems that rely on majority-based rule are quicker to arrive at far-reaching decisions and that consensus-based systems limit decisions to the preferences of the least ambitious country. Do you support a stronger reliance on qualified majority voting to speed up international environmental norm-setting?**



Oran R. Young

*Source: Courtesy of Oran R. Young*

Young - Without doubt, procedural rules can block progress in efforts to arrive at collective choices. This is not peculiar to international society. Consider the case of the US federal government today as an example of gridlock. My own view is that we need to approach these issues in terms of what I call “institutional bargaining” rather than some form of voting. The trick is to cultivate a culture of bargaining in which all participants are prepared to engage in a process of give-and-take rather than adopting the role of veto players.

**SeD - The Rio+20 UN Summit in Brazil has rejected a proposal to transform the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) into a specialized agency, thwarting a push that had been spearheaded by Kenya and several other countries. What are the alternatives to compensate that missed opportunity in this “constitutional moment” in world politics and global governance?**

Young - Although I am critical of what happened at Rio+20, I am not sure that the failure to transform UNEP into a UNEO or a WEO was a missed opportunity. The preoccupation with the status of UNEP reflects the mistaken idea that we can deal with an institutional problem with an organizational solution. Reforming UNEP may be a useful thing to do at some point. But the results are likely to prove disappointing so long as we refuse to make adjustments in the underlying institutional structure of international society.

**SeD - Many people talk about the notion of the “death of real environmentalism”. Do events such as the COP 15 and Copenhagen at the end of 2009 really make sense as a mode of operation?**

Young - My take on this is that processes like the UNFCCC COP have roles to play, but they cannot succeed in a vacuum. In the case of climate, the problem is that most members of the public do not take the issue seriously, and many governments are more interested in the politics of the situation than the substance. The COP can be a useful mechanism, but only if the broader setting is conducive to progress on the issue.

**SeD - Concerning the matter of maximum coalitions (as opposed to minimum ones) as the ideal setting for the effective environmental governance as far as the provision of public goods is concerned – if maximum coalitions work well for this purpose, can they not inhibit “healthy”, traditional and stable settings of “opposition versus incumbents” in neighboring fields of governance, to the detriment of good overall government/governance?**

Young - I don't see this as a real problem. When we are seeking to supply a public good (e.g. an intact climate system), it makes sense to make a concerted effort to minimize the amount of free riding. Other issues will exhibit different problem structures. The challenge is to devise governance systems in such a way as to achieve a good fit between the problem and the solution on a case-by-case basis.

**SeD - You propose that individuals matter even at the international level, and that they matter in terms of their leadership. Former Republican candidate**



**Mitt Romney, who once supported climate change initiatives, has recently criticized President's Obama environmental goals and tried to convince voters that reducing money for green initiatives was the only way to get America back on its feet. Who is to blame when environmental policies prove costly or fail? Unrealistic environmental goals, or politics?**

Young - In looking at effective environmental regimes, we have found that leadership on the part of key individuals is an important factor in case after case. But that doesn't mean that leadership will emerge. Governance failures are common. In the case of climate change, the question in the coming years is whether Xi Jinping and Barack Obama, both securely installed in their roles, can forge a coalition between China and the US, which together now account for ~45% of GHG emissions, to break the current international deadlock regarding the issue.

**SeD - Can you provide examples of how estimates of the costs of action (or inaction) in the area of climate change mitigation have influenced decision makers to act (or not to act)?**

Young - The important story here is the extent to which ex ante estimates of the costs of addressing problems are exaggerated in ways that impede or slow action. We have seen this in cases like ozone depleting substances, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides. There's a good chance the same will be true of greenhouse gases. This is not so much a matter of political manipulation, though that is a factor in some cases. The real story is that once people take issues seriously and commitments are made, creative energy is unleashed to search for efficient solutions.

**SeD - In your opinion, what have been the obstacles towards more inclusive and participatory forms of management and governance (e.g. through the inclusion of a broader range of actors, like local stakeholders, the private sector and multi-nationals, and civil society)? On a more personal note: how did you first become interested in Arctic issues? How did your participation in Arctic governance efforts (N.E.: Dr Young recently chaired the Steering Committee of the Arctic Governance Project) influence your outlooks on global environmental governance?**

Young - In my view, a major obstacle to progress is the gap that commonly separates members of the policy community and members of the scientific community. For me, working on issues of Arctic governance has made it possible to have a foot in the policy world, while still maintaining my role as a scientist. I think my understanding of governance in many settings has benefitted from this opportunity to look at the same issues from the perspectives of praxis and analysis.

**SeD - After 40 years of research on the matter, why do you think there is still no general theory about environmental governance?**

Young - The critical problem lies in integrating or reconciling what I have called rational-choice models and social-practice models of social institutions, including

*environmental governance systems. The challenge is much like that facing those seeking to integrate the findings of behavioral economics into neo-classical microeconomic theory. It's cutting-edge work, and it's exciting to engage in this work. But there are no simple solutions.*

**SeD - You have stated that navigating the Anthropocene (an unprecedented era with regard to the impact of human actions on the Earth's biophysical systems) requires the creation and operation of governance systems that are effective and resilient in turbulent times. What are the governance challenges of the Anthropocene in the light of post- Rio+20 and how can we meet them?**

Young - In the Anthropocene, we are dealing with a human-dominated Earth System that features teleconnections, non-linear and often abrupt changes, and emergent properties that take us by surprise. We may also be operating close to planetary boundaries in which the margin for error is limited. My view is that dealing with the challenges of the Anthropocene will require substantial changes in the existing world order. This is not a call for some form of world government. It is a call for recognizing the need to accept significant changes in prevailing assumptions about the internal and external sovereignty of states. The existing order is a social construct; it won't be easy to change, but it's not like dealing with a law of nature.

### **About Oran R. Young:**

*Oran Young is a research professor and co-director of the Program on Governance for Sustainable Development at the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management at the University of California, Santa Barbara. During the academic year 2012-2013, he is serving as a visiting professor in the School of the Environment at Nanjing University. His research focuses on theories of environmental governance with applications to issues relating to climate change, marine systems, and the polar regions. Dr. Young served for six years as founding chair of the Committee on the Human Dimensions of Global Change of the US National Academy of Sciences, and he chaired the Scientific Steering Committee of the international project on the Institutional Dimensions of Global Environmental Change (IDGEC). He was a founding co-chair of the Global Carbon Project and from 2005 to 2010 chaired the Scientific Committee of the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change. An expert on Arctic issues, Dr. Young recently chaired the Steering Committee of the Arctic Governance Project. Past service in this realm includes co-chair of the Working Group on Arctic International Relations, vice-president of the International Arctic Science Committee, chair of the Board of Governors of the University of the Arctic, consultant to the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, and co-chair of the 2004 Arctic Human Development Report. He is the author of more than 20 books. His recent books include *Institutional Dynamics: Emergent Patterns in International Environmental Governance* (2010) and *On Environmental Governance: Sustainability, Efficiency, and Equity* (2012).*





## Governance In Brief

About key concepts and definitions: I am not saying that these definitions are objectively correct, but nonetheless it is important to be explicit about concepts and to frame everything as clearly as possible so as to minimize the ever present possibility of seeming to disagree simply by using different definitions of things.

- “Governance” is the social function steering or guiding societies toward socially or collectively desirable outcomes and away from undesirable outcomes, avoiding things like the “Tragedy of the Commons”.
- “Governance system” is a set of arrangements performing the function of governance centered around an institution, but also including a variety of corporate, cultural and technological agencies, so that a governance system is more than just an institution. Institutional arrangements form the core of such a system, but the ensemble normally includes cognitive, cultural, and technological elements as well.
- Institutions are collections of rights, rules, and decision-making procedures that give rise to social practices, assign roles to the participants in these practices, and guide interactions among the participants.
- Regimes are institutions specialized to addressing functionally defined topics (e.g., health care, pollution, and trade) or spatially defined areas (e.g., Antarctica, the North Pacific, and Western Europe). Environmental and resource regimes are institutions that address matters of governance relating to human–environment relations. Regimes treated as collections of rights, rules, and decision-making procedures differ from organizations treated as material entities that have offices, personnel, budgets, and legal personality
- “Effectiveness” shows the extent to which governance and particularly an environmental or resource regime is successful at resolving or mitigating a problem that lead to its creation
- “Governance Vs. Government”. The existence of a government in the ordinary sense of the term is neither necessary, nor sufficient to perform the function of governance effectively. This conceptual shift – which was rather innovative around the 1970s and the 1980s - has radical and liberating implications for how we think about human-environment institutions and other matters. This is conceptually productive because this social definition of governance has broken down some common distinctions (e.g. public/private sectors; national/international organizations; state/local government) and encourages cross-level (e.g. local/global) comparisons
- The “Anthropocene”. The Great Acceleration has launched a new era known increasingly as the Anthropocene. Navigating the Anthropocene

requires the creation and operation of governance systems that are effective and resilient in turbulent times, with a prominence of non-linear, frequently abrupt, and often irreversible changes. We need governance systems that are flexible across issues and adaptable over time.

- “Complex Systems”. The objects of greatest interest are complex systems with biophysical and anthropogenic elements that are inextricably linked. Cross-scale interactions in the dimensions of space, time, and social organizations are pervasive. We must think in global terms.

*Excerpts extracted from Oran R. Young’s speech “Sugaring Off: Enduring insights from four decades of theorizing about environmental governance”, delivered at the Colorado Conference on Earth System Governance 2011 (held on the campus of Colorado State University, in May 2011) (<http://cc2011.earthsystemgovernance.org/outline.html>)*

See also:

*YOUNG, Oran R. Sugaring off: enduring insights from long-term research on environmental governance. International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics. Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht. Volume 2, Number 4. November 2012. DOI 10.1007/s10784-012-9204-z.*

