NR16 / Rethinking Climate Governance through SES Lens: Making the Commons Visible

Topic : Research

Chair : Smriti Das (XLRI Delhi-NCR Campus)

Second Chair : Lavanya Suresh (Birla Institute of Technology and Science)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The Anthropocene is marked by accelerating climate and ecological crises, yet prevailing policy discourse remains dominated by international (dis)agreements, technocratic rationalities, and market-based instruments. Such approaches risk rendering invisible the commons such as forests, grasslands, wetlands, pasturelands, and water bodies that are central to ecological stability and climate resilience. These commons have sustained landscapes and livelihoods and are governed by plural institutional arrangements, local norms, and practices that have historically sustained social-ecological systems long before the emergence of global climate frameworks.

This panel interrogates the consequences of this invisibilization by examining how India's commons are represented, classified, and governed. Using social-ecological systems (SES) framework (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014; Berkes, 2017, Vogt et al, 2015), it integrates spatial, ecological, and local governance perspectives to reveal the diverse actors, values, and rules that underpin resilience. By situating commons at the heart of climate action, the panel challenges apolitical framings and demonstrates that equitable and effective climate policy must engage with the plural social-ecological realities that sustain landscapes and livelihoods.

The central questions addressed in the panel will be: How are India's commons represented, classified, and governed through spatial and institutional lenses? How and why are certain institutional arrangements governing the commons made visible or rendered invisible across different environmental, historical, and socio-political contexts, and what are the implications for social-ecological resilience and climate governance?

The present papers in this panel emanate from research engagements using the SES heuristics and present such engagement as a foundation to a context-sensitive and resilient governance model to deal with complex multi-actor decision-making environments.

Identified papers (part of the panel):

1) Mapping the Invisibilised Commons: A Commentary on Land Categorization in India
Authors: Shaurabh Anand et al.
Contact: shaurabh.anand@apu.edu.in
Abstract: This commentary examines conceptual and logistical challenges in mapping commons in India. By tracing the historical origins of land-related data categories, it demonstrates how a productivity-oriented imagination of landscapes systematically obscures commons, despite their centrality to ecosystem functioning and community well-being.
2) Visibilising Social–Ecological Interactions: Insights from 25 Years of Civil Society Engagement in Bhilwara
Authors: Lavanya Suresh, Rajeswari S. Raina, Smriti Das
Contact: lavanya@hyderabad.bits-pilani.ac.in
Abstract: Using the case of a civil society organization with long-term engagement on commons in Bhilwara, this study analyses the functioning of social–ecological systems. It investigates how institutional arrangements appear explicitly or implicitly in the CSOs engagement with the commons, why these forms differ across contexts, and how certain institutions are promoted while others are invisibilised.
3) Complexity, Mobility, and Adaptation in Semi-Arid Landscapes: Emerging Insights from the Luni Basin
Author: Purnendu Kavoori
Contact: purnendukavoori@censeindia.org
Abstract: This work explores landscape complexity and adaptive strategies in the Luni basin of Rajasthan, focusing on patterns of mobility, crop diversity, and ecological resilience. It examines how communities respond to environmental change, with particular attention to traditional institutions such as *gauchars* and sacred groves, that sustain landscape stability and social–ecological continuity.
4) Institutional Pluralism in Rainfed Farming Systems: Agrobiodiversity, Knowledge Commons, and Policy

Hierarchies
Author: Rajeswari S. Raina
Contact: rajeswari.raina@snu.edu.in
Abstract: This paper analyses how institutional pluralism shapes knowledge commons, rules, and norms within rainfed agro-ecosystems—an area comprising nearly 60 percent of India's arable land and marked by climate vulnerability. It argues that prevailing policy hierarchies often overlook these spatial and institutional commons, highlighting the need for institutional innovation and adaptive learning to strengthen agrobiodiversity and rainfed farming resilience.

References:

McGinnis, M. D., and E. Ostrom. (2014). Social-ecological system framework: initial changes and continuing challenges. Ecology and Society 19(2): 30. http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-06387-190230

Berkes, F. (2017). Environmental Governance for the Anthropocene? Social-Ecological Systems, Resilience, and Collaborative Learning. Sustainability, 9(7), 1232. https://doi.org/10.3390/su9071232

Vij, S., & Narain, V. (2016). Land, water & power: The demise of common property resources in periurban Gurgaon, India. Land Use Policy, 50, 59-66. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2015.08.030

Vogt, J. M., G. B. Epstein, S. K. Mincey, B. C. Fischer, and P. McCord. (2015). Putting the "E" in SES: unpacking the ecology in the Ostrom social-ecological system framework. Ecology and Society 20(1): 55. http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-07239-200155

Panel Co-chairs:

Dr. Smriti Das
Dr. Smriti Das is an Associate Professor at XLRI Delhi-NCR Campus. Trained as an interdisciplinary researcher, her interest spans across a range of issues including environmental governance, decentralization, public policy processes and institutions, climate change, and gender. She has worked on several nationally and internationally funded research projects and published in reputed national and international peer reviewed journals. She has been actively engaged in teaching and mentoring roles, including PhD guidance, across various institutions.

Dr. Lavanya Suresh
Dr. Lavanya Suresh is an Associate Professor at BITS Pilani, Hyderabad Campus. A political scientist by training, she specializes in the political ecology of commons in India, with broader research interests encompassing decentralization and public administration. Her impactful research has been published in leading peer-reviewed social science journals, and she is the co-author of "Decentralized Democracy: Gandhi's Vision and Indian Reality." Professor Suresh has successfully led multiple funded research projects and actively guides PhD research scholars in the field of Political Ecology.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Title of the panel

Rethinking Climate Governance through SES Lens: Making the Commons Visible

Co-chairs

Dr. Smriti Das (XLRI Delhi-NCR Campus)

Dr. Lavanya Suresh (BITS-Pilani Hyderabad Campus)

This panel interrogates the consequences of invisibilization of commons by examining how India's commons are represented, classified, and governed. Using social-ecological systems (SES) framework (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014; Berkes, 2017, Vogt et al, 2015), it integrates spatial, ecological, and local governance perspectives to reveal the diverse actors, values, and rules that underpin resilience. By situating commons at the heart of climate action, the panel challenges apolitical framings and demonstrates that equitable and

effective climate policy must engage with the plural social-ecological realities that sustain landscapes and livelihoods.

The central questions addressed in the panel are:

- How are India’s commons represented, classified, and governed through spatial and institutional lenses?
- How and why are certain institutional arrangements governing the commons made visible or rendered invisible across different environmental, historical, and socio-political contexts?
- What are the implications of such visibility/invisibility for social-ecological resilience and climate governance?

Contributions

This panel invites contributions that use SES approaches, spatial analysis, or field-based research to examine the governance of commons in India. Contributions may examine institutional pluralism, local practices, and the interplay of visibility and invisibility in shaping resilient landscapes and climate governance outcomes.