

Emma S. Norman, PhD
Research Statement

My research intercedes environmental geography, political geography, and cultural geography with an emphasis on water resources and environmental governance.

My PhD thesis investigated the rescaling of transboundary water governance, focusing on the Canada-U.S. border. In this work, I intervened in current debates over scale, governance, and borders, and mobilized literatures within environmental governance, the politics of scale, and the social construction of borders. In my dissertation research, I focused on three conceptual claims. First, I argued that studying environmental governance at the site of the border helps to move discussions beyond a nation-state framework, challenging what Agnew (2004) refers to as the territorial trap. This is important given the nation-state focus of a significant proportion of the literature on environmental governance, which is an obvious oversight considering the tendency of environmental issues (such as air and water pollution) to transcend national borders.

Second, I argued that drawing on the “politics of scale” literature can offer new insights into processes of rescaling environmental governance, specifically through interrogating local governance capacity in the context of devolution of environmental governance. In particular, my analysis challenges (often implicit) assumptions regarding the capacity of local actors to effectively participate in multi-scalar governance processes.

Third, I argued that closer attention to borders can help refine critical assessments of transboundary environmental governance. Specifically, I suggested that all borders, even seemingly “natural” ones, are part of cultural construction and wider politics of power that help define and redefine the landscape. Pursuant to this, I explored how discursive, often jingoistic strategies are deployed to entrench borders. Understanding transboundary governance of water, in other words, requires close attention to the cultural politics of the border (see Norman 2012).

A major finding from this research and analysis was the decoupling of “decentralization” and the “rise of the local,” which are often conflated in the natural resource management literature. In a 2009 article based on this research that appeared in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, I showed that despite the increased engagement of local actors in international (transboundary) governance, participation does not necessarily translate to capacity (Norman and Bakker 2009). This analysis has proven to be an important contribution in political and environmental geography, and is cited as a leading example of providing a more nuanced interpretation of multi-scalar governance processes (cf Reed and Bruyneel 2010; Zimmerer 2009).

Complementing these interests, I am currently co-editing a book on transboundary water governance along the Canada-U.S. border (Norman et al. forthcoming). In addition to the manuscript, we are releasing a series of policy briefs that analyze the “hotspots” along the border and investigate why, after sustained engagement in transboundary water governance, controversies still exist.

Following my work on transboundary governance, I have more recently been involved in a two-year research project investigating water security in Canada. This project is part of a multi-disciplinary team that focuses on conceptualizing a water security framework throughout Canada.

My role within this project was to help assess and investigate the governance component of the water security framework.

This project led to three publications. The first publication documents the concerns held by water policy makers, managers, and practitioners regarding the limitations of water security assessment in Canada (Norman et al. 2010). The research was based on a large-scale survey, in-depth interviews, and a facilitated workshop. A primary objective of the research presented was to refine and test a definition of water security relevant to the Canadian context.

The second objective of the research was to determine whether, how, and why Canadian water managers use water monitoring and assessment tools that could support improved water security. The second publication, the Water Security Primer, was written as an educational tool for policy makers and community end-users. The commitment to bridging academy and policy is pervasive throughout this project and throughout my work in general (Norman et al. 2011).

The third manuscript “Water Security Assessment: Integrating governance and fresh water indicators,” documents a new approach to evaluating water security status: the Water Security Status Indicators (WSSI) assessment method (Norman et al. under review). The WSSI addresses: gaps in the water security assessment literature, the relative paucity of user-friendly assessment methods at the local scale, the integration of univariate indicators, and the incorporation of assessment results into water governance. Specifically, the WSSI integrates variables pertaining to water quality and water quantity as they relate to aquatic ecosystems and human health. This paper documents the WSSI assessment method and its application in a community in British Columbia (Canada), including the incorporation of community input into the development and application of the WSSI through the adoption of an adaptive management approach, and the integration of WSSI results into community water governance.

My current research project revisits several of the themes identified in my dissertation, with a focus on transboundary water governance in the post-colonial context. My current project seeks to document and analyze the emergence of new transboundary water governance mechanisms designed for (and by) Native communities. Specifically, I highlight two cases: the Coast Salish Aboriginal Council, whose territory spans British Columbia and Washington State, and the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council, whose territory spans Yukon Territory and Alaska. By highlighting the details of these institutions, I seek to explore issues related to governance of shared resources across multiple jurisdictions, particularly in a post-colonial context. This research contributes to discussions of self-determination and sovereignty for indigenous communities beyond the North American context. Exploring these issues at the site of the border, where tensions between contemporary political borders and flow resources are acute, helps to tease apart these issues.

In general, my work is at the nexus of environmental geography, political geography, and cultural geography, intervening in wider academic and policy discussions related to water governance in multicultural and multijurisdictional settings. My research is informed by discussions in the literature on environmental justice, political ecology, and border studies.

Future research projects include an investigation of water quality testing in First Nations communities in light of the chronic boil water advisories and compromised water systems. This project will be part of a larger, three-year project through a Water Economics Policy Governance

Network, and will be investigated with Dr. Leila Harris and Dr. Karen Bakker from the University of British Columbia.

I foresee my future research projects continuing with the themes of environmental governance, political borders, and the politics of scale, and seek to apply these topics in a variety of settings. Future projects include applying my work on transboundary governance to the Great Lakes region and working with the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council and working on climate change and water resource adaptation in a rural, watershed scale.

I anticipate a robust, innovative, and forward-thinking research agenda ahead of me that would complement and enrich existing programs at Michigan Tech University – including the opening of the Great Lakes Research Center.

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