

# Open Borders and the Environment: Externalities and Unexpected Consequences<sup>1</sup>

Curran, Sara R. 2002. "Open Borders and the Environment: Externalities and Unexpected Consequences,"  
Discussion paper for cyberseminar Should Borders be Open: the Population and Environment Dimension,  
Population Environment Research Network, September 30-October 14, 2002.  
<http://www.populationenvironmentresearch.org/>

Sara Curran

Department of Sociology and Office of Population Research  
Princeton University  
curran@princeton.edu

## Introduction

A variety of perspectives on opening borders have been offered by a range of scholars as starting points for this PERN cyber seminar. Some suggest that relaxation of border control is a good idea, others suggest that it is an impossibility in climate where the nation-state is sovereign and pre-eminent. Many important points have been made, but surprisingly little has been said about the environment. Environmental concerns are central to anti-globalization advocates, but these concerns do not appear to be central to those for or against open borders, despite some obvious overlaps with regards to labor and social welfare concerns. This contribution briefly outlines the potential positive and negative environmental externalities associated with opening borders, remembering that it is often hard to anticipate the unexpected consequences of any policy and the ability of people to create or modify social institutions in response (Massey's research on immigrant responses to the U.S. IRCA legislation amply demonstrates this latter point).

The open border debate must first be set within a context of globalization and in relation to other global asset resource flows. I consider the following list of capital assets essential components, but perhaps not complete, of global asset resources: human, financial, natural, knowledge, and cultural. A variety of cross-border relationships are built on one or more of these resource flows – including trade partnerships, multi-sited and multinational corporations, transmigration associations, multilateral regulatory governance institutes, etc. Opening borders to lower the barriers to human capital flows will inevitably challenge many existing cross-border relationships and thereby other resource asset flows. Increasing the barriers to human capital flows may also affect the stock and flow of natural capital. The goal in this discussion is to suggest several ways to think about how either policy might affect the stock, quality, and flow of natural capital from the perspective of a nation-state. We conclude our essay with some speculation about how the debate about open borders may be moot, in a context of both geopolitical instability and global warming.

Natural capital stock and quality within a nation-state is affected by population size, composition, distribution, and activity<sup>2</sup>. The stock and quality of natural capital

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge Kelly Hoffman's important insight on the importance of upstream position in regard to international river treaties and river quality. Annababette Wils provided important brainstorming ideas for many parts of this essay.

within a nation-state affects and is affected by the flow of natural capital across borders. Natural capital can flow in one of two ways across borders. First, it can do so “naturally” as a result of topography, hydrodynamics, and aerodynamics. An important aspect of this natural movement for cross-border relationships is the upstream positioning of nation-states, particularly with regards to water and air. Second, it can do so, “unnaturally” through markets and trade. Two important aspects of this unnatural flow are the valuing of natural capital within nation-states and the power of nation-states to set terms of trade with other nation-states. We will discuss each of these points in relation to how opening borders or closing borders may affect the environment.

### Open Borders and Natural Capital Stock and Quality

Labor, technology, policy, and markets, as well as the characteristics of a particular natural resource shape the way it is extracted, recycled, and regenerated within a nation-state. Closing or opening borders will affect the labor supply and the resource extraction process or ability to extract a resource. In the case of land-based resources, such as agricultural crops, hand picking of crops may be the only way to extract a resource. For example, hand picking is still the only way to harvest apples. Limited labor supply and increasingly expensive labor has meant that many northwestern and northern Midwest states in the United States can no longer grow and market apples competitively. Land once highly valued for its tree crops has dropped considerably in value and investments in trees written-off as lost investments. Such devaluation, raises the specter of alternative land uses, and, in many cases, increases the potential for the sale of the development rights to suburban interests. At the same time, China, has invested in millions of acres of apple trees to take advantage of its own, relatively cheap labor and vast land resources to compete with apple growers on the global market. Whether or not an open border would increase access to cheaper labor has not yet been shown by any of the comments offered in this seminar, but surely increasing the barriers to human capital flows will hasten land use change in this case.

Open borders may lead to more efficient use of labor, increasing productivity, and ultimately increasing wealth. The degree to which this wealth is equitably distributed is questionable (and debated), but overall increases in wealth are associated with greater levels of consumption per person than previously. The negative externalities of this higher level of consumption include waste and pollution and degradation of a nation-state’s natural capital. Understanding the way in which more open borders affect productivity, consequent wealth inequality and how wealth inequality affects levels of consumption and the production of negative externalities would be a critical research agenda to pursue. Alternatively, Coleman argues in this cyber seminar, that immigration to the UK led to inefficiency in the production of textiles and manufacturing, as well as maintaining an inefficient health care system. Such inefficiencies argue against increases in productivity as a result of open borders, but would still likely yield negative environmental externalities.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a vague term meant to capture the organization of consumption, including policies that value resource extraction and resource conservation, markets for natural capital goods, technical knowledge to extract natural capital, and the management of common pool resources.

Closed borders may exacerbate population over-crowding in countries of origin. The resulting demand on resources, especially land and water, may seriously diminish a nation-state's natural capital. Abernathy argues for a Malthusian policy whereby borders are closed so that sending countries will "learn" that they ought to reduce fertility. Alternatively, open borders may foster shifts in the valuation of both family size and the environment. Female Cape Verdean migrants are bringing back the notion of small family sizes to their country and are postponing childbirth in order to work abroad for some time. Similarly, some studies of South Pacific Islander transnational migration suggest that migrants return with financial capital and with higher valuation of the importance of natural and cultural resource conservation and enhancement.

#### Open Borders and the Flows of Natural and Financial Capital

Natural flows of natural capital, for example air and water and the life that inhabits these common pool resources inevitably cross nation-state boundaries and yield policy dilemmas that demand bilateral or multilateral relationships to manage the stock and quality of those resources. Opening borders to ease human capital flows will inevitably change the character of such relationships.

One might imagine, for example, that current Mexican demand for more and cleaner water from the international rivers it shares with the U.S. may be diminished, if Mexican labor shifts dramatically out of the states bordering the U.S. and into the interior of the United States. A loss of constituent demand for clean water and a growing Mexican labor constituency within the United States would mitigate the Mexican states' interest in demanding concessions from the United States, which might affect job opportunities for Mexican workers.

Although none of the essays touched on the role of transnational migrant associations for mitigating or exacerbating the externalities associated with migration (they can serve as migrant network gatekeepers and funnel resource flows), it could be that transnational migrant associations may serve to channel ideas about environmental valuation either in terms of conservation or extraction for sale in destination communities. For example, networks of gift exchange between Micronesian islanders and migrant workers in the U.S. created a market for Micronesian crabs and subsequent degradation of mangrove habitats. The degree to which an open borders policy influences the strength of transnational migration associations is a question that remains to be answered. Transnational migration associations also influence political participation in both sending and receiving countries. Again, the extent to which these activities are related to environmental concerns is likely to vary.

Finally, although the literature on how remittances are used in places of origin is debated, even less likely to be addressed is how remittances affect the environment either directly or indirectly. Remittances may be used to buy consumer durables – yielding greater consumption of fossil fuels (automobiles) and electricity (televisions and refrigerators), as well as pollution. Or, remittances may be used to shift land use from agriculture and open space to manufacturing or housing. Will open borders increase or decrease the flow of financial resources between origin and sending countries? This

question is not addressed by the essays, but might be considered. Implicated here is a larger question about whether open borders will foster even stronger cross-national ties between migrant communities and their places of origin or whether open borders will diminish the need for those networks of relationships that are increasingly recognized as apparently significant channels of financial, knowledge, human, and cultural resource flows between places.

#### Will the Open Border Debate Be Moot?

Current geopolitical instability and threats to instability, as well as global warming threaten to increase the number of political and environmental refugees who will need a place to live and are likely to eventually come knocking on the doors of nations who are attempting to close their borders. In both cases, geopolitical instability and global warming are transforming localities into places of diminished natural capital.

Land mines, bombs, and invasions of sovereign territory devastate agricultural land and ecosystems. Desertification also threatens croplands throughout the world. Sea level rise threatens many of the world's urban citizens.

In all cases, it may not be that open borders should be the concern, but the redirection of international investment in places of migrant origin to stem the flow and reverse the tide. Such investments might include those to enhance all aspects of capital resources (human, natural, financial, knowledge, technical, and cultural).