

## Research Articles

# Macropolitics of Micronesia: Toward a Critical Theory of Regional Environmental Governance

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### Abstract

This article examines regional environmental governance (REG) through the lens of human geography theory on scale. Drawing on a case study of the Micronesia Challenge, a regional conservation commitment among five Pacific islands, I advance a critical theory of REG as a scaling process and tool of politics through which regions are (re)made and mobilized in support of diverse agendas. Results highlight understudied dimensions of REG, including: motivations for scaling environmental governance to regions; the co-production of regional and global environmental governance; the mutable expression of regionality within REG; and the ways in which REG is leveraged for resource mobilization, global visibility and influence, and conservation. The potential for REG to empower subaltern groups while advancing conservation is promising, and an important area for future research. The overall contribution of this article is a more complex, politicized understanding of REG that complicates a scholarly search for its inherent characteristics.

At the eighth Conference of the Parties (CoP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2006, the President of Palau announced a new agreement for regional environmental governance (REG) among five states and territories in Micronesia. In the audience that day were the presidents of Conservation International and the World Wildlife Fund, the vice president for external affairs of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the executive coordinator of the Global Environment Facility, and the executive secretary of the CBD. Minutes after the announcement, TNC put forward a US\$ 3 million pledge of support and issued a “challenge” for

\* The National Science Foundation Geography and Spatial Sciences Program provided funding for this work through a Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant (award no. 1130675). I am indebted to many interviewees, whose generosity in sharing time, experiences, and insights made this research possible. Special thanks to three anonymous reviewers and to Lisa M. Campbell, Catherine Corson, and Kimberly R. Marion Suisseea for providing valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. I also thank Robbie Greene for producing the map in Figure 1.

others to do the same. Conservation International followed, pledging US\$3 million to the Micronesia Challenge and congratulating the region for its leadership in advancing global conservation targets.

Formally, the Micronesia Challenge is an agreement among the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to “effectively conserve at least 30% of the near-shore marine and 20% of the forest resources across Micronesia by 2020” (Micronesia Challenge 2006a). In the policy performance described above, it was also serving a number of political functions for a diverse network of policy actors. For the president of Palau, it was a way to attract the attention of powerful global elites and bring resources to Pacific island microstates often viewed as small, isolated, and dependent. For global conservation organizations, the regional commitment was, in part, a signal to the world that the CBD program of protected areas was gaining traction.

This opening vignette introduces this article’s focus on the politics of REG. A special issue in this journal (August 2012) called attention to “the rise of the region in global environmental politics” (Conca 2012, 127), arguing that “[i]t is time to bring the regional back in to the study of global environmental politics” (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2012, 1). Thus far, the research agenda emerging around REG has been framed and populated largely by political scientists, reflecting a predisposition for realist ontologies and functionalist questions such as, do regional regimes offer a more practicable scale for achieving global environmental governance? As geographer Bernard Debarbieux (2012) has argued, however, “Another question, *How* is a region? deserves much more attention.” To this I add the related question, “*Why* is a region?”

This paper addresses these questions with a case study of the Micronesia Challenge, analyzed through the lens of human geography theory on scale and scalar politics. My objectives are to advance the contribution of geography to the emergent research agenda on REG, further develop the concept of strategic regionalization within the scalar politics literature, and enhance understanding of a globally significant model of REG, the Micronesia Challenge.

## Regional Environmental Governance Through the Lens of Scale

Balsiger and Prys (2014) defined REG as a heterogeneous category of agreements that exhibit contiguity in their membership (i.e., among two or more neighboring countries), their spatial ambit (i.e., a contiguous area), or both. According to this definition, approximately 60 percent of all international environmental agreements developed between 1945 and 2005 were regional (Balsiger and Prys 2014). An extensive body of research has addressed REG. However, this literature has largely treated REG “simply as illustrations of general patterns of international environmental politics and policy-making” (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010, 6179). More recently, REG has emerged as a distinct subdiscipline within the global environmental politics literature, signaling its recognition as a phenomenon

worthy of empirical attention in its own right (Balsiger and Prys 2014; Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010). Within this emergent subdiscipline, the majority of work to date has focused on European and North American contexts and on regimes characterized by narrow thematic objectives, political territoriality, and state actors (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010). Systematic research on emerging forms of REG is needed to address fundamental questions about the diversity of REG in form and function, compliance and effectiveness across agreement types, and the position of REG within multilevel regimes (Balsiger and VanDeveer 2010; Balsiger and VanDeveer 2012).

With some exceptions (e.g., Debarbieux 2012; Debarbieux et al. 2014), the emerging subdiscipline tends to position REG relative to global environmental governance, with a normative interest in its comparative efficiency and effectiveness for achieving collective action (Balsiger and Prys 2014; Conca 2012). Conca (2012, 129), for example, suggests that collective action is more difficult to achieve at larger scales due to increased transaction costs and information needs, and hypothesizes that “the possibility of arranging robust schemes for common property resources and public goods at [a] supranational scale may seem more feasible at the regional level than the global.” Balsiger and VanDeveer (2012, 3) similarly argue that relative to global approaches, regional initiatives may offer “enhanced commonalities in a particular environmental challenge, greater familiarity with key actors, and the ability to tailor mitigating action to a smaller than global constituency.” There is increasing interest in regional governance, both as a potential alternative to relatively inefficient, ineffective global treaties (Conca 2012) and as an opportunity to enhance global environmental governance by linking global policy with localized management needs (Selin 2012).

An underlying goal of much emergent research on REG is thus to ascertain the potential benefits of governance at the regional level, so as to inform the allocation of governance tasks in multilevel regimes. Inherent to this objective is an epistemological and ontological position that the regional level of environmental governance exhibits intrinsic characteristics that may be discovered, categorized, and generalized through theory building. In contrast, critical geographers argue that “there is nothing inherent about scale” (Brown and Purcell 2005, 607) and that research on REG would benefit from a more contextualized and historicized approach informed by theory on scale and scalar politics (Debarbieux 2012). Although global environmental governance scholars have attended to the scalar dimensions of environmental governance, including the politics of scales and networks (Bulkeley 2005), the specific contribution of scale theory to the REG subdiscipline has yet to be explicated. That is the focus here.

Critical geographers understand scale, including the region, as “the focal setting at which spatial boundaries are defined for a specific social claim, activity, or behavior” (Agnew 1997, 100). Scale theory in geography is organized around three key principles. First, scale is socially constructed through political struggles and therefore does not have inherent qualities (Brown and Purcell 2005). Second, because the political struggles that produce scale are ongoing,

scalar arrangements are fluid and dynamic, even though they can become fixed over certain periods (Brown and Purcell 2005; McCann 2003). Finally, scale is relational and must be understood in terms of the social production of scalar relations (e.g., between the global and the regional) (Brown and Purcell 2005).

The scalar politics literature builds on this constructivist understanding of scale, focusing on how actors strategically invoke and manipulate scale to serve political agendas. This literature is grounded in the premise that groups forge alliances over spatial scales to “shape conditions of appropriation and control over place and have a decisive influence over relative socio-spatial power positions” (Swyngedouw 2000, 70). The motivating questions for scholars of scalar politics are “Who produces scale, how, and for what purposes?” (McCarthy 2005, 733). Scalar politics scholars have approached the rescaling of environmental governance as a dynamic political process that redistributes decision-making power and access to resources (McCarthy 2005; Sievanen et al. 2013). Although the literature acknowledges the role of biophysical processes in constructing biophysical scales, it also acknowledges that decisions to rescale governance to such “natural” scales as watersheds and ecosystems are also inherently political (Cohen and McCarthy 2015; Sievanen et al. 2013).

Geographers have long recognized regions as scalar constructs emerging from a “constellation of institutionalized practices, power relations and discourse” (Paasi 2004, 540). However, only recently have regions been examined through the lens of scalar politics (Gray et al. 2014; Gruby and Campbell 2013). Gruby and Campbell argue that regions are tools of scalar politics that actors construct and mobilize to reshape their influence within global environmental governance processes. This article extends this understanding of strategic regionalization to REG, to argue that to really understand REG, we must attend to the politics underlying the scaling of environmental governance to regions.

Toward this end, I examine the Micronesia Challenge through the lens of scale and scalar politics. Theoretically, this means approaching regions as strategically constructed tools of politics through which actors attempt to fix (i.e., establish) a spatial construction in space and time, in an effort to fix (i.e., solve) a particular problem for a particular group (McCann 2003). Analytically, this means foregrounding the questions of how and why governance is scaled to the region. How and why did environmental governance emerge at the regional scale in Micronesia? How is the Micronesia Challenge regional, and how regional is the Micronesia Challenge? How is regionality mobilized through the Micronesia Challenge in support of diverse agendas?

Drawing on McCay (2002), I approach institutional emergence as a political process shaped by the situated choices of policy actors embedded in particular historical, institutional, and political contexts. I interrogate the form of the Micronesia Challenge with respect to its territoriality and governance activities, and I address function in accordance with themes that emerged from my analysis: resource mobilization, global visibility and influence, and environmental conservation. My answers to these questions yield three insights. First, I highlight the

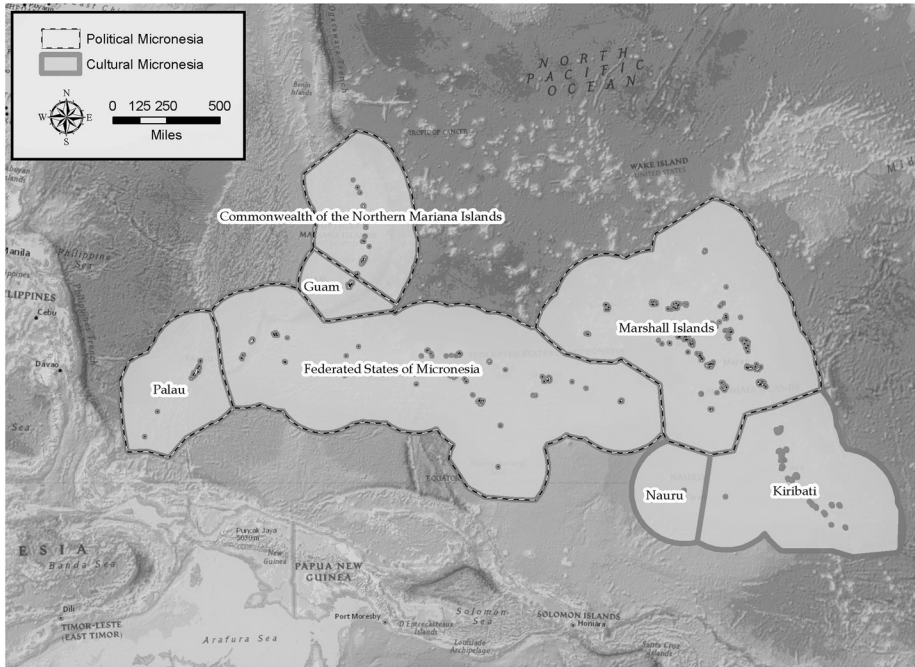
limitations of collective action oriented understandings of the emergence of REG by drawing attention to the motivations for REG in Micronesia. These results call attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between global and regional environmental governance. Second, I complicate REG as an object of analysis by showing the Micronesia Challenge to be a mutable scalar construction in which distinct and strategic forms of regionality emerge in practice and in representation. Finally, I draw attention to the contingent and political functionality of REG by examining the contextually specific ways diverse actors leverage its regionality. The overall result is a more complex, politicized understanding of REG and of its global/local linkages that complicates the scholarly search for an inherently more efficient or effective level of governance.

### **Making Micronesia: A Short History**

The term *Micronesia* first emerged in the 1830s, when French geographers and explorers cataloged the peoples of the Pacific islands into the Melanesian, Polynesian, and Micronesian “culture regions” (Hanlon 1989, 2). Today the Micronesian “culture region” encompasses the US territory of Guam, the US Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Palau, Kiribati, and Nauru. These political jurisdictions comprise thousands of islands with a total land area about the size of Rhode Island spread across an ocean area larger than the continental United States (Leibowitz 1989).

In addition to “cultural” Micronesia, a second version of the region is recognized internationally. Diverse colonial experiences beginning in the early 17th century divided cultural Micronesia along political lines. In short, Guam, the CNMI, the Marshall Islands, the FSM, and Palau are all tied to the US and one another through formal and informal political agreements. They belong to a political region commonly referred to as the US-affiliated islands of Micronesia. Because of their distinct colonial trajectories, Nauru and Kiribati are absent from most contemporary forms of cooperation among the US-affiliated islands of Micronesia, including the Micronesia Challenge (Figure 1).

The remainder of this article focuses on political Micronesia—the version of Micronesia reflected, and in some ways remade, through the Micronesia Challenge. Today, the FSM, the Marshall Islands, and Palau are independent nations tied to the US through international agreements called Compacts of Free Association. These three “freely associated states” have their own constitutions and associated governments and citizenship requirements. They conduct their own foreign affairs, including entering into international treaties and agreements, and they are all members of the United Nations and parties to the CBD. Guam is an unincorporated territory of the US, and the CNMI is a commonwealth in political union with the US.



**Figure 1**  
'Political' versus 'Cultural' Micronesia

## Methodology

Between 2010 and 2012, I used a “follow the policy” distended case study approach to collect data on the Micronesia Challenge (Peck and Theodore 2012). “Follow the policy” is an innovative methodology drawing on multisite ethnography and the extended case method to facilitate research on the mobility and mutation of policy models. To collect data on a mobile policy, one must travel with it, tracking its transformations across geographical and political spaces. Toward this end, I collected data on the Micronesia Challenge via interviews, policy documents, and participant observation at a global policy-making arena (CBD CoP 10 in Nagoya, Japan, October 19–29, 2010), a regional policy-making arena (the 17th Micronesian Chief Executive’s Summit in Guam, March 12–14, 2012), and at local sites of implementation in all five participating jurisdictions (March 14–April 27, 2012). Event ethnographies at the global and regional levels illuminated linkages among the Micronesia Challenge, the global biodiversity regime, and the regional-level policy processes through which the Micronesia Challenge is translated into programs of work. Local field sites revealed how the Micronesia Challenge was transformed once again through interpretations at sites of implementation.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 82 people who represent a near-census sample of policy actors involved with the Micronesia Challenge at the time, including two heads of state. All interviews were transcribed and, along with policy documents and participant observation notes, uploaded to QSR NVivo qualitative data analysis software for thematic coding, process tracing, and conjunctural analysis. I used a combination of inductive and deductive thematic coding to identify broad themes for analysis. Process tracing then allowed me to hone in not only on what occurred but how and why, focusing on the interviewees' perceptions. Finally, I used conjunctural analysis to identify key moments through which actors, institutions, ideas, and practices came together to produce a particular policy (Corson 2016).

Policy actors who live and work primarily within one island are cited as Guam (GM1–GM9), the CNMI (CNMI1–CNMI14), the FSM (FSM1–FSM12), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI1–RMI16), and the Republic of Palau (ROP1–ROP16). Actors working for international nongovernmental or intergovernmental organizations are coded and cited as INGO1–INGO15. These include representatives of the Global Environment Facility, TNC, Conservation International, the Micronesia Conservation Trust, the Micronesia Challenge Regional Office, Rare, the Global Island Partnership, and the Micronesian Image Institute.

The empirical data presented herein are current through 2012. Like any dynamic policy process, the Micronesia Challenge has undergone changes in form and function over time. Recognizing that all policy research reflects snapshots in time, 2010–2012 is a valuable and appropriate period for this analysis, for three reasons. First, during this period the emergence process was still relatively fresh in the minds of interviewees, who were all directly involved. Second, foundational elements of the institutional infrastructure had already been put into place, and third, definitive interpretations of how the Micronesia Challenge could and should function had been formulated in each of the participating jurisdictions. These data thus provide a sufficient basis for exploring the emergence, form, and function of the Micronesia Challenge at a particular moment in its history.

### **Emergence: How and Why Did Environmental Governance Emerge at the Regional Scale in Micronesia?**

My examination of the emergence of the Micronesia Challenge points to the limitations of an efficiency-oriented explanation of how REG comes to be. As this section will demonstrate, the Micronesia Challenge coalesced around the political agendas of state and nonstate policy entrepreneurs, protected area targets set by the US Coral Reef Task Force and the CBD, and a historically institutionalized regionalism. Before the launch of the Micronesia Challenge, both the US Coral Reef Task Force and the CBD had set numeric conservation

targets. The task force had set graduated targets to protect at least 10 percent of all coral reef and associated habitat types in each major island group and Florida by 2005, and 20 percent by 2020. The Seventh Conference of the Parties (CoP 7) to the CBD had also adopted a target and associated program of work on protected areas in 2004, to protect 10 percent of Earth's ecological regions by 2010. Demonstrable progress toward these targets was lagging and actively sought. Global conservation actors had invested in the formulation and adoption of the program of work on protected areas at CoP 7, and they were looking for success stories to highlight at the upcoming CoP 8 in 2006: "We needed something to say the program [of work on protected areas] is working, cause everybody was saying oh, the COP 7 plan was a total waste of time.... we needed something in 2006 to make a splash" (INGO11).

As the 14th US Coral Reef Task Force meeting and CBD CoP 8 approached in 2005 and 2006, respectively, the president of Palau, his top advisors, and a few TNC staff realized that they offered international stages upon which to launch a target-driven conservation initiative that could demonstrate progress toward both the US and global conservation targets, while attracting global attention and resources to Micronesia (INGO14). Within these contexts, they recognized the strategic importance of conveying progress at a globally significant spatial scale. [The region] was a larger slice of the planet, and there is a certain amount of attention that gets paid when dealing with global resources and actions of global significance, when you can define a large area or a significant slice of biodiversity or a significant number of people (INGO14).

The Palauan government similarly saw the value of organizing regionally, as a way to get ourselves on the map and then to be known internationally as someone moving forward in the right direction. It's very difficult to do that when you're in Micronesia, no one even knows where you are or who you are. (ROP3)

For Palau, getting on the map in this context was not only a matter of global visibility and reputation. It was also a means of attracting financial resources from major international donors such as the Global Environment Facility and international environmental NGOs: "[T]here was potential for bigger money to come if we make it a regional effort, instead of just a Palauan effort" (ROP15).

In designing the Micronesia Challenge commitment, the initial policy entrepreneurs set out to build on extant regional cooperation and local conservation initiatives to produce a conservation success story that could be leveraged by the US Coral Reef Task Force, the CBD, conservation NGOs, and Micronesian jurisdictions. As an interviewee from the donor community later reflected:

How on earth are we going to make those [international] targets unless governments really embrace it? And so the Micronesia Challenge was a very clear and obvious example of governments taking on that challenge early. (INGO9)



A set of regional conservation targets were selected on the basis of a calculus of what was within reach for the US-affiliated islands of Micronesia, given pre-existing conservation efforts. The Micronesia Challenge's numeric targets had arguably been reached by Palau, for example, before the challenge was declared. The strategy was to package and leverage a major conservation success story.

The diplomatic task of securing a formal, signed declaration of commitment among five political entities within a relatively short period fell largely to the administration of the president of Palau. The speed and success of President Remengesau's diplomacy was enabled in part by the close personal and political ties among leaders in the US-affiliated islands of Micronesia, several of whom had attended boarding school together and served together in the Congress of Micronesia. Interviewees described the social and political pressure to sign the Micronesia Challenge using the terms "peer pressure", "solidarity", "brotherhood", and the "nice island way".

Despite the vast ocean space that the Micronesian islands of Kiribati and Nauru could have added to the Micronesia Challenge's conservation contribution, including them within the regional commitment was never seriously considered. When asked why, interviewees highlighted existing institutional and political infrastructure within political Micronesia to which the Micronesia Challenge could be attached. They also emphasized "practicalities" tied to colonial legacies, such as the geography of air travel, whereby travel across the enduring colonial boundaries to Kiribati and Nauru is circuitous and expensive by comparison.

Preexisting cooperation within political Micronesia—and the decision not to include Nauru and Kiribati—certainly reduced the transaction costs of formalizing the Micronesia Challenge. However, an efficiency-based explanation of collective action in this case would be incomplete, because it fails to capture the motivations to pursue a regional arrangement in the first place. For the Micronesia Challenge's chief architects, a large oceanic region could be seen and heard on international stages, such as the CBD CoP 8, in a way that individual Micronesian states could not. Framed at a globally relevant scale and in alignment with international conservation agendas, a large-scale regional commitment in Micronesia indeed attracted attention and support from a network of powerful policy actors—including Micronesian political elites, TNC, Conservation International, and the CBD secretariat—for whom it could produce success and legitimacy by demonstrating globally significant progress toward international conservation targets. The policy entrepreneurs explicitly recognized that the large regional scale of the agreement imbued it with this power.

This analysis also highlights the relational coproduction of regional and global scales of environmental governance. Global conservation targets motivated a large-scale regional initiative by providing an international stage upon which microstates and territories cooperatively sought visibility, influence, and resources. REG in Micronesia, in turn, legitimized global environmental governance

by demonstrating significant progress toward international targets and inspiring parallel initiatives in other regions. Since it emerged in 2006, the Micronesia Challenge has been credited with inspiring additional “challenges”—the Caribbean Challenge and the Western Indian Ocean Coastal Challenge—which the CBD secretariat collectively lauded in 2010 as “a movement that we see is catalyzing implementation of the convention in general.” Where Conca (2012, 127) suggests that “the pull of the regional is rooted in the failure of the global,” this analysis indicates that the pull of the regional may also be rooted in the *success* of the global. That is, regional and global environmental governance have a mutually constitutive relationship in Micronesia. The broader implication is that if we are to fully understand the emergence of REG, scholars should be more attentive to the multilevel institutional interactions and political motivations driving it.

### **Form: How Is the Micronesia Challenge Regional, and How Regional Is the Micronesia Challenge?**

A scalar politics perspective emphasizes the dynamic nature of scalar constructions, such as regions, as they are continually made, contested, and remade over time. This section thus turns to the representation and practice of regionality within the Micronesia Challenge as it took shape in implementation stages, to emphasize the multidimensionality and contingency of REG.

Balsiger and VanDeveer (2010) understand the territoriality of REG in terms of the basis for delineating the geographic scope of cooperation—with political boundaries on one end of a spectrum and naturally delineated ecosystem boundaries on the other. As I explained above, the territoriality of the Micronesia Challenge was initially shaped by historic and contemporary political boundaries. As an interviewee summarized, “I don’t think there was even any consideration originally about ecological [boundaries]” (GM2). However, this does not mean that policy actors were not considering the possibility that biologically significant regional connectivity exists or representing their political region as an ecologically relevant basis for cooperation.

Policy actors recognized the strategic value of territorial representations that would resonate with global conservation agendas increasingly focused on ecological connectivity across large spatial scales. Although the Micronesia Challenge commitment applies only to the near-shore marine areas around each individual participating island, the geographic scope of action in its outreach materials was sometimes represented by contiguous regional polygons and associated statistics claiming that the Micronesia Challenge covers “6.7 million square kilometers of ocean” and “represents more than 20% of the Pacific Island region—and 5% of the largest ocean in the world.” Representations of regional

unity and connectivity extend to the human dimension, as well. The “One Micronesia” regional communication plan, for example, advocates the “branding” of a region united:

The message [of the One Micronesia campaign] is one of unity. That even though Micronesia spans over 6.71 million square kilometers of the Pacific, we are a singular community of island nations with one oceanic legacy. ([www.micronesiachallenge.org/](http://www.micronesiachallenge.org/), accessed 2012)

The “One Micronesia” campaign is directed both outward, to international tourists, donors, and conservationists, and also inward, to an audience including “The Native Micronesia Islander” (Source: [www.micronesiachallenge.org/](http://www.micronesiachallenge.org/), accessed 2012). It is motivated in part by a recognition that “One Micronesia” doesn’t exist. One goal of the campaign was to combat tensions among culturally, politically, and linguistically diverse peoples who shared a recent or continuing colonial history in which they struggled for their independence from the US and one another (INGO1).

By drawing attention to the strategic construction and representation of socio-spatial territoriality through REG, a scalar politics perspective reveals the territoriality of the Micronesia Challenge to be simultaneously political (in its emergence) and social and natural (in its representation). Though boundaries were decidedly political at its onset, representations of a large oceanic region united both spatially and socially are being put to work to garner support for the Micronesia Challenge both within Micronesia and abroad.

As for governance, the Micronesian chief executives established five regional bodies to coordinate the regional-level work of the Micronesia Challenge shortly after it was launched. All but one of these bodies included participation from both state and nonstate actors. In 2007, the Micronesia Conservation Trust was designated the host of a regional endowment for the Micronesia Challenge. Although the Micronesia Challenge signatories are governments, in practice two NGOs—The Nature Conservancy and the Micronesia Conservation Trust—were recognized as key drivers for active regional coordination.

The regionalization of governance practices for the Micronesia Challenge falls largely into the categories of fundraising, goal setting, and monitoring/reporting. During the first Micronesia Challenge planning meeting in 2006, “the group highlighted the importance of considering truly regional options for fundraising for the Challenge” (Micronesia Challenge 2006b, 9). Six years later, interviewees would conclude that there were actually few truly regional options for fundraising, due to the different political statuses and associated eligibility for international funding within the US jurisdictions of Guam and the CNMI, on the one hand, and the freely associated states of the FSM, Palau, and the Marshall Islands, on the other. As of 2011, regional fundraising exclusively served the freely associated states. The political status of Guam and the CNMI

has also complicated international fundraising for the other three jurisdictions. As one interviewee explained:

[W]e're not successful in getting China to give their stimulus grant toward the [Micronesia Challenge] endowment.... no matter how many times we can confirm to [China] that none of this money goes to Guam and CNMI for some reason ... it was a sticking point. (INGO4)

Closely tied to regional fundraising was the task of monitoring and reporting collective progress toward the Micronesia Challenge's goal of effectively conserving 20 percent of forest and 30 percent of near-shore marine resources. Regional monitoring and reporting was pursued through the development of common ecological and social indicators, a regionally standardized sampling design, and shared definitions for key terms related to the Micronesia Challenge target: *effective conservation*, *terrestrial resources*, and *near-shore marine resources* (Montambault et al. 2015). This process, however, was complicated by differential scientific and technical capacities across the participating jurisdictions. The initial set of indicators that the Micronesia Challenge Measures Working Group created were deemed to be "extremely ambitious and may not be possible for all jurisdictions" (Micronesia Challenge Steering Committee 2011, 6). As a result, a more narrow and basic set of indicators for measuring collective progress had to be developed, which meant backtracking for the CNMI and Guam, which had more sophisticated technical and scientific capacities. Although progress toward regional targets is measured and reported regionally, the identification and implementation of activities that count toward the Micronesia Challenge targets is decentralized to jurisdictional governments: "we're not making decisions regionally on how we're going implement this" (INGO4).

While the Micronesia Challenge attempts to regionalize environmental governance through decision-making, goal-setting, and fundraising organizations and processes, inherent regional diversity constantly challenges the construction of regional-scale governance: the regionalization of fundraising is challenged by political diversity, the regionalization of monitoring and reporting is challenged by diverse scientific and technical capacities, and the formal regionalization of conservation strategies for meeting the Micronesia Challenge targets was blocked from the beginning. In representations, however, this regional diversity is glossed over—and strategically so. The Micronesia Challenge presents regional progress toward a collective goal by "One Micronesia" that can be seen, heard, and valued by international and global conservation actors, processes, and agendas. In this sense, strategic scalar representations work to fix the "problem" of heterogeneity by fixing in time and space a stylized version of One Micronesia that resonates with global audiences. To be clear, this observation is not meant as a critique. I interpret this strategic scalar representation as a politically astute attempt to co-opt an imposed regionalism and put it to work for diverse Micronesians.

The broader implication here is that both regions and REG defy simplistic characterization. By directing the analyst to better understand the regionality of REG in practice and representation, a scalar perspective complicates the object of analysis in studies of REG. Approached as a scaling process, REG is shown to be uneven, contingent, and strategic. The implication is that scholars of REG must develop more complex understandings of their subject as a dynamic scaling process shaped by political agendas and inherent regional diversity.

### **Function: How Is Regionality Mobilized Through the Micronesia Challenge?**

This final empirical section considers how local and global policy actors embed, contest, and/or mobilize the Micronesia Challenge within participating jurisdictions and at the global level. This section is not a comprehensive accounting of Micronesia Challenge outcomes. Rather, consistent with a scalar politics approach, the focus is on the contextually specific ways in which policy actors attempt to put REG to work toward particular agendas. Approached as such, the Micronesia Challenge functions generally fall within three themes: resource mobilization, global visibility and influence, and environmental conservation. This section draws attention to the contingency and heterogeneity of REG outcomes, and the functionality of REG as a tool of scalar politics in struggles for power and resources.

#### *Resource Mobilization*

Nearly all interviewees from the three freely associated states understood the Micronesia Challenge foremost as a mechanism for mobilizing international funding and support for preexisting conservation policies and activities. Interviewees in Palau, for example, described the Micronesia Challenge as a “marketing tool to get financial support” (ROP7), a “fundraising gimmick” (ROP6), and a way to “attract donors by regionalizing” (ROP5). Interpretations were similar in the Marshall Islands and FSM. Interviewees linked this leverage to the regionality of the agreement, which they strategically market to donors interested in administrative convenience and large-scale impact: “one of the attractive things about the Micronesia Challenge is its regional scope.... [Since donors] want to stretch the value of [their] dollar, what better initiative to fund than this one because you can claim that you are supporting an area larger than the continental US” (INGO6).

Interviewees also described leverage in terms of increased power in influencing international donor agendas. As one interviewee put it: “[the Micronesia Challenge] kind of empowers us to say this is what we are working toward and what we want to accomplish. And so based on what you fund, this is what you can do for us” (INGO8). In a session at the CBD CoP 10, a Palauan delegate

similarly argued “When we started the challenge, the number one ingredient is ownership and number two is control.... When you have ownership and you know what you want, donors will come looking for you.”

But to whom does this power accrue? Although they acknowledged that the Micronesia Challenge was increasing the overall amount of conservation funding coming into the region, several smaller conservation NGOs based in the region raised concerns about the potential for regional fundraising to crowd out their direct fundraising efforts and relationships: “one of the downsides of doing a regional [fundraising] ... you sort of give up most of your bilateral leverage” (RMI1). Interviewees in the FSM and Palau raised similar concerns about the redistribution of international resources first “up” to such regional organizations as TNC and the Micronesia Conservation Trust, and then “down” to local organizations and governments. While the Micronesia Challenge may attract a larger overall pool of resources to the region, it also empowers regional NGOs, to some extent, “to direct how and why that funding should come to this region” (INGO7). Regional organizations are aware of this tension and attempt to minimize competition by targeting sources of funding that may otherwise be inaccessible to smaller, local organizations.

Guam and the CNMI receive funding for environmental management and conservation from the US federal government and are ineligible for most sources of international funding. Because of this, some interviewees questioned the uneven benefits accruing to participating jurisdictions and resented that they would not directly benefit from regional fundraising: “we said, well what are we doing here?” (CNMI7).

### *Global Visibility and Influence*

Interviewees, particularly from the Marshall Islands, Guam, and the CNMI, also focused on the ability of the Micronesia Challenge to bring global visibility to locally specific issues. A high-level official in the Marshall Islands, for example, saw the Micronesia Challenge as a way to access new political forums and attract international attention to the lingering impacts of historic nuclear testing<sup>1</sup> and the future threat of climate change: “I think the Challenge has an opportunity, if used wisely, to talk about these other issues” (RMI1). Policy actors within the CNMI and Guam also saw the Micronesia Challenge as a vehicle for seeking locally relevant influence and representation within global forums. There the vision was to mobilize horizontal ties to the freely associated states (member states of the United Nations) through the Micronesia Challenge as a means to represent their interests within global environmental forums in which the US

1. The Marshall Islands is still seeking reparations to fulfill outstanding personal injury claims linked to US nuclear tests conducted between 1946 and 1958.

does not provide locally relevant representation. Guam's Micronesia Challenge implementation strategy states, for example:

It is most appropriate for Guam to be involved in the Convention on Biological Diversity, the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Millennium Development Goals from the perspective of a resource-limited small island, not the perspective of a world economic and political leader, the United States. Greater involvement in regional organizations and appropriate representation in such global groups will result from Guam's participation in the Micronesia Challenge.

A majority of interviewees across the region also articulated a more general function that the Micronesia Challenge serves for their individual jurisdictions and the region collectively: securing a global voice and recognition that will help them push back in both material and discursive terms against a discourse of the Pacific islands as small, isolated, vulnerable, and dependent. As one interviewee put it, "the countries themselves will have more self-determination" (INGO8). Again, the regional scale of the Micronesia Challenge is recognized as the central point of leverage toward this end. A regional agreement can be used to "put us on the map" (FSM1) or help Micronesians "to be recognized by the world" (CNMI6). The benefits of this global visibility may accrue not only to signatory states, but to global conservation actors as well. As one interviewee summarized: "[the Micronesia Challenge has] given us NGOs who are aligned up with these little countries a voice we've never had before" (INGO11).

### *Environmental Conservation*

Policy actors were generally not trying to leverage the Micronesia Challenge to change domestic environmental policy. Within Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the FSM, most interviewees interpreted the Micronesia Challenge as a tool for supporting preexisting conservation efforts through capacity building and fundraising. At the time of research, Palau was the only Micronesia Challenge signatory to have a legally specified implementation mechanism: a national protected-area network established in 2003, three years before the Micronesia Challenge was declared. As one interviewee in Palau explained: "no, actually, Micronesia Challenge wasn't designed to ... change policy. It was designed to attract donors" (ROP5). Interviewees in the Marshall Islands similarly asserted their vision of the Micronesia Challenge as "a commitment of ensuring that we continue to do the things that we've been doing all along" (RMI12). In 2008, the Marshall Islands formally documented existing practice in "Reimaanlok," a community-based conservation area planning framework for the Marshall Islands that is serving as their national strategy for achieving the Micronesia Challenge. Within the FSM, no formal implementation mechanism was specified at the time of research. When asked how the FSM is meeting its commitments, policy actors asserted that "nothing that we speak of in the Micronesia

Challenge in my view is all new stuff ... it's part of the way that we live, but you're just naming it a little bit differently" (FSM8).

The interpretation of the Micronesia Challenge in Guam and the CNMI was more controversial, with conflict surrounding assessments of what counts as effective conservation, how much effective conservation was already in place, and how the numeric targets should be met. Although some in Guam and the CNMI felt that the Micronesia Challenge should be used to put new protections in place, ultimately both jurisdictions agreed to undertake a watershed approach to meeting the Micronesia Challenge commitments that fits with preexisting management efforts and focuses on reducing land-based sources of pollution to coral reefs in priority watersheds.

Although a disappointment for some, the focus of the Micronesia Challenge on mobilizing resources and support for preexisting environmental policies, especially in resource-poor contexts, has presented an opportunity to advance conservation in alignment with locally defined priorities and practices. In case studies of areas within Palau, the FSM (Pohnpei and Yap), and the CNMI that have received funding through the Micronesia Challenge, Montambault et al. (2015) found that conservation practitioners are using monitoring data to advance marine conservation in contextually appropriate ways—for example, through the implementation of more effective enforcement, or by adjusting the boundaries of marine conservation areas.

In summary, the Micronesia Challenge is being leveraged to raise conservation funding in some corners of Micronesia, not to trigger large-scale changes in environmental policy. Interviewees rarely focused on specific policy or environmental change as a goal when describing the overall function of the regional commitment. Instead, their focus was on how they attempted to mobilize REG in support of contextualized agendas linked to resource mobilization for preexisting conservation efforts and in support of global visibility and influence. These agendas were not shared uniformly across the region, however, and the associated benefits may come at a cost. The rescaling of fundraising to the region has meant that national and local actors in the freely associated states may face competition from NGOs operating at the regional level—for example, for international conservation resources and associated decision-making power.

Overall, it may be true that the Micronesia Challenge, as one interviewee put it, has "given these little countries a voice at a level that they've never had before" (INGO11). By fixing in time and space a united large ocean region that can be seen, heard, and valued by global donors, processes, and agendas, REG in Micronesia is serving as a tenuous scalar fix for the limitations posed by geopolitical smallness. Although additional progress will be needed to meet the Micronesia Challenge's conservation goals (Houk et al. 2015), promising steps have also been taken toward "fixing" the very real environmental problems in the region (Montambault et al. 2015). As this analysis reveals, however, underlying the so-called regional voice is not one but many voices that are seeking both shared and context-specific goals in political struggles that are simultaneously local, regional, and global. The



implication is that the regional scale of environmental governance is unlikely to be inherently more or less functional than any other scale of environmental governance. If we really want to understand the functioning of REG, we must ask: who is mobilizing it, and toward what ends? Scholars of REG should acknowledge its contingent functionality and pay attention to the contextually specific ways in which diverse actors put regions and REG to work for particular agendas including, but not limited to, environmental governance.

## Conclusions

This article engages the human geography literature on scale and scalar politics to complicate and politicize our understanding of REG. Drawing on a case study of the emergence, form, and function of the Micronesia Challenge, I offer three main observations with broad implications for scholars and practitioners of a regional approach to environmental governance. First, the emergence of REG is embedded within struggles for resources, recognition, and legitimacy within interlinked political and policy processes at multiple levels. Rather than looking to REG as a more efficient or effective alternative to global environmental governance, we need to better understand the mutually constitutive relationship between these levels of governance. Second, the expression of regionality in REG is not a static feature that can be accurately characterized or fully understood by reading a policy text. Rather, it is dynamic and varies in representation and practice. Scholars of REG need to deeply understand our object of analysis by developing nuanced understandings of the ways in which REG is and is not regional. Third, and perhaps most important, the functioning of REG extends beyond environmental governance. In a famous essay, scholar/activist Epeli Hau'ofa called for an independent regionalism in Oceania that could empower Pacific Islanders to act more autonomously within global political and economic systems (Hau'ofa 2008). In some ways the Micronesia Challenge may be understood as a brilliant example of this. Through the Micronesia Challenge, small islands became a large region that raised a \$17.5 million endowment in support of locally defined conservation projects and policies (as of September 2016). However, the power of REG to deliver agency and autonomy is both enabled and constrained by external agendas. The ability of "One Micronesia" to attain global visibility and mobilize resources is drawn in part from the construction and mobilization of a particular form of institutionalized regionality that resonates with global conservation governance agendas and funding priorities: a large-scale conservation commitment. At the same time, actors within all participating jurisdictions are finding ways to leverage the regionalism of the Micronesia Challenge in pursuit of their particular interests within its institutional scaffolding. This possibility of REG to empower geopolitically subaltern groups while advancing conservation goals is a promising yet understudied dimension of REG that deserves more attention in future work.

As scholars interrogate the promise of REG as an alternative or complement to global environmental governance, more complete understandings will be needed of the social and political processes that shape its emergence, form, and function. As this article has demonstrated, a human geography perspective can reveal critical understudied dimensions of REG, including motivations for scaling environmental governance to regions, the co-production of regional and global environmental governance, the mutability of REG, and its embeddedness within multiscale power struggles and policy processes. Ultimately, this article advances a situated theory of REG as a political scaling process through which regions are made and mobilized in support of diverse agendas that may interact with environmental governance objectives in context-dependent ways. In this sense, REG should be approached analytically and theoretically as an expression of a distinctly *scalar* politics that may produce significant but contingent outcomes. As the research agenda on REG develops, I hope to see geographers, political scientists, and others continue to create a “space of dialogue” (Debarbieux 2012) around REG in a collective effort to understand and harness the potential of this prolific model of environmental governance.

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