Questions regarding the production and usage of expertise are some of the most difficult and contested within the environmental field today. On the one hand, the technical scope of many environmental problems is beyond what most citizens’ training, time, or interest allows them to adequately understand, and thus expertise is obviously a critical component in identifying and defining the nature of most environmental problems. A common thought stemming from this is that decisions regarding such complex matters are best left to those with the appropriate specialized knowledge, and that appropriate solutions should be conceived on purely scientific, as opposed to political, foundations. On the other hand, it is increasingly recognized that expert knowledge is commonly co-opted and utilized as a source of legitimization for risky practices undertaken in the interest of corporate and state elites, and the literature is replete with cases showing that affected citizens are often unable to establish an effective counter to expert claims due to epistemological, economic, and political asymmetries within bureaucratic and judicial bodies that favor elite interests. A common thought stemming from this line of reasoning is that the production of knowledge about environmental problems and the subsequent policy responses are more a function of political and economic power than “objective science,” and that leaving decisions up to “the experts” is simply a recipe for furthering the interests of corporate and state elites at the expense of both ordinary citizens and the environment.

Political scientist Frank Fischer has published many works diagnosing and problematizing the methods of technocratic decision-making, and has consistently defended and called for more participatory modes of inquiry to correct some problems associated with bureaucracies and technocratic discourses. In the book *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment*, Fischer synthesizes his previous work and draws upon a diverse array of theoretical and empirical literature to put together a rich, multi-layered analysis that includes sophisticated epistemological critiques of standard positivistic research and technocratic decision-making, equally sophisticated arguments for the use of “postpositivistic” participatory research methods, and methodological pointers for facilitating a more democratic approach in environmental policy-making. The depth and rigor of the analyses presented by Fischer make this a very important book for anyone working within environmental science and policy, particularly those interested in the use and application of participatory research methods.
Fischer’s stated goal for the book is to move “beyond the standard ideological exhortations for or against citizen participation” and instead to critically examine “the contention that citizens can effectively participate in helping to make the complex decision facing contemporary policy-makers” (p. xi). As Fischer candidly acknowledges, citizen participation is often quite difficult and frustrating to implement in practice and, as such, should not in any way be seen as a straightforward cure-all for environmental problems. However, Fischer believes that it is erroneous to assume that difficulties with participation are simply a function of the common citizen’s inability or unwillingness to help make informed decisions about critical issues. Instead, ordinary citizens can be a critical component in identifying and solving many environmental problems, particularly when the local knowledge of citizens is used to augment and even direct the research of professional experts. Therefore, the real problem lies in the creation of appropriate methodological and institutional frameworks that can facilitate effective forms of participatory inquiry on complex and highly charged issues, including the assessment of environmental risks.

Fischer’s book has twelve chapters, which are further divided into four thematic parts. Part I, entitled “Citizens and Experts in the Risk Society,” consists of four theoretical chapters exploring the development of modern technology, its associated expert discourses, and the tensions between an increasingly technical world and the prospects for democratic decision-making. Most of the book’s major arguments, analyses, and prescriptive theses are introduced and developed in Part I, with later sections of the book providing deeper exploration and explanation of theoretical, empirical, and methodological points. Part II of the book is entitled “Environmental Politics in the Public Sphere: Technical versus Cultural Rationality.” As implied in this title, the three chapters of Part II expand upon analyses begun in Part I by more explicitly discussing tensions between experts and citizens within the context of the environmental movement. Part III, “Local Knowledge and Participatory Inquiry,” sketches out a generalized methodological framework for social scientists interested in participatory research by giving a historical overview of developments within participatory inquiry and discussing several successful case studies in which participatory methods have brought about positive results for local communities. Part IV, “Discursive Institutions and Policy Epistemics,” wraps up the book by discussing some of the roles participatory inquiry might play in reshaping the epistemological frameworks and political institutions in which public policy is developed. This review will essentially follow the path of the book and discuss the development of various arguments in the successive parts and chapters.