Introduction

This chapter examines the research agenda of liberal and realist IR theorists in studying global environmental change. My first aim here is simply to outline the analyses they make of, on the one hand, international environmental regimes and, on the other, environmental security. I return to the question of political responses in particular in Chapter 7 where I will revisit these arguments and assess their value given my argument about the origins of global environmental change. In this chapter my concerns are more modest: to provide an account of the questions asked, assumptions made and themes developed by the majority of writers in IR who investigate global environmental change.

After such an exegesis, I attempt to show how mainstream approaches within IR to global environmental change exclude questions concerning the causes of global environmental change. This is not a huge claim, since most writers in these traditions would perhaps explicitly suggest that such questions are not part of their domain. But it remains nevertheless an important part of my task in the book as a whole. My aim is effectively to show that while they exclude this question from their field of enquiry they necessarily have an implicit assumption about what the causes of global environmental change are. In later chapters I argue that the implicit assumptions they hold concerning these causes are implausible. Here I merely wish to establish what their assumptions are. I suggest that they assume that the origins of global environmental change are in either (a) an interstate ‘tragedy of the commons’, and/or (b) a set of secular trends which are treated as exogenous to any conceptual or theoretical enquiry.
The realist and liberal global environmental change research agenda

Liberal institutionalism

The liberal institutionalist research agenda concerning global environmental change has focused primarily on accounting for the emergence of international environmental regimes. This focus has been the product of a shift in liberal thought in International Relations from the end of the 1970s onwards from the pluralist focus on a multiplicity of actors in world politics, the decreasing utility of physical force, and so on, back towards a state-centric analysis of global politics. This vision is thus much closer to the position of realism, especially given the more or less simultaneous structural turn taken by some realists, associated in particular with Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (1979). As a consequence of this theoretical shift, the ‘problem’ for liberal institutionalists in terms of transnational problems is almost necessarily a question of explaining collective action. Since global politics is understood as *international relations*, as a realm of sovereign states interacting in an anarchic setting, any social or political problems which transcend state boundaries are necessarily understood as collective action problems, or alternatively, as problems concerning the provision of public goods. Such goods, characterised in technical language by ‘jointness of supply’ (so that, for example, no country can single-handedly provide a stable climate globally) and ‘non-excludability of benefits’ (no country can insulate itself from the impacts of climate change, or make sure that only it benefits from a stable climate), must be resolved through collaboration. International regimes have been the descriptive device on which explanations of such collaboration have been centred.

The literature on international regimes, however, did not emerge primarily in order to explain international environmental politics from a liberal institutionalist position. Mostly, it emerged to explain patterns of interstate interaction on the global economy (see, for instance, many of the chapters in Krasner, 1983). Occasionally it was used to explain security regimes (for example, Jervis, 1983). Krasner’s definition of an international regime has become ubiquitous, but is perhaps worth repeating here. Krasner defines a regime as a ‘set of explicit or implicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations’ (1983a, p. 2). Thus the first point to note about regime analysis is that regimes are not the same as specific agreements; nor are they synonymous with particular organisations. Regimes are usually regarded as a