

Foreword

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One of the contingent rewards of agreeing to write a foreword to a book is not only that one gets a free copy of the book, but also that one is forced to read the book even if its size and substance suggest that it may not be altogether light reading. The reward is inescapably contingent, since it is dependent on whether the book is actually worthwhile to read.

This imposing volume of carefully edited essays passes the test handsomely. It is not only an excellent collection of essays on an extremely important subject, but it is also a reader's delight in that the editors provide an informative tour of a vast - and rapidly growing - field of research, giving the reader the opportunity to make intelligent decisions on what he or she would particularly like to read. I feel very privileged to be able to present this volume to what I hope will be a large readership.

Indeed, with the illuminating and user-friendly introduction that the editors themselves have provided, my task is made much simpler, and I shall use the opportunity to comment briefly on the nature of the subject and how a reader may view a volume of this kind.

What, then, is so special about yet another book on sustainable development? This is certainly a rapidly growing field of research and of publishing. The understanding that nature and the environment in which we live are deeply vulnerable may be a new thought, but its far-reaching implications have made this a much studied area of investigation and assessment. The frailty of each individual life (including its ultimate cessation) has, of course, been well understood for a very long time, leading to ancient and modern studies of the so-called "human predicament." But that predicament has been typically seen as a plight of the individual, and frequently contrasted with the durability of mankind as a whole. Even Alfred Tennyson's great "elegy," grumbled about the partiality of nature, and contrasted the infirmity of individual life with the security that nature provides for our group future:

So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

With the growing recognition that it is not merely the single life, but also the "types" (indeed all the known types) that are threatened, and that the lives that can be led may well stand in great danger of being impoverished or obliterated, environmental studies have become inescapably a major area of intense research and investigations.

This may be reason enough for trying to get a well-selected and well-organized compendium of essays and other contributions, but the case for a book of this kind is stronger than such general reasoning may suggest. If, despite several brilliant contributions that have tried to integrate the environmental literature, it still seems rather murky, this is partly because of the fact that both the nature of the questions asked and the content of the answers given admit a variety of different concerns and motivating contexts. Do we view the environmental challenge from the perspective of preserving nature or that of preserving the lives that human beings can lead? The latter is more anthropocentric than the former, and thus much more limited, and yet it is not clear from what

perspective any non-anthropocentric conservationism may be assessed. There are disputes also between different anthropocentric approaches. For example, should we be concerned only with those environmental issues that influence the standard of living of human beings, or also with the conservation of those natural objects that people find reason to value (whether or not they contribute directly to what can be seen as their "standard of living")? And again, how are the judgments that people make (or – alternatively – the interests they actually have) to be exactly identified, in an articulated form, and how are they to be related to particular programs of conservation, which may compete with one another for our limited resources, or even for our narrow span of attention and commitment?

In the environmental literature, each individual analysis tends to make specific assumptions, if only implicitly, on these issues, and they respectively opt for particular lines of reasoning, taking distinctive positions on these contentious matters. But the discerning reader, not to mention the activist environmentalist, has reason enough to wonder how to compare and contrast these different approaches, and how to deal with what may or may not be an embarrassment of riches but certainly is an embarrassment of some sort as a prelude to action. We are, thus, inclined to seek a more comprehensive understanding that would allow us to form our own views of these divisive issues, in the light of what each approach has yielded or seems to promise.

This problem of diversity is endemic in the field. A great deal of the environmental literature has focused in recent years on the task of sustainability, but there have been several distinct characterizations of *what* it is to be sustained. As a result the implications of sustainability have emerged in very diverse lights in different parts of the literature. To take another source of contrast, the choice variables on which environmentalists concentrate as instruments of conservation can vary greatly depending on the focus of the discipline to which the analysts themselves belong or with which they are most familiar. Economists often have quite a different focus on policy variables (concentrating on markets, prices, taxes, property rights, etc.) than what anthropologists choose to discuss (such as values, perceptions, cultures, etc.). Similarly, natural scientists frequently take a somewhat different route (focusing on scientific possibilities or technical variations) from what social scientists end up discussing. There are many discipline-related contrasts of approach, which supplement the diversities related to basic ethics and valuational priorities.

Wide variance of contexts and concerns is, thus, a major feature of environmental studies. Even when there is a general agreement that the environmental challenges are important and that they call for some reasoned response, the direction of investigations can be widely divergent. What this informative and stimulating book does is to present, in a single volume, a great many – sixty-six, to be exact – essays and book chapters, with a remarkable diversity of approaches and outlooks. It thus meets a very important need, and does so with efficiency and style.

Bearing in mind this motivation, it is perhaps important not to see the table of contents as an integral and indivisible agenda, each item of which must be fully tackled by each participant, but rather than as a menu that tells readers what is being offered so that they can decide precisely what they want to read, in what detail. With a book of this kind, it is extremely important to exercise one's discretion, in the light of one's own interests and the guidance that is provided by the editors. We have to know

something about each of the extant approaches, but may have good reason, too, to spend a lot more time on some approaches rather than others. Indeed, the reader may end up reacting against particular contributions included here, even when he or she profits greatly from others. This is a choice that has to be exercised in an informed way. In giving us these options, and in general in providing a very rich menu that covers a wide cross-section of the massive span of the extant environmental and sustainable development literature, the editors have put us greatly in their debt.

Finally, I should note that this book completes the fine series on "frontier issues in economic thought" which Neva Goodwin has been editing for the Global Development and Environment Institute of Tufts University. Having already done a great deal to advance a comprehensive understanding of ecological economics, consumption and the consumer society, economic and social goals, the changing nature of work, and the political economy of inequality, this volume extends the guided tour to the frontiers of environmental studies. It is pleasing that the series is ending with a volume that is particularly important in its own right. This is, thus, an occasion for a double celebration, and I am very happy – and privileged – to be allowed to join the combined festivities.

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