BOOK REVIEWS

A.T. Grove and Oliver Rackham: ***The Nature of Mediterranean Europe: An Ecological History***. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

What forces have degraded the landscapes around the Mediterranean Sea, from the times when ancient empires rose and fell, through the dark ages and the vicissitudes of Medieval times to the Industrial Revolution and the world market economy? Are deforestation and desertification the result of the pressures of population and production, or the accidental effects of random climatic changes? Why do the peoples of the Mediterranean, the heirs of great civilizations, inhabit a ruined landscape?

The authors of this extensive study have an unexpected answer for these questions. The landscape, they confidently assert, is not ruined. The state of the Mediterranean lands in, say, 1950 AD, was no worse than it was at the end of the Bronze Age three thousand years earlier. There is little evidence for deserts on the march, and if there were such evidence, it would not be a shame, because deserts are interesting landscapes full of biodiversity. Badlands, where gullies and other erosional features dominate, are stable landscapes that have remained in the same districts for centuries or millennia. Grazing by goats and sheep is not bad, since if the animals did not reduce the vegetation, it would be more vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires. Deforestation, they further assert, exists mainly in the imagination of artists and writers, who make the simplistic assumption that cutting down trees destroys forests. (Apparently Grove and Rackham think that no one other than themselves knows the basic principle of forestry that unsustainable use of a forest results from cutting trees, or losing them to fire, insects or disease, faster than they are replaced by reproduction and growth.) In any case, the authors are not convinced that deforestation makes erosion worse.

These are surprising conclusions, and they go against the weight of opinion of students of historical land use who have been studying these questions since George Perkins Marsh in the middle of the nineteenth century. Present-day scholars will probably not be convinced by the line of reasoning adopted by Grove and Rackham. Yet the book is worth study because it raises doubts about established ideas, which is usually a good thing, and it provides a wealth of evidence, although that evidence is open to interpretations other than those of the authors.

The book represents the results of work supported by the European Community under the Mediterranean Desertification and Land Use (MEDALUS) program. It covers the ecological history of Mediterranean Europe, not including the African or Asian coastlands of the sea, during the time of human habitation. Within Europe itself, the authors give most attention to Crete and parts of Greece, Sardinia and parts of Italy, the French coastlands, and southern Iberia. There is little discussion of Albania and the former Yugoslavia (both outside the European Community), Sicily, Corsica, or northern Spain. It is a big book (9” x 12”), lavishly illustrated with excellent color photographs mostly taken by the authors, with numerous maps, drawings, charts, and tables of varying clarity and value, but most quite helpful.

Five of the twenty chapters are devoted to climate and its changes. Where alterations in the landscape such as erosion are undeniable, the authors tend to think they were caused by climatic episodes such as the Little Ice Age rather than by human agency. Grove and Rackham are, however, skeptical both of the existence and the claimed effects of twentieth-century global warming. Another five chapters discuss geology and features such as badlands and limestone karst. There are chapters on vegetation, including one on savanna (“Trees without Forests”), but none on forests per se, which are discussed briefly in a more general chapter on plant life. Deltas and “soft coasts” occupy a chapter, as does the overuse of groundwater. Human history gets one chapter, a fact which emphasizes the fact that what the authors call “ecological history” is not environmental history in the sense understood by most historians.

That chapter, Chapter Five, “Aspects of Human History,” along with brief references to history elsewhere, deserves comment. Since pollen studies indicate that extensive forests existed in Mediterranean prehistory, the authors are willing to allow that humans did cause deforestation in very early times, and as late as the Bronze Age, but not afterwards. “All the changes were complete by the end of the Bronze Age,” they aver (p. 166). In regard to the Classical period, they insist that no Greek writer ever says that an area that used to be forested was without trees in his own time due to human agency, even though Plato says exactly that in the *Critias* (111), pointing out that there were beams in buildings in Athens that came from mountains where only "food for bees" (flowering plants and bushes) existed when he was writing. Grove and Rackham (p. 288) interpret this passage to say that the forest had been washed away by a deluge, but Plato plainly says that the beams were used for roofs in the largest buildings. The deluge, later on, carried the soil of deforested hillsides into the sea. There are plenty of other examples of writers mentioning deforestation, but the authors deftly explain them away. As to the Roman period, Grove and Rackham baldly state that there was no degradation then (p. 80), which defies the evidence and strains credulity. How they can go on to claim that the plague under Justinian, late in the Roman Empire (542 AD) by reducing the population and therefore use of wood, may have caused an increase of trees and forests, if there had not been a decrease before that, boggles the mind.

Coming down to the contemporary world, the authors indicate that the long period of stability of the resilient Mediterranean landscape may be at an end. They ascribe this partly to the use of technology, particularly the bulldozer, which has scarred the slopes with dirt roads and "false" terraces (unsupported by stonework). No one could deny that fact, which is graphically evident in the landscape itself. They also condemn the electric pump, which enables the exhaustion of groundwater for ill-advised irrigation schemes that disrupt traditional agriculture and end up salinizing the soil. The authors think that the pernicious overuse of groundwater is about as close to desertification as Europe has come in recent decades. Thus far this reviewer cannot seriously object, but why did they not add the chain saw, which has certainly accelerated deforestation? In fact, everywhere throughout the book, whenever putative evidence arises for deforestation caused by human action, they exhaust themselves in search for ways to minimize it. Conversely, they demand impossible levels of proof from those who judge that the evidence shows that humans cause forest removal.

Along with technology, the authors warn against the damage caused by land consolidators who buy up farms and remove the walls and hedges from between them. Indeed, they distrust any plans of outsiders, governments, and intergovernmental agencies, including the European Union, the one that funds the authors. This is because they have a strong, understandable liking for local people, small farmers, and the traditional Mediterranean way of living with the natural environment. Ignoring the fact that it is often these people who actually operate the bulldozers and electric pumps, they say, "Only continued occupation by people gaining their livelihoods locally can maintain the man-made diversity typical of Mediterranean Europe" (p. 365). If such a sentence represents more than nostalgia, the authors should look at the underlying social and economic forces that are wrenching local people from their former occupations, providing technology and paying them to work in modes that destroy their traditional settings. The book mentions some unfortunate results of the impact of the world market economy, but never uses the words capitalism or socialism in an analytical sense (or any other).

This book is a delight to the eye and a challenge to the explanatory faculty. It is far too technical, both in vocabulary and in approach, and too long, to appeal to the general reader. But it offers enough valuable information to make it an indispensable reference work for anyone seriously interested in the Mediterranean environment. — **J. Donald Hughes**

Frank Fischer and Maarten Hajer, eds.: ***Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse***. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Living with Nature, co-edited by Frank Fischer and Maarten Hajer is an inquiry into the central role that the *cultural* plays in the realm of environmental politics; theoretically, regionally and globally. The collection of eleven essays by prominent writers in the field explores the complex varieties in which culture defines and redefines the political and the ecological. *Living with Nature* is at once critical and informative of the multiple dimensions in the environmental predicament. Major emphasis is placed on the dominating paradigms reflected in such common phrases as "ecological modernization" and "sustainable development," the international discourse that has come to dominate environmental politics.

The authors are frequently critical of the Eurocentric or "Western" bias in many aspects of environmental discourse. One chapter is dedicated to an analysis of the developmentalist faith in the progress of science, technology and "eco-management" as Timothy Luke phrases it. Many of the authors mention the legacy that international development had in conforming the pathway for the "developing world."

A central theme in *Living with Nature* is in confronting the challenges we face aided by a more sophisticated appreciation of the cultural in environmental politics. While many authors and politicians realize the need for strategic solidarity (locally and internationally), there is also the necessity for diverse and dynamic problem solving, locally, culturally-based. The “age of consensus,” where the technologically advanced North has directed much of the international environmental discourse, is analyzed throughout book. The consensus of sustainable development could be considered the off-shoot of legacies such as colonialism, mass communications, international trade and neoliberalism. Within these larger legacies, the adaptive abilities of less developed countries tend to fall under the influence of specialists from the North.

The rational and scientific power of this political hegemony from the North has fermented the confrontations between different “cultural systems.” The challenge, as the various authors’ stress, will be to build on the unique role that culture can play in recognizing diverse problem-solving skills in strategic international cooperation. While it is always difficult to do justice to the breadth of issues covered in edited books, here is a selection of highlights from this excellent book:

The first chapter by Wolfgang Sachs opens with an analysis of the often-conflicting problems between the now popular term “sustainable development” and the ongoing crisis of nature. The chapter addresses the difficulty with reductionist definitions of what is considered “progress” and “development.” Sachs stresses that streamlining institutional and investment operating systems for development initiatives often avoids the critical public input and involvement that is necessary for fruitful projects (p. 32).

By limiting the scope of actors involved in the development process, benefits have often been concentrated into few hands. Many development projects rely on the highly developed skills of specialists; this tendency omits the input, technical or social, of larger circles of people. This has resulted in a smaller radius of responsibility and knowledge into environmental problem solving (p. 34). Sachs emphasizes that only with public involvement can there be local interest in development projects, including their implementation and sustainability. An historical legacy of development suggests that the emphasis of numerous large-scale projects have conflicted with the immediate needs of communities. The author notes that even if development projects aim to provide seemingly universal concepts as energy efficiency in their implementation, these projects may not be the priority for local cultures and their economy. It is for this reason that a “sufficiency revolution” should be occurring simultaneously with any “efficiency revolution” deemed necessary (p. 40). One of the ways to do this may be through de-centralized decision making. With cultures and economies of scale reduced to more immediate priorities, a reflexive, dynamic and participatory environmental politics could be revitalized.

In Carolyn Egri's chapter entitled, "Nature in Spiritual Traditions," the reader is introduced to the potential renewal of relationships humans can foster with the natural world through spirituality. One of the most interesting passages from the chapter is in regard to Egri's concept of the "power of place." The spiritual and emotional connection that people can develop with their community over time offers tremendous power and importance concerning ecological balance and sustainability (p. 63). This emphasis on staying and growing in one place are often in conflict with a world that is full of movement, resettlement and migration caused by numerous political and societal pressures. Egri's example of the Buddhist "art of mindfulness" is an interesting metaphor that unites the power of place with the necessities of movement. The "art of mindfulness" calls for a process of re-sensitizing oneself to the important changes happening to our surroundings so as to take action and participate in a stewardship of the earth. While in certain regards the chapter tends towards the elusive in comprehension, important points are made about the local in environmental change.

Timothy Luke's chapter on "Eco-Managerialism" is a provocative look at the role that academia plays in the complexity of environmental politics. Luke analyzes leading environmental studies departments across the United States. His criticism is of the culture of 'eco-management' that often perpetuates and rationalizes the existing economic system within resource management discourse. Part of this problem stems from the emphasis on specialization in many environmental studies programs. Through specialized training in engineering programs, water management, forestry practices and so forth, graduates fail to see the larger results on the environment that their skills contribute to. The "environment" becomes a set of resources to be utilized and managed for the greatest economic return (p. 106). Luke is critical of the power dynamics that academia plays in training graduates in the management of natural resources. Academia can be interpreted as an institutional system that provides the discursive home, in which economic and political regimes become officialized, problematized and developed into policy. While not entirely critical, Luke's essay is an important and provocative precaution of the complacent role that the academy can play in the discursive development of environmental policies.

The chapter, "Mapping Complex Social-Natural Relationships," written by Peter Taylor, addresses the need for understanding how local economies use unique methods of adaptation to their natural environments. Taylor uses the example of the *cacique* (local bosses throughout Mexico) and their relation to efficiency and productivity.

Prior to the introduction of overt legalistic control of land by wealthy owners, or the influence of foreign investors, caciques were indigenous leaders who maintained a high degree of respect from the local farmers. This would ensure productivity and innovation. The power and prestige of the rural community would correspond to the authority of the cacique (p. 123). Understanding internal complexities such as this example from Mexico is an integral step in appreciation of the social relationships to the natural environment that local cultures have.

Often in the process of scientific implementation of new, more efficient means, larger economies have sidestepped the cultural fabric of relationships in communities. Bridges need to link large-scale projects that go beyond the locality to those that affect people's immediate cultural surroundings. For this reason, Taylor concludes with an emphasis on the importance of accessible language in environmental discourse when communicating complex topics or innovations (p. 134).

The chapter entitled, "Security and Solidarity," by Michael Thompson, is a comparative study of the approaches to handling environmental risks facing nations and the philosophy with which these problems are solved. Thompson suggests that cultures that see their security from the perspective of constant crisis and risk, tend to solve the problem by masking the crisis (p. 135). An example of this may be increased militarization rather than addressing the root of the conflict, or increased chemical inputs into agricultural production, rather than simplified smaller scale production. Security and enforcement become a cultural ethos that takes over the mentality of problem solving. Often the answers are not in sustainability but rather in suppression of the reoccurring problem. This process can become systematic over time and, as Thompson argues, lacks the solidarity necessary for long term solutions to environmental problems (p. 136). Solidarity requires certain factors such as trust and respect for diversity. A society that can recognize the virtue in enhancing the shared "commons" can foster the concept of "security enhancement" as Thompson suggests.

The chapter makes a distinction between reference to "security emphasis," such as scientific intensification or militarization, and an alternate process of sustainability such as an enhancement of the commons. In this sense the cultural and the ecological gain from security enhancement (p. 143). Thompson mentions how the process of security enhancement requires an ongoing process of social reflexivity, where people are "always learning…never getting it right" (p. 145).

David Harvey writes in chapter 8 about the struggle that minorities face in light of environmental pollution. The chapter opens with what

Harvey calls the "stigmatization of the other" within the industrial mindset (p. 156). This stigma is often rooted in racism and/or classism. Development projects or industrial facilities often financed by wealthy industrial capital manufacture the most polluting, environmentally dangerous products in the "developing" South or lower income areas of cities and countries.

Yet Harvey points to the emergence of justice movements as a counterweight to this tendency. Two important concepts of environmental justice get special attention, "militant particularisms" and "distributive justice." These concepts recognize the imbalance of social accountability for ecological care. Proponents advocate a movement based on justice, culturally diverse and distributive in nature. At the same time, Harvey is critical of the development of what is known as "ecological modernization" (EM). Advanced capitalism's ability to adapt within the environmental movement is best exemplified with EM. Industrial capital has been able to absorb societal concerns from dissenting voices in the environmental movement through incremental changes in operation; however, larger ecological impact is often transferred to other regions of the country or world. Yet, in an increasingly connected world, the results of displacing environmental impact are coming home sooner.

Harvey's chapter ends with the aim of combining the best from environmental justice and ecological modernization (p. 167). Harvey writes,

> Alternative modes of production, consumption and distribution as well as alternative modes of environmental transformation have to be explored if the discursive spaces of the environmental justice movement and the theses of ecological modernization are to be conjoined (p. 185).

Too often, environmentalists have not addressed head on the elusive adaptability of global capitalism in incorporating and shifting production. Going beyond the local/global dynamic, Harvey's point is thus especially relevant.

The chapter entitled, "Images of Place in Green Politics" by Douglas Torgerson, states that environmental politics is always a cultural politics. The process relies on a contestation of different ways of understanding the natural world. This often involves a defense of place, of traditions and customs against the tide that attempts to homogenize differences. Torgerson's analysis of "green politics" is important in understanding that certain cultures have radically different ways of confronting the "enemy" (those with different relations to nature), if their cultural traditions are not as confrontational. Examples are given of indigenous communities in Canada. While some incidents have been confrontational as the Oka crisis in 1990 testified, many other communities have found they must develop stronger advocacy skills to defend their lands and traditions (p. 190).

The larger issue that Torgerson is addressing in his essay is the important linkage that should develop between environmentalists and indigenous peoples. By recognition of the politics of place, environmentalists raise their awareness of the cultural diversity that is crucial in protecting biological diversity.

Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse is a broad-based approach to a better understanding of the cultural in environmental issues. The essays are varied and common linkages from one essay to another are not always immediate. Fischer and Hajer are effective in their introduction to the book with the emphasis on the global implications of the international, standardizing movement in the "age of consensus." This was particularly relevant in respect to the pressures that countries and diverse cultures face in light of increasing pressures to adopt neo-liberal domestic and foreign policies in alignment with international trade agreements. In this regard, a better understanding of the role that culture can play in environmental justice and renewal has particular currency in the current global economic climate. — **Mark Juhasz**