

RECLAIMING NATURE: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION, edited by James Boyce, Sunita Narain, and Elizabeth Stanton, Anthem Press, 2007. ISBN: 9781843312352; 439 pages.

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In recent years the debate over global climate change has tended to become polarized into two camps, those who continue to maintain a sang-froid born of technological optimism (Boyce calls them “see-no-evil optimists”) and those who take an excessively pessimistic, “doomsday” view of the human-nature relationship. *Reclaiming Nature: Environmental Justice and Ecological Restoration* edited by Jim Boyce, Sunita Narain and Elizabeth Stanton (hereafter *Reclaiming Nature*), tried to steer clear of both and largely succeeds in doing so. I first situate the book in its historical context, then review its major contributions and shortcomings, and finally present a brief overview of some representative articles.

The ecological consciousness born in the industrialized Global North in the later part of the 20th century was marked by three fundamental features. First, faced with the obvious correlation between material prosperity and accompanying ecological degradation, a general conclusion was reached that social goals are in direct conflict with environmental goals. A second related belief was that “nature” needed to be protected from “man.” This conservationist position tended to view human impact as uniformly negative and in need of minimization. The third feature of this environmentalism was the belief that those residing in the Global South are less “environmentally conscious” or are more destructive of their environments than the rich or those living in the Global North (the so-called environmental Kuznets curve).

The present volume brings together 16 essays, each a case study or a compilation of case studies from South and East Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, West and Southern Africa, Latin America and the United States, that taken together mount a serious challenge to these fundamental beliefs that have dominated mainstream environmentalism. The new environmentalism that it wishes to articulate is based in part on lessons learned from grassroots movements all over the world.

An earlier volume, titled *Natural Assets: Democratizing Environmental Ownership* (2003) is part of the same “Natural Assets Project” of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. *Reclaiming Nature* is an extension of this project onto an international canvas. The contributors, drawn from all over the world, are united in their view of the environment as a natural asset. As Boyce explains in his Introduction to the volume, this term represents a consciously effort to steer away from the term “natural capital.” Asset, as opposed to capital stands for wealth as well as well-being, and the returns to an asset go beyond income, including health, social status, political power and security. Further, the word “asset” denotes the relationship between a person and a thing, rather than the thing itself. The three core propositions of the project listed in the Introduction are:

1. Environmental degradation is not the result of an inherent conflict between humans and nature; it is a result of conflicts among people.
2. Every person has an inalienable right to share in nature's wealth, including the right to a clean and safe environment.
3. We do not face a grim choice between protecting the environment and reducing poverty. Instead the two can, and often must, go together.

The articles tackle various important issues in global environmentalism including forest management, rain-water harvesting, land reform and sustainable development, environmental justice and global climate change. An important unifying theme is that "Human activity need not lead inevitably to depreciation and ruin of nature's capital. Instead humans can nurture and invest in resources found in nature" (p. 37). To this end a problem that several authors contend with is how to construct property rights regimes that ensure equitable distribution and sustainable use of the ecological commons.

Heterodox economists, whether they are directly interested in environmental issues or concerned with issues of resource distribution, property rights regimes, trade, development etc., will find things of interest here. The classic concerns of political economy such as the relationship between wealth and power, welfare and distribution are never far away. In fact, the book's unique contribution lies in consistently showing how environmental quality and equity concerns are inseparable -- or conversely how ecological degradation is often a symptom of economic inequities that in turn result in power asymmetries using which the rich are able to shift ecological costs of development onto the poor. The ensuing degradation perpetuates poverty and inequality, completing the vicious circle. For those interested in policies at the national and international levels, concrete measures are discussed to internalize negative externalities, to reward communities for the positive externalities that they create in the process of managing their natural assets, and to manage the global commons.

Finally, the book also fruitfully intervenes in the long-standing (and sometimes sterile) debate on state versus market-based approaches to governing the ecological commons. Community-based governance emerges as a strong alternative to both State and market-based approaches in some instances. There is a fine line between arguing for greater decentralization and community control of local resources and (unwittingly) strengthening the Neoliberal agenda of doing away with state welfare functions. The book stays on the right (or the Left, if you prefer) side of this line by amply demonstrating the strength of decentralized models of development that give greater autonomy to the local populations.

Although I have tried, in foregoing paragraphs, to extract some theoretical principles that emerge from *Reclaiming Nature*, the book's strength does not lie in theoretical considerations and debates. This is primarily a book of case-studies, of both grassroots actions and policy measures to tackle specific problems. The book is divided into four parts, each dealing with a particular strategy for building natural assets.

Part One (**Adding Value**) discusses strategies for restoring damaged environments and enhancing diversity and productivity of ecosystem in order to benefit local communities, in the process generating positive externalities for humanity. John Kurien offers an excellent institutional history of ocean commons governance in the 20th century. Recounting how Garrett Hardin's tragedy of the commons (or as Boyce points out, what is more appropriately called "the tragedy of open-access") was created and remedied for fishing the oceans. Recounting the denigration of knowledge that coastal fishing communities faced in the colonial and post-colonial periods, Kurien outlines the advantages of small-scale fisheries along four dimensions, all of them key to the Natural Assets Project: "*investment* to increase the total stock of natural assets; *internalization* to increase the ability of the poor to capture benefits generated by their stewardship of natural assets; *redistribution* to transfer natural assets from others; and *appropriation* to establish community rights for the poor to erstwhile open-access" (p. 26).

Narpat Jodha discusses factors helping or hindering community-level natural resource management in the Himalayan regions of Pakistan, India, and Nepal. Jodha attacks the mainstream view of poverty as a cause of environmental resource degradation (ERD) arguing that instead the causation runs the other way, from ERD to poverty via inequality. According to Jodha, dilution of community stake in resource management and erosion of grassroots mechanisms to nurture this stake constitute the fundamental reasons behind ERD. He concludes that "More than poverty, it is inequality in resource ownership, access, power [...] that promotes environmental degradation" (p. 57). The three important factors for promoting community-based natural resource management are enhancing community stake, local control over local resources, and traditional knowledge systems.

The piece by Narain and Agarwal is a truly inspirational one. It recounts the story of successful ecological restoration via restoration of community control in four rural communities of India. A theme common to Kurien and Jodha, that reemerges here is that *de jure* state management of ecological commons (be they forests or oceans or anything else) often has meant *de facto* open access, which in turn is differentially open depending upon the distribution of power in society. Narain and Agarwal emphasize the afforestation of semi-arid regions via watershed management has been possible in these cases by local participatory democracy, making effective use of the gram panchayat, the lowest democratically elected body in Indian polity.

In Part Two on "**Democratizing Access**" to natural assets, almost as a cautionary note to an uncritical acceptance of "participatory development" as the panacea for all ills, Kojo S Amanor distinguishes between participation in *implementation* versus participation in *design*. Discussing participatory forest management in West Africa, Amanor notes that the emphasis has often been on participation without representation, the state predetermining who constitutes the community and who represents it. In the process, colonial-era policies that excluded indigenous peoples in the name of protecting the environment are often perpetuated in the post-colonial era.

This section also includes an article by Boyce, Rosset and Stanton on Land Reform and Sustainable Development, one by Keenan, De Echave and Traynor on community control over mining activity and one by Anthony Hall on Amazonian extractive reserves. “Extractive reserves” is an idea borne out by the struggle of the Brazilian rubber-tappers led by Francisco “Chico” Mendes, whose assassination in 1989 drew the attention of the world. The idea is to convert the forest from an open access resource to a resource managed by local community norms that allow sustainable use of forest produce. This development model challenges the “frontier mentality” of conventional industrial development that sees the forest either as an unlimited source of raw materials or as land to be obtained for next to no cost. But it also challenges the “conservationist mentality” of the mainstream environmental lobby that seeks to protect the forest by shutting out humans from it.

Part Three (**Capturing Benefits**) brings out strategies for compensating poor communities that create positive externalities via the management of their natural assets. Examples include watershed management, conservation and creation of biodiversity, and recycling of wastes. The pieces in this section are motivated by the realization that the ability of communities to provide these services cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, as Jodha argues (see earlier), a disintegration of community stake and denigration/neglect of local governance norms, coupled with increasing poverty can easily erode the basis for such service provisioning. For externalities such as crop genetic diversity, loss can mean increased vulnerability to disaster world-wide.

Rosa, Kandel, Dimas and Barry discuss payment for environmental services (PES) to rural communities. These are “compensation mechanisms that recognize and reward ecosystem management practices that guarantee environmental services of interest, both to local communities and to outside ‘consumers.’” Possibilities are direct payments to those responsible for maintaining certain types of land uses with revenue generated from taxes and charges on consumers of those environmental services. The authors discuss institutional constraints and avenues to implement such systems and offer examples of PES from Costa Rica, Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador and New York City. For example, in the state of Acre in Brazil, under the Chico Mendes Law, about US\$0.20 per kg of rubber collected is paid to rubber-tapper associations as a way of recognizing their role in ensuring the continuation of an environmental service.

The article by Mike Conroy will be of interest to those who wish to know more about the promise (and to a lesser extent the pitfalls) of certification systems (such as the “Fair Trade Coffee” label) as a means of rewarding “environmental best practices.” Conroy examines the two leading certification systems, the Forest Stewardship CouncilTM and Fair Trade CertifiedTM from the point of view of their ability to contribute to poverty alleviation, keeping in mind that these systems have *not* been designed primarily with that aim.

Eugenio Gonzales, in his article “Wastes as Assets”, takes the reader to the sprawling urban landscapes of Metro Manila in the Philippines. Here the poorest of the poor eke out a livelihood recycling wastes. However, the benefits accruing to the urban

community from their exposure to hazardous pollutants are large. Gonzales estimates scavengers in Payatas, a dumpsite, extract around 65 tons of recyclables per day. The cost of handling solid waste in Metro Manila is estimated to be around US\$44 per ton. Thus if the scavengers were paid for their environmental service they would earn roughly US\$3,600 *per day*, equivalent to 30% of the average *yearly* income of all the waste-pickers in Payatas. Gonzales does demonstrate the importance of the service performed but I feel the article does not adequately confront the larger problem that gives rise to the social class of scavengers.

Part Four (**Defending the Commons**) contains articles on the Environmental Justice (EJ) and Greenhouse Justice. The latter refers to an equitable system of generating and distributing the revenue that will result from putting a market price on the atmosphere's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases. Manuel Pastor, a leading figure in the EJ movement outlines the history of the movement in the United States and also discusses his work in the Los Angeles area with Communities for a Better Environment. In the Chapter on "International Environmental Justice", Harper and Rajan discuss environmental inequality between countries (the exploitative North-South relationship wherein the North uses the South as source and sink) and within countries along class, race/ethnicity, age, gender and urban/rural lines. Examples are offered from China, South Africa, Russia's Far East, Thailand, Central and Eastern Europe and India.

The global atmospheric commons have so far been the quintessential open-access resource. To some, asking "Who Owns the Sky" and putting a price on it may seem a peculiar if not repugnant proposition. But if we recall that allowing industries to emit pollutants into the sky already effectively grants them property rights over this now scarce resource, perhaps we may warm somewhat to the idea of making the property rights regime explicit. Tradable permits are market-based solutions to the problem of overexploitation of open-access resources. Hultman and Kammen discuss arguments in favor of tradable permits, potential international allocation regimes for these permits, as well as avenues for equitable inter- and intra-national distribution of revenues resulting from their. A particular point of contention is the so-called "grandfathering" procedure, which allocates the highest number of permits to historically high emitters of greenhouse gases. This is a politically safe solution that largely allows the continuation of business as usual in the industrialized world. I note that Hultman and Kammen are not opposed to this type of a politically convenient arrangement. Narain and Riddle offer a picture of exactly how unequal historical and present-day emissions are, and how much atmospheric polluting space, the Global North owes the Global South. They also discuss the emergence of Renewable Energy Technologies.

It would have been nice to have a concluding chapter that drew out the common implications of all the case-studies. To some extent Boyce's Introduction does this. And to compensate for the lack of a conclusion, the individual authors do make consistent efforts to integrate their particular studies into the Natural Assets framework.

Staying away from polarizing debates over market-based versus state-based solutions, doomsday pessimism versus technological optimism, is the book's main

strength. But this could also be a weakness if you are inclined to look for fully articulate socialist visions or calls for an end to Capitalism as a solution for ecological problems. But even in the later case, I would recommend the book for the richness and diversity of real-life examples.

References

Boyce, James, and B. G. Shelley (eds.). *Natural Assets: Democratizing Environmental Ownership*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003.