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Natural Resources and People: Conceptual Issues and Interdisciplinary Research

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BOOK REVIEWS

NATURAL RESOURCES AND PEOPLE: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

KENNETH A. DAHLBERG and JOHN W. BENNET, eds.
Bolder and London: Westview Press, 1986. Pp. 394

This volume is a collection of papers chosen from an American Academy for the Advancement of Sciences symposium, *Human Impacts on Global Resources*. A central goal of the volume is "to include both examples of, and reflections upon genuine interdisciplinary research." It is instructive that ". . . all the authors are worried about the ecological crisis, and this is why they were selected to contribute to this symposium." Thus, the volume is representative of the kind of analysis and motivation that produced *The Global 2000 Report to the President* (CEQ, 1981) and adherents to that view will find the volume reinforces their old biases and suggests promising directions for future research. Non-believers will find it a restatement of the basic assumptions behind *Global 2000* which fails to account for the basic challenges to that view mounted during the past five years.

The main themes, given the set of contributors chosen, are those of the environmental decade: there is a need to plan, systems analysts are best suited to design the future, science should direct policy, we are in the midst of an ecological crisis, the world is in danger of running out of critical natural resources, greed and over-consumption are the root causes of resource problems, equality is an important social goal, markets and prices must be directed by planning efforts. The authors build upon these themes without questioning their accuracy or usefulness in designing policy.

The outstanding failure of the book, especially surprising given the title is *Natural Resources and People*, is that an understanding of human choices and actions is not incorporated into the resource models. Only one of the papers—Bromley/Szarleta—develops a specific model of human behavior. The other analysts miss the most important part of the system—the people.

Another major failure is not recognizing the link between social institutions and incentives. The contributors to this volume suffer from what appears to be a systematic, nonrecognition that most natural resource/people problems are the result of institutional arrangements which separate authority to act from accountability for the costs of the actions. Rather than rearrange institutions and incentives to take advantage of human nature, they apply the wishful, frontal lobotomy approach suggested by one of the editors in the summary chapter ". . . if a better balance is to

be created in human—Nature relationships, it will require a change of values and a commitment to the Earth at least as strong as a commitment to human gratification.” If and only if such a task is possible or necessary, it should be left to practitioners of religion, and the social and natural scientist ought to spend more time trying to understand human institutions, the incentives they create, and their effects on the use of the environment.

Much of the social and natural sciences have been driven for too long by the very myths underlying *Global 2000*, and rather than promoting new understanding, the authors of this volume continue to promote the same myths. We have not experienced the resource shortages predicted by the Club of Rome, et. al. In fact, by most sensible measures of human achievement and standard of living, things in general have gotten better for humankind not worse, and there is every reason to believe such progress will continue. This is not to say there are not resource and ecological problems in the world. There are, and the authors of the volume identify many; however, their essays do not move us towards understanding the causes and, thus, the solutions to the problems. Instead, they promote increasing sophistication and reliance on Malthusian type models—which have been so imprecise in the past that had policies been based on them, the results would have been catastrophic.

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