

## GENERAL CONSERVATION

**The Earth in Transition: Patterns and Processes of Biotic Impoverishment** edited by George M. Woodwell (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, ISBN 0 521 39137 7, 530 pp., HB £30, \$49.50)

This book, based on a conference at Woods Hole Research Center in October 1986, brings together some 26 papers from leading experts on the impact of change on natural systems.

Past changes on our planet often have been beneficial to life, judging by the diversity of organisms that inhabit earth. But the current tragic loss of species is transforming a highly productive, self-maintaining landscape of great versatility and considerable resilience into a barren landscape of limited potential for supporting life (including people). The irony is that many people see the transformation of highly diverse natural ecosystems into simpler ecosystems as 'development'.

In his introduction to this useful volume, George Woodwell points out that consideration of the climatic changes now threatening us only confirms a fundamental relationship: the human habitat, despite the spread of human influences, remains dominated by natural communities. And, although these communities may not be the richest source of succour for the current human enterprise, they have the advantage that they develop and maintain themselves indefinitely without human effort. This book attempts an objective appraisal of the patterns and processes of biotic impoverishment. With the exception of Robert Reppeto's article on incentives

for sustainable forest management, the book tends to avoid political and economic issues, even though these are recognized as the fundamental causes of change.

Most readers of *Oryx* will not be surprised by the findings presented, which reconfirm that human activities are replacing complex, multi-species systems with much simpler systems dominated by cosmopolitan species.

The book does contain some fresh perspectives. F. Herbert Borman observes that in New England the value of the land is seen to lie not in the life that it supports or in the energy that it could produce, but in mere space. House plots, highways, paved commercial sites and smallholdings of various types are none of them dependent on energy from the land, but rather energy from distant (and unsustainable) sources. He concludes with a plea for maintaining redundancy in forest ecosystems and says it is injudicious and shortsighted to sacrifice ecosystem redundancy for short-term economic objectives.

Ironically, some authors, such as Margaret Davis, suggest that the correction to the human impacts so starkly described in this book are yet more human interventions. Others, such as Michael Oppenheimer, suggest that biotic impoverishment is a threat to economic and political security as serious as war itself. Agreeing with most authors in the volume, he concludes that repairing a troubled world will require fundamental alterations in many aspects of human behaviour. His solution: more research, which seems oversimplified, self-interested, and of borderline relevance to the urgent problems he outlines.

Robert Reppeto holds out hope that the economic gradi-

ents that are so effective in destruction can be adjusted to favour preservation and management for long-term use of forests. The challenge remains to establish both the technical and social need and the political strength to deflect avarice and the government corruption that feeds it. This will not happen automatically and Donella Meadows concludes the book with some helpful suggestions on how to squeeze the system. She points out that scientists need to take much more responsibility for passing their information to the public, simplifying their message if necessary. They need to tell the public that renewable resources must be managed not from their stock level but from their rate of removal; that a single sample does not constitute a trend; and that a sudden visible stress may appear only because of the presence of long-term invisible stress. Scientists also need to debunk some of the myths that guide our consumer society, such as 'economic growth is necessary and good'. She concludes by saying that 'we should never fail in economic discussions to reiterate – without the slightest apology – that nature has its own worth far beyond the feeble calculus of human purposes. Under the spell of economics, society keeps forgetting what is really important. We have to keep remembering'.

Jeffrey A. McNeely

**Rebirth of Nature** by Roger L. DiSilvestro (John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1992, ISBN 0 471 253208 8, 275pp., HB £21.95)

Roger DiSilvestro is an award-winning American author and chief staff writer for the prestigious National Audubon Society television specials, for which this book is the compan-

ion volume. The glossy, coffee-table format, handsomely illustrated by Page Chichester's colour photographs, makes a bold platform from which the author surveys some of the key battlegrounds where the fight to save the world's threatened ecosystems is taking place. He takes us to Costa Rica, where the struggle to save the country's rain forests will be won or lost within the next 5 years, and to Africa, where poachers came close to creating the unthinkable – a world without elephants – until the ivory trade was banned. But he is best on his home ground, in the United States, on the vanished prairies, in the forests and canyons of the Old West, looking at Yellowstone's trial by fire, at the poisoned shores of San Francisco Bay and the polluted waters of the Great Lakes. Yet DiSilvestro's book with its subtitle – *New Hope for Endangered Habitats* – is far from being a catalogue of eco-disasters. His message is one of enlightenment and encouragement, a call to arms, setting out practical and sensible remedies for putting our world to rights. At the end of the day, as he rightly reminds us, the fight to save the planet is a battle for hearts and minds. But can it still be won in time?

Brian Jackman

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## HISTORY

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**A History of Nature Conservation in Britain** by David Evans (Routledge, London, 1992, ISBN 0 415 06653 0, 274 pp., SB £14.99)

David Evans has taken on a remarkably complex task and, while for most purposes he has produced a workmanlike, chronological history, it does suffer from two serious flaws:

the lack of people and the lack of an international context.

The natural history conservation movement was, and is, driven by people and without some understanding of those people and the politics of the day, any history is bound to be a rather dry compilation of extracts, summaries and dates. How anyone can write a history of nature conservation in Britain and not mention the driving roles of people like Max Nicholson or Richard Fitter, is difficult to comprehend. But readers will look in vain for more than passing references to the people and the philosophies that moulded the conservation movement.

There is, superficially, an impressive amount of detail, but I could not help feeling that the author did not have a close involvement with, or understanding of, what went on at the hub of the conservation movement. It is particularly noticeable that the role of the more radical groups is not discussed in any great detail. Friends of the Earth barely get a mention, despite all their lobbying on behalf of British wildlife and close involvement with the Conservation of Wild Creatures and Wild Plants Act. Evans claims that in the 1970s Britain was lagging behind the international movement, basing this interpretation on the fact that some of the funds for Greenpeace's purchase of the *Rainbow Warrior* came from the Dutch branch of WWF. This ignores the fact that a Greenpeace office had been established in the UK before the Netherlands and the fact that FFPS channelled funds to Greenpeace's campaign and had an observer on board *Rainbow Warrior* when the ship went to the Orkneys to challenge the seal cull. The illustration on page 113 shows the *Sea Shepherd*, described as

owned by the Greenpeace organization. This ship was in fact owned by a group set up by an ex-Greenpeacer, Paul Watson.

Most of the book goes over ground that has been dealt with elsewhere (Dudley Stamp's *Nature Conservation in Britain*, Sheail's *Nature in Trust: The History of Nature Conservation in Britain* and Richard Fitter's *The Penitent Butchers*, to name only three). An historian should consult primary sources in order to establish 'truth'. Press releases, propaganda and panegyrics are not noted for their accuracy, but they do shed interpretative light. Diaries, notebooks and letters are generally much more useful sources of history, but neither have been used in this compilation. There has been little or no reference to archives, nor to any views of the people actually involved in conservation. But is it really true, for instance, of the Report of Huxley's Wild Life Conservation Special Committee, published in 1947 (of which I do happen to have a copy) that 'Conservationists still regard it highly'? I am quite certain that very few conservationists under the age of 50 have even heard of it let alone seen it.

The dramatic growth in interest in nature conservation issues over the past decade means that it is still all but impossible to condense the recent history of nature conservation in Britain into 274 pages. The account is not particularly readable, simply because the author tried to cram in too many facts with too little interpretation or context. Evans did not define his parameters and perhaps would have done better to have restricted his interest to reserves or species conservation, thereby giving greater depth to a smaller subject area.

These criticisms may appear