

BOOK REVIEWS

Conservation for a New Generation: Redefining Natural Resources Management

Richard L. Knight and Courtney White (eds), 2009.
Island Press, Washington DC USA. xvi, 315 pp.
ISBN 9781597264389
RRP US \$30.00 paperback

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HAVING studied environmental science and policy in the United States (US) during my undergraduate years, I was interested to read an overview of the legislative and administrative changes that have occurred in the US over the last 20 years. The first paragraph of the introduction thrust me into the position of the “new generation” of natural resource practitioners that Professor Richard L. Knight’s generation has engendered. He put into perspective what my generation takes for granted- the cross-disciplinary nature of conservation biology and the effort that was required to get multi-disciplinary co-operation on environmental issues. The book is structured in three parts looking at current partners/stakeholders in land management, the tools that are available for conservation and land management and finally the middle ground, where the diverse parties involved in conservation of natural resources meet. Each part is supported by case studies, mainly from the US, written by people involved in each study.

In Part 1, Cheng’s overview of federal and state land management agencies highlighted the need for these agencies to stay relevant to the conservation agenda. Though focused on US land management agencies, the over-riding message was that large federal or state agencies need to pay more attention to the smaller NGO and community based groups in order to implement any federally funded conservation efforts. This well-written chapter boded well for the rest of the book but, while each of the following chapters and case studies had its own merit, the diversity of backgrounds from which the authors came from caused the section to feel disjointed. The variation in writing styles and information provided sometimes left me either wanting more information or more clarity.

The chapters of Part 2 were designed to look at the different conservation paradigms that have emerged in recent years and how various new stakeholders are involved in conservation and land management. Many authors had a US based view of conservation, naturally so; however, the applicability of many of their insights in the Asia-Pacific region is low. The only chapter in this part that I found informative and useful was Professor J.B. Ruhl’s chapter on ecosystem services. His chapter focused on the reality that conservation cannot occur in a vacuum, however, the “commodifying” of natural resources has its perils. His message was that “sitting on the sidelines unwilling to engage in research on ecosystem service values” will be a detriment to creating a sustainable and ecologically responsible

future in the current world economic situation. To get real discourse on conservation and land management, requires conservationists to think in terms of economic value in combination with the intrinsic value of nature.

Part 3 opened with a chapter by Knight on a new “radical centre,” a middle ground where the historically extreme conservationists/preservationists and land grabbing developers are now meeting in order to devise better land management plans for a sustainable future. Over the decades, Knight has observed a shift in the attitudes of his students from combatant environmentalism towards trying to find solutions where humans and healthy landscapes can co-exist. Most of the case studies of Part 3 were good examples of this new type of collaborative land management between conservationists and land owners.

While the book had some heart-warming anecdotal stories on conservation efforts, the information on the progression of environmental legislature and entry of new players into land management and conservation biology were quite specific to the US. Only three of the twelve case studies were non-US examples and even within the context of the US, only two were not specific to the mid-western states of the US. This highlighted the location of the book’s editors (Colorado and New Mexico respectively) and brought into perspective the limited use of this book outside of the US.

As a whole, it was interesting to read the outlooks of conservationists that have been in the business for many decades. I appreciate more the current systems of collaborative land management and that the people involved are less polarized than they used to be. Though I would have difficulty using this as a university text book within the Asia-Pacific region, it is still a useful book to those wanting to gain a perspective of the evolution of conservation efforts in mid-western USA.

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