
There was a time when those concerned about the future could talk in terms of nature conservation or preservation. Now such ideas seem quaint and, apparently, too feeble. Since the early 1990s one must invoke more robust metaphors, of which sustainable development and protecting biodiversity come immediately to mind. Armed with these shiny new imperatives, one imagines the challenges to be more definitive and the strategies more coherent. Appearances are deceiving.

Unlike the apparent roadblocks thrown up by the ideas of nature conservation and preservation, sustainable development seems absolutely liberating; go ahead and conquer nature in the name of progress — just do it in a fashion that does not diminish the capacity of future persons to do likewise. As for protecting global biodiversity, we may never figure out what that means — or whether or not we have managed to do it. Happily, the stage is therefore set for endless conferences in charming cities with world-class hotels and restaurants. With this prospect on offer, do not look for a quick consensus.

In the meantime there is a need for some clear thought about the challenge of protecting global biodiversity and this volume addresses the manifold issues as well as any on the market. Many of the right people are here — Peter Raven, Ariel Lugo, Robert Horsch, Robert Fraley, Gregory Benford, Graciela Chichilnisky, Geoffrey Heal, David Simpson, Roger Sedjo, John Reid, Elinor Ostrom, Walter Reid, Anil Gupta, Gary Toenniessen, James Anaya, Todd Crider, Ana Sittenfeld, Annie Lovejoy, Bryan Norton, Mark Sagoff (twice), Christopher Stone, Yvonne Cripps, and Brent Hendricks. The two editors also offer substantive contributions.

There are many nice chapters here — full of important facts and essential insights. One of the best is surely Guruswamy’s exegesis on the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD). But there are many more. There is a nice mix of disciplines represented here, and each chapter is short enough that the reader need not despair starting what may not be worth finishing.

There is an opening chapter, followed by chapters grouped into sections entitled Scientific Responses, Economic Responses, Institutional Responses, Moral Responses, and Legal Implementation. I found the ‘responses’ sections less than compelling. Indeed, the structure seemed unnecessarily contrived. But then organizing a book of 22 chapters into something coherent and manageable is a daunting task. This is a book for scanning and skimming, not for reading. That is not a criticism — the many facets of the problem dictate an eclectic and diverse approach. Indeed the book, and its makeup, is a metaphor of the problems associated with understanding biodiversity and knowing what to do about it.

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