
Macalester Environmental Review

Book Review

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What is Environmental Literacy?

Encyclopedia of Environmental Science

By J. Mongillo & L. Zierdt-Warshaw

Phoenix: Oryx Press, 2000

450 pages

An old debate in environmental studies, parallel of those of breadth vs. depth, interdisciplinary vs. multidisciplinary and the rest, is what is environmental literacy? Definitions range from activism to encyclopedic-academic knowledge. Whatever you want to believe it is, in a world of superspecialization and lack of holistic views, this is a subject yet to be resolved. The current trend of hiring faculty more and more unidimensional in their scholarship in our colleges and universities, and to consider interdisciplinary studies as not truly robust academia, has led to the production of students that lack the necessary breadth to make the connections between ecology and economics, policy and ethics, history and land management.

Mongillo and Zierdt-Warshaw have written an Encyclopedia of Environmental Science aimed to serve "as a reference tool for high school students, college students, and others..." The book is very well organized with a number of very useful sections such as "Time Capsule" that highlights one of more significant events related to the topic under discussion; "TimeWatch", a section on discussion of new technologies; "A Global View" presenting global perspectives on an issue; "EnviroTerms" with definitions for terms used within the articles; and "EnviroLink" used to clarify terms mentioned in the articles that may have a different meaning in other sciences. Appendixes include a Timeline of environmental history, web sites sorted by subject, a list of endangered species by state, a list of environmental organizations, and a bibliography.

The book contains, according to our count, 1018 terms and definitions, not bad when compared with a previous similar effort¹. Actually Dashefsky's book contains 963 terms². Yet,

when we match the terms described in both books, the overlap is only of 293, which says a lot about the lack of intellectual unification in the field of environmental studies. This lack of a unifying understanding of what environmental studies is all about, can also be seen in the way environmental-related programs in U.S. colleges and universities are structured³.

Mongillo and Zierdt-Warshaw, both science writers, cover a lot of ground and are very comprehensive. Their sense that not only technical terms but also names of environmental personalities, organizations, and laws should be included is a good one. Yet, some gaps are serious. For example, the Precautionary Principle and the Gaia Hypothesis, two of the pillars of current environmental thinking, are nowhere to be found. Nor there is any mention of GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or on the concept of globalization, both a source of major controversies (e.g., the "Battle of Seattle"). Although the authors provide a thorough list of major environmental personalities (alive and dead) such as Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, or Edward Abbey, one wonders why Lester Brown or Michael Soule (co-editor of this journal) were left out. Their list of environmental organizations to which they devote part of the text is also somewhat unbalanced; for example, they include organizations such as the African Wildlife Foundation or the Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, yet they left out the Environmental Defense Fund, the Center for Marine Conservation, and the League of Conservation Voters. Also, the list of environmental laws is extensive but some of the missing ones include the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

Despite these shortcomings, and the lack of intellectual unity in the field, this book can be useful as a general reference.

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¹Dashefsky, H. S. 1993. *Environmental Literacy*. New York: Random House. 298 pp.

²I thank Ann Esson who patiently composed a table of terms for both books for me.

³See Romero, A., M. Brandt, P. Vanselow, and J. Creswell. 2000. Not all are created equal: An analysis of the environmentally-related programs/departments in U.S. academic institutions until December 1999. *Macalester Environmental Review* (<http://www.macalester.edu/~envirost/MacEnvReview/equalarticle.htm>).