

Book Review

Review of *Managing for Healthy Ecosystems*, edited by David J. Rapport, William Lasley, Dennis E. Rolston, N. Ole Nielsen, Calvin O. Qualset, Ardeshir B. Damania. Washington, DC: Lewis Publishers, 2003, 1510 pages.

Review by Bruce Morito

Bruce Morito is a philosopher with Athabasca University and the editor of the *Trumpeter*. Much of his work is focused on Aboriginal thought and rights. Policy and decision-making process are primary research areas in applied ethics and philosophy. His latest book is *Thinking Ecologically: Environmental Thought, Values and Policy* (2002).

This tome, while its editors self-consciously deny that it is an encyclopedia (preface) of ecosystem health, resembles one in appearance and, to some extent, in organization. Occupying 1510 pages and 137 articles, the book appears to be a compilation of the key concepts, problems, and applications concerning ecosystem health and integrity. It is organized under three large thematic areas: conceptual, issues and methods regarding the assessment and monitoring of ecosystem health, and case studies.

The papers were taken from the 1999 “Managing for Ecosystem Health” conference at the University of California, Davis, under the auspices of the International Society for Ecosystem Health. If the resulting book is any indication of the volume of papers presented there, it is no wonder that it took six editors to compile it.

The deep ecology community should be interested in *Managing for Healthy Ecosystems* because it brings together proponents of the ecosystem health model and proponents of the ecosystem integrity approach, groups which have, at one time, been considerably at odds with one another. Laura Westra, who contributes to this book and was also engaged in the organization of the conference, heavily criticized the health approach in her own work (*An Environmental Proposal for Ethics*, 1994). Westra, among others supporting this approach, look to the deep ecology tradition for much of their perspective and ethical direction. The book, therefore, gives some indication of how the deep

ecology movement has influenced some of the current thinking and policy making that attempts to direct us toward ecological sustainability.

To actually read the entire book and give a credible critique would take an exorbitant amount of time. My review, therefore, is based on a selective reading of the technical sections and a focus on the conceptual articles.

These relatively short, conference-oriented papers are of the sort that provide an indication of how people are thinking in the area. Some are synopsis accounts of the work the writers have been engaged in, such as Westra's article on ecological integrity and Rees's on ecological footprint analysis. Others are synopses of work done in various areas (e.g., ambient air quality objectives). As a result, the book gives an overview of many people's work in their respective areas, which leaves the impression that many contributors are using the collection and the conference principally as marketing mediums for their other work, or that the book is designed to capture as many issues as possible under the rubric of ecosystem health.

Many of the authors, after reviewing what they take to be the most up-to-date developments in their areas, pose challenges to research or policy. Many articles read like opinion pieces on environmental problems concerning sustainability. There are a few more-detailed and well-developed arguments, but the general length of articles precludes them from establishing well-formulated arguments. If readers are looking for such arguments, or for deeply informative articles, they will not find it in this collection. Some of the bibliographies lead readers to a rich body of literature, but many are so minimal that they do not serve even this purpose.

If readers are looking for an in-depth discussion on ecosystem health, this is not their book. If they are looking for a comprehensive representation and synopsis account of the area, and related areas, then this book can serve as a valuable tool.