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## Book review

*Understanding the Environment: Bridging the Disciplinary Divides*, Edited by R. Quentin Grafton, Libby Robin and Robert J. Wasson. Published by University of New South Wales Press and Centre for Applied Economic Research, Sydney, Australia, 2005, pp. xviii + 219, ISBN 086840 912 X (pbk), A\$44.95.

Identifying how researchers in different disciplines conceptualise environmental issues is a challenging task. The execution of this book is suggested by the editors to be akin to the parable about blind men describing an elephant: each has such a different impression that it seems impossible that it could be the same animal they are feeling. In this book, the environment is the elephant, and the different disciplines are the blind men describing how they view the engagement.

The editors have brought together contributions from 10 key areas to identify different prisms by which environmental issues are analysed. While the contributors are all from the Australian National University (most from the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies), the focus of the book is at broad discipline levels rather than particular environmental issues. The key discipline areas that are covered include history, anthropology, economics, human health, public policy, ecology, environmental earth science, hydrology, mathematical and statistical sciences, and geography.

The purpose of each chapter is essentially to provide a guide about how different disciplines view and analyse environmental issues. The chapters are written concisely and simply, and many necessarily begin with a description or overview of the discipline area. Each then provides some overview of the way that environmental issues are analysed and the challenges that are faced. Additional chapters to introduce and conclude the volume help to provide some oversight of the material and draw out key messages. While the chapters have some unifying focus on environmental engagement, the way that each discipline is described and presented is quite varied, giving some insights into the different methods and approaches employed.

The economics chapter was contributed by Quentin Grafton and Jack Pezzey. They give some background to the nature and origin of economics before focusing more closely on the economics of the environment. While I enjoyed the way that they summarised the issues in terms of differences between environmental economics and more mainstream economics, it was more as a collection of contributions to environmental analysis than the three broad areas that I categorise environmental economics into: understanding why environmental issues exist, identifying if it is worth remedying the situation, and developing solutions. In a similar way, the section on controversies identifies areas where there are disagreements within economics (and with

other disciplines), without necessarily following a logical structure. By contrast, the final section on methods and tools of analysis gave a more systematic overview of the types of methods that environmental economists use.

The scope and conciseness of the book (there is about 200 pages of text) does limit the depth of material to be covered. While the discussion in each chapter gives a good insight into how each discipline approaches environmental issues, there is little time for discussion about how more interdisciplinary approaches might be developed. Quentin Grafton and Robyn Connors do provide a discussion in the final chapter about how differences can be bridged, identifying both where there are contested concepts and where connections between multiple disciplines are possible. While the effort and costs involved in moving out of a core specialisation into other areas is recognised, there are potential benefits in generating better understanding and creating new ways of thinking and conceptualising problems.

There are some intriguing aspects to the way that the book is structured. It is perhaps unusual in three main ways. First, the chapters dealing with the 'hard sciences' are located in the second half of the book, perhaps in reverse order to the application of these disciplines to an actual case study in the field. Ecology, which perhaps can be viewed as an area drawing many sciences together, precedes rather than follows the other 'science' contributions. Second, the key disciplines of history and geography that describe human–environment interactions are the first and last of the disciplines to be presented, while anthropology is located beside history. Third, the key disciplines to analyse the outcomes of human–environment interactions, economics and public policy, are located in the centre of the contributions rather than after the other disciplines. This has some advantages, as it helps to balance the discussion in the opening and closing chapters. The choice of structure also helps to communicate the choice of different approaches available that are not necessarily structured in a particular order.

Perhaps the most disturbing, and appealing, outcome of the volume is the differences that emerge in the approach to conceptualising and analysing environmental issues. I was particularly struck by the way that many of the disciplines appeared to be descriptive in terms of analysing why environmental problems exist, with a more limited sense that their insights lead to solutions. Different epistemological and philosophical backgrounds seep through the contributions, arousing suspicion that developing interdisciplinary studies may be even harder than the editors acknowledge.

The value of the book is that it helps to communicate both the contributions and the differences between disciplines in relatively digestible format. It will be appealing to a broad range of students and academics interested in touching different parts of the environmental 'elephant'.

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