



Book Reviews

Reading(s) for Comprehension

Conservation. Volume 1: The Idea of Conservation. Volume 2: The Conservation of Diversity. Volume 3: Conservation and Development. Volume 4: The Politics of Conservation. Adams, William M., editor. 2009. Earthscan, London, U.K. 1270 pp. \$1260.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-84407-414-3.

As readers of this journal well realize, conservation is no simple thing. Conservation (to adapt Walt Whitman) is large and contains multitudes. It pulls into itself entire fields of knowledge and realms of expertise. Yet, our wanton interdisciplinarity also accounts for the difficulty we have in comprehending conservation. We can search bookshelves and websites in vain for a single volume that tells thoroughly the sprawling story of conservation. And yet the need for comprehensive understanding has never been greater. If we are to respond effectively to the multiple, cumulative, and converging problems of life in the Age of Consequences, we will need to get our story together.

This ambitious collection of readings, assembled by William M. Adams, Professor of Conservation and Development at the University of Cambridge, does not tell that story—that is not its goal—but it provides a robust foundation for anyone striving for comprehension. Other helpful anthologies of conservation, ecological, and environmental literature have appeared over the years (e.g., Real & Brown 1991; Elder & Finch 2002; McKibben 2008; and Deming & Savoy 2011). For teaching, Adelson et al.'s *Environment: an Interdisciplinary Anthology* (2007) is excellent. For conservation professionals, however, Adams' collection may be more useful in corraling the essential readings that define conservation in all of its scientific, social, and philosophical breadth.

Conservation comprises 79 readings in four separate volumes. (A complete table of contents is available at <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9781844074143/>.) The collection includes venerable voices (e.g., Thoreau, Marsh, Muir, Pinchot, Leopold, Carson), but is weighted toward more recent statements by a diverse range of contemporary conservation biologists, social scientists, historians, economists, ethicists, and writers. Many of the readings and authors—E.O. Wilson, Jared Diamond, Reed Noss, David Orr, Gro Harlem Brundtland—will be familiar to this journal's readers. Others will not. All of them deserve to be.

Together the selections constitute a useful, balanced, and well-integrated whole.

One of the key strengths of *Conservation* is its organization. The collection's structure conveys Adams' awareness of conservation not as a mere series of disciplinary accretions, but as a dynamic conversation across and between fields over time. As he writes, "natural science only explains part of what conservationists need to know to achieve success. . . . To meet the needs of conservation, we need much more effective communication among different academic disciplines and ways of understanding the world." The four volumes answer this call, addressing the cultural, scientific, economic, and political dimensions of conservation. All of these spheres are deserving of an anthology of their own. To bind them together in a single collection makes the point about their integration. The quality of Adams' introductions to the volumes is exceptional. They in themselves constitute a well-conceived brief on the saga of conservation.

Volume 1, "The Idea of Conservation," explores the ever-changing cultural context of conservation through the perspectives of history, literature, indigenous traditions, philosophy, ethics, and advocacy. It includes selections from esteemed elders—Thoreau's "Walking," Marsh's *Man and Nature*, Pinchot's *The Fight for Conservation*, Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain," Carson's *Silent Spring*—but these are nicely juxtaposed with such pieces as Fikret Berkes' commentary on traditional knowledge systems, William Cronon's historical critique of wilderness, and David Orr's consideration of our fossil fuel addictions. "Ideas about nature and its conservation are constantly in flux," Adams writes in his introduction to the volume, "varying through time and from place to place." These pieces demonstrate that conservation is fundamentally shaped by our evolving ideas of what nature is, how it works, and how humans are situated within it.

Volume 2, "The Conservation of Diversity," tracks the shifting scientific foundations of conservation. Adams' approach is marked by keen appreciation of the reality of ecological change and human environmental impacts. "Without knowledge of long-term environmental change," he writes, "how can the conservationist hope to understand the 'natural' state of nature?" In just 20 selected readings, Adams takes in much territory: biological diversity and ecological history; disturbance and resilience; large-scale conservation planning and landscape-level approaches; invasive species; and restoration ecology. Most of the selections here are of more

recent vintage, reflecting contemporary advances in knowledge. But, wisely, Adams has chosen to bookend the volume with reflections on the past (Worster's "The Vulnerable Earth: Toward a Planetary History") and the future (Hobbs and Harris' "Restoration Ecology: Repairing the Earth's Ecosystems in the New Millennium").

Volume 3, "Conservation and Development," addresses the interface—and increasing integration—of conservation and human economic development. It includes sections on sustainable development, sustainable harvests, social institutions, economics, and community-based conservation. I suspect this was the most challenging of the four volumes to assemble, due to the sheer difficulty of surveying such an expansive domain. "The relationship between conservation and development is complex," Adams states plainly. The result is generally solid. I see, however, one noteworthy gap: it includes no selections focused on the Gordian knot of conservation, human population, and consumption. (One can think of possible pieces by Malthus, Hardin, Ehrlich, and their critics!)

Volume 4, "The Politics of Conservation," includes writings on conservation policy and governance. The volume leans a bit toward the promise and problems of protected areas (as opposed to conservation on "working lands" or in urban landscapes). The flip side of this is that the volume is especially strong in representing diverse cultural perspectives, case studies, and commentaries. And, there is a welcome counterweight: Robert Michael Pyle's insightful and challenging essay "Nature Matrix: Reconnecting People and Nature." In his introduction to this volume, Adams neatly summarizes the reality he is trying to help us grasp: "This is a messy, complex maelstrom of ideas and issues, and it offers many challenges to conservationists whose expertise lies elsewhere, in biological science. This is the world where conservation is unavoidably embedded: a highly political world."

Adams accepted a daunting task in editing this work. Ask a hundred conservationists to choose essential readings, and of course you'll get a hundred varied and *perhaps* overlapping lists. Looking at the collection as a whole, one gains a sense of Adams' own viewpoint. He has a broad vision of conservation, its scientific and non-scientific dimensions, and its diverse roots and expressions. He appreciates the important contributions of the North American conservation movement over the last century, but is not beholden to it. He understands the more practical aspects of sustainable natural resource management (e.g., soil conservation, forestry), but keeps his focus on the conservation and preservation of biological diversity.

Adams' choices reflect these strengths. Non-Western perspectives and the humanities are woven well into and through the scientific selections. There are nice surprises. I especially appreciated the passages from James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998) and Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: A*

Biography of the Fish that Changed the World (1999). On the other side of the ledger are several (perhaps unavoidable) gaps. Certain periods are underrepresented (e.g., the 1920s through the 1940s and the 1950s). Some voices are missed (e.g., William Vogt, Wendell Berry). The collection is light on some core topics (e.g., agriculture, urban conservation, ecosystem function). But these are hardly defects; they simply reflect the limits to growth in any anthology one might construct.

One additional matter begs for comment. In a time when many of the selected readings could probably be accessed via the internet, it is a matter that has to be broached: Why is this collection so expensive? (And how much conservation good might one be able to fetch with the same dollars?) Rather than speculate, I communicated directly with the publishers while preparing this review (and appreciate very much their quick and forthright reply). In the case of such collections as this one, the price reflects costs associated with permission fees, limited print runs, and the complications of layout, formatting, and indexing—all of which result in an unusually high unit cost of printing. Libraries—especially those in non-English-speaking and middle-income countries—value such collections as a means of building up their English-language collections of essential reference materials; the cost of subscribing to all the journals from which the readings are drawn would be even higher. Finally, such edited volumes do of course provide added value through the editor's hard work of critically considering, selecting, and introducing the readings. William Adams, through his sifting and winnowing and his commentary, has saved a lot of professors a lot of time and effort.

That said, this collection is too important and too *needed* to be available only to those with the immediate means (financial and otherwise) of access. Perhaps Earthscan can find a way to make this material available through special gifts, grants, or other arrangements. Oxford University Press' *Conservation Biology for All* (Sodhi & Ehrlich 2010) provides one model for access (the volume has been made available online at no cost). As we feel our way through the uncertainties of publishing in the digital age, this collection itself reminds us: we cannot afford to leave the classics behind as we try to comprehend conservation. The future, everywhere, for all of us, and all living things, depends on that comprehension.

Curt Meine

Aldo Leopold Foundation and Center for Humans and Nature, P.O. Box 38, Prairie du Sac, WI 53578, U.S.A., email curtmeine@gmail.com

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