

Book Reviews

Environments at Risk; Case Histories of Impact Assessment, by Derek Ellis. Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1989. Pp. 329. \$47.40, cloth.

From a purely historical point of view, this text is a useful compendium of environmental impact assessments. It contains about fifteen case studies, five of which deal with Canada, and three with B.C. Some descriptions, such as several accounts of mines, sewage outfalls, and pulp mills, give a well-documented sequence of events that occurred in carrying out environmental studies before and after the installation of an industrial facility. Other accounts, on subjects such as the Bhopal and Chernobyl disasters, are largely reports of what can happen when the very low probability of an undesirable event occasionally becomes a fact. These sections of the text are a very effective counterattack to many published articles that imply that industry generally does not care what happens to the environment. Forecasting doom and gloom has been well known since the days of the Old Testament prophets. However, the fact is that human beings seem eventually to take a reasonable approach to the many problems which confront them (even if it is sometimes more by trial and error). This book documents many of these reasonable approaches to pollution problems and thus clearly indicates how we may learn to handle such events better next time.

It is a pity that the text does not stick to the historical accounts. Too often the author imposes his own ideas which end up by confusing the issue. For example, throughout the text there is a strong plea for professionalism in dealing with environmental problems. This takes various forms. On page 182, the author says that "assessing scientists need to publish properly, in refereed journals. . . ." However, out of ten references to his own work on the Victoria sewage outfall, only one could possibly be considered to be in a refereed journal. Chapter 9 is devoted to the idea that "professional" scientists can "audit" the environmental programme of a company. The word "audit" is intentionally borrowed from accountancy,

where the practice is used to check the validity of numbers. However, much of this chapter uses a highly subjective appraisal — table 9.8, for example, gives numerical rankings to impacts based on what the author calls “Best Professional Judgement.” The invention of arbitrary numerical ranking is not scientific professionalism, and it is certainly not something that can be objectively audited. Throughout the text the author refers to his own work and attendance at numerous meetings concerning environmental conflicts — this presumably to establish his own professional experience. However, on page 302 the author describes himself quite differently “as an occasional environmental consultant . . .” (hardly a fitting description for an experienced professional).

In the above examples one is left on one hand with a desire by the author to see environmental studies as a professional science. On the other hand, the record is exactly the opposite. Environmental science is still highly experimental and site-specific and requires much research. The need for research implies that there is much uncertainty which cannot be resolved by an “Association of Professional Biologists” (301) or by “Best Professional Judgement” (237). Uncertainty can be resolved by sticking to the scientific method. In my own opinion, the author’s claim to have arrived at a professional status on environmental issues is as misleading as the claims of those who take the opposite prophetic opinion of doom. Professionalism implies that a correct decision will be made with predictable results; environmental science is a long way from achieving this.

The text is well illustrated and free of all but a few typographical errors. The author’s use of English is sometimes difficult to follow. However, he justifies this (or excuses it?) in the Preface by saying, “. . . because I am a Canadian I write as a Canadian, not as an Englishman or an American.” Referencing of the text is generally good, but the author throws out a few undocumented comments such as “there should be some concern since some high grade pulp is used in bread” (109). Since adulteration is a more serious charge than pollution, the statement cries out for a reference.

In summary, at the UBC Bookstore price of \$47.40, this book is a useful historical text which our libraries at least can well afford to purchase.

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