

Ecology: A Pocket Guide. Ernest Callenbach. Universities Press (India) Limited, 3-5-819, Hyderguda, Hyderabad 500 029, India. 1999. 154 pp. Price: Rs 125.

With the world becoming more and more 'ecology conscious', the dearth of simple literature aimed at educating lay readers on the subject has been increasingly felt. In 1995, funded by the Global Environmental facility, the United Nations Environment Programme brought out a monumental publication titled *Global Biodiversity Assessment*. This compilation, a state-of-the-art of the subject, is also the most comprehensive and authentic reference material for understanding global ecology in theory and practice. Nevertheless, since the primary purpose of the book was to serve as a source of ecological information to those involved in the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, it has not reached the hands of as many as would really benefit by it.

Good reference material on global ecology is certainly the need of the day. The book under review by Ernest Callenbach is hence a welcome and handy contribution. The compact pocket guide is excellent reading material. Written in the most simple and readable style, it should interest both general readers and environmental activists.

The book discusses the way matter, life and natural processes interact in creating the earth's living systems in the most eloquent way. By coincidence, the alpha-

betic arrangement of the various subjects discussed in the book takes the readers through a real process of change the world is foreseeing. For instance, the book starts with air and ends with zoo. This is both real and symbolic of the process of change – a change, guided by the rapid human development that the world is now bearing, taking the earth's living system from a free and naturally evolving one to something captive and human-managed.

Specifically, the book highlights the role of micro-organisms that are referred to as 'subvisibles'. How the subvisibles control the earth's biosphere is beautifully described as follows: 'small animals moving around in their burrows spread the spores of fungi without which young tree roots could not take up nutrients, and insects hasten the decay of fallen tree trunks and their decomposition by microbes' (p. 26).

The examples discussed are really thought provoking. Talking of the degradation brought about by unplanned development, it forewarns the possibility of automobiles being the greatest competitors of land. It also brings out the need to look at the earth's ecology in a more holistic way than to break down its various components for independent analyses. In this context, the inadequacies of some of the early and popular mathematical models in ecology have been brought out.

Unlike more classical textbooks of ecology, the entire book is written in a rather philosophical tone. Thus, theories as that of the 'Gaia', which hardly find a

place in many ecology reference books, are in place here. The ideals of ecological movements as that of 'deep ecology' and 'ecofeminism' have also been discussed, making the book a compact and comprehensive reference for lay ecologists.

The book certainly does not cover every aspect of ecology. However, the style of presenting concepts is really good. Throughout the text, phrases that by themselves stand for important concepts or components in the functioning of the biosphere have been highlighted for easy cross-referencing. Wherever appropriate, easy-to-remember acronyms have also been added. A good example is CHNOPS, provided as a handy way to remember that all organisms contain fixed proportions of the elements carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorous and sulphur (p. 30).

The pocket guide, written with the American and European readers in mind, should interest every reader. It is simple, handy and full of thought-provoking ecological facts, all presented in an encyclopaedic form. Every lay ecologist should find it the most appropriate companion and guide. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it might even prove a 'prayer book' for many.

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