

Reviews

access to the knowledge and resources that will ultimately influence the decision to burn or not, and eventually affect social meaning of burning.

The book's theoretical contributions should not overshadow the book's strong qualitative and ethnographic contributions. Jansen's long-term fieldwork in El Zapote and his use of different field methods provide a rich and informative account of human side of agriculture and environment in El Zapote. His historical work is particularly insightful and adds a much needed time depth to the book.

Ethnographically, the book is important because of its concern with social life in the hinterlands and the role of coffee and cattle, particularly for mountain areas. The book highlights that we need to know more about the local dynamics of coffee production, particularly how environmental and socio-economic factors articulate.

In this book, Jansen has successfully integrated complex theory with complex ethnographic processes. His focus has been to understand both local farming practices and environmental transformations, while providing a "grounded" alternative to a number of macro-level theories that posit the primacy of dominant, single explanatory factors to account for environmental degradation. While one can disagree with the importance given particular socio-political processes or histories, in terms of affecting individual agriculture and environmental behavior, depending the ethnographic specifics, one cannot dismiss the importance of social relations, structures and histories, constructed and reconstructed at the local level. Also, it may be the case that local knowledge may have more of a shared pattern, and that more extensive quantitative data might provide insights on patterns of production linked to producers' models of agricultural and environmental processes.

Still, the book provides a well-articulated argument for grounding our theories of environmental degradation in the local particulars, and it does so without losing sight of the theoretical parameters. Jansen makes this especially clear in the book's final section, where he offers well-reasoned and thoughtful suggestions for moving "post political ecologies" beyond overly relativistic and discursive analyses. As he argues, a "realist political ecology" must incorporate the material realities that confront farmers in El Zapote. Although multiple meanings and interpretations arise out of discourse and socio-political processes, these interpretations are also affected by "real-world" material/environmental processes that are of concern to El Zapote farmers, environmentalists and conservationists alike. Recognition of this has less to do with modernity and post-modernity, or structural versus post-structural, and more to do with an acknowledgment that real-world ecological processes are generative of meaning along with our socio-cultural processes, and that a political ecology capable of bridging the divide between social and natural sciences in the study of environmental degradation must include the material and a variety of theoretical perspectives.

**Chinnagounder's Challenge: The Question of Ecological Citizenship (1999),
by Deane Curtin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, xviii, 218 pp.**

**Reviewed by Dave Howland, Department of Natural Resources, and Rob
Robertson Department of Resource Economics and Development, University
of New Hampshire**

Reviews

Deane Curtin would like us to rethink our cultural and environmental ethics. In his new book, *Chinnagounder's Challenge: The Question of Ecological Citizenship*, Curtin delivers a thoughtful, well-documented critique of western attitudes toward the environment and other cultures. He concludes that we have upended eco-communities and threatened indigenous people around the world through commercial exploitation, the green revolution and even the well-intentioned export of western environmental ethics, such as preservation. Curtin argues that these are all forms of covert, systemic violence — though some are harder to recognize than others — that threaten to transform billions of people into environmental refugees. He warns: “The future of the planet urgently requires a global practice of localized care for the environment.” (p. 16) Curtin suggests, as a solution, his own brand of environmental and cultural philosophy, which he calls critical ecocommunitarianism. (p. 141)

The selection of the book's title is a little confusing, and Curtin unfortunately leaves readers guessing about it until the final chapter. Chinnagounder is the name of a tribal elder in a village in Southeast India, whom Curtin met while traveling with a group of American students. Chinnagounder, who Curtin estimated to be more than 100 years old, recalled how strangers duped his father into selling the family's land to a coffee plantation for the equivalent of about \$2 at present day value. Today, a new generation of colonialists stalks his ancestral home — pharmaceutical company prospectors wanting information about native medicines. Chinnagounder's challenge apparently comes in the form of a question: Which drug company did Curtin and his fellow travelers represent? In other words, where did these westerners really belong? Curtin answers the reader: “We are, perhaps the lone people that has never succeeded in becoming native to any place.” (p. 173)

Curtin uses his book to urge us to become invested in our own place — our own natural land — and to respect the place of others. He defines his critical ecocommunitarianism as “a pluralist ethic that begins with the authority of local communities to define their local values and participate in their transformation over time.” The local community might be a tribe in the Amazon or an inner-city neighborhood that has created its own community garden. In the context of ecocommunitarianism, important environmental decisions would be made at the local level by people who know the land best. In today's world such decisions are made out of context by, for example, the World Trade Organization — a panel of business executives appointed by heads of state. Where there is a conflict between cultures or different groups, Curtin says the sides must make profound efforts to understand each other's positions and even their way of life. Though he avoids the cliché, he would have opposing sides walk a mile or more in each other's shoes to establish a common understanding needed to resolve differences. In the process, we might stop talking past one another and begin to find real solutions.

Writing to a First-World western audience, Curtin says that we have forced our own worldview on other cultures at the peril of their societies and their environment. The very concept of a First and Third World, Curtin notes, is itself a questionable creation of western thought. He says a struggle has emerged between two powerful movements: “the increasingly global reach of Western liberal individualism and the resistance to this movement in traditional communities” (p. xi). The casualties are endangered species and endangered indigenous cultures, which are disappearing at a rapid rate under the crush of so-called progress. He writes:

These cultures are often fragile. One-third of the original North American languages have been lost, two-thirds in Australia. Eighty-seven tribes disappeared in Brazil alone in the first half of this century. Yet most of the world's cultural and genetic diversity reside in these small, unique cultures. At a pace that only increases, these cultures face the tragic choice of living in a homogeneous global culture, or being eradicated altogether (p. xi).

Curtin notes that westerners have not cornered the market on environmental ethics, though we might think so given the ground covered by the diametrically opposed views of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Muir believed in preserving natural resources for nature's sake, an ideology that

Reviews

Curtin says led to the founding of the National Park Service. Pinchot, a utilitarian, was in favor of using nature's bounty to serve people, a concept that placed stewardship of national forests under the Department of Agriculture (p. 5). Curtin notes that both ideologies have done great harm where they have been exported to other parts of the world. He declares Nepal's Chitwan National Park a failure, pointing to a policy in which indigenous people were relocated to marginal lands to create a wilderness within the park. Forced to earn a living providing for low-budget tourists, they have begun cutting away at the edge of the jungle for firewood (p. 4).

At the other end of the spectrum is commercial exploitation. Curtin quotes former World Bank economist Herman Daly about the dangers of our mainstream economic theory that is "destroying our own humanity and killing the planet" (p. 24). Curtin also levels a scathing attack on the green revolution, the spread of modern agriculture, which he calls "murderous." He gives his strongest warning at the end of Chapter 3: "When 20 percent insists on consuming 80 percent of the resources, this creates billions of environmental refugees who can only be pacified by force."

Curtin spends most of his energy educating his readers about the error of our western ways. What we might mistake for charitable behavior on our part could be cultural violence toward another – "the attempt to supplant community values with the misguided assumption that cultural development is equivalent to Western liberalism" (p. 30). To put his argument in context, he provides an elegant taxonomy of violence that defines not only personal violence – such as mugging, murder and domestic abuse – but also institutional and systemic violence, which comes in both overt and covert forms. For example, forcing a Third World agrarian community to adopt mechanical agriculture and reject their caste system is a form of systemic violence. Colonialism is covert systemic violence. Genocidal violence is overt systemic violence.

As with his book's title, Curtin waits until the final chapter to reveal the details of his own environmental ethic. He says that in America we have lost our connection with the land and have turned over responsibility for environmental caring to the national government. He argues we need is to rekindle our sense of place with a dose Thomas Jefferson's passion for local control and an ounce of Edward Abbey's love of nature. Writes Curtin: "My view is that the best guarantee we have of preserving the wilderness of nature is through cultivating an informed and humble citizenry that is genuinely committed to preservation. Then theory and practice, coincide" (p. 190). Curtin is wise to concede that the local approach of critical ecocommunitarianism is no panacea. If there is an Achilles heel to his ethic, it is that it cannot alone solve the world's greatest systemic environmental problems. He offers as an afterthought in the fifth to last sentence of the book that global warming will indeed take a global effort to solve. Curtin could add to the list the scourge of endocrine-disrupting chemicals, nuclear waste and every other transboundary nightmare wrought by western technology. The point, however, is not worth belaboring because Curtin's philosophy and global environmental solutions are not mutually exclusive. We need a combination of local and worldwide effort to address our environmental threats.

Curtin does a service to all, regardless of their environmental ethics, by revealing another perspective. We in the west do not realize how harmful our influences can be. Seemingly unimpeachable attempts to improve life in other lands by casting it in our image can bring great distress and even death to other cultures. Chinnagounder's Challenge turns the tables on our everyday assumptions. In *Close to Eden*, a 1992 film by Nikita Mikhalkov, a Mongolian herder named Gombo discovers the excitement of modern civilization when he travels to a Chinese city with a Russian truck driver named Sergei. On the way back to his family across the sprawling steppe, Gombo dreams that he and Sergei are set upon by a powerful Mongolian Army of centuries past. The ancient soldiers find the precious television set Gombo had bought for his wife and they smash it. Then they set Sergei's truck aflame and tumbling down a hill. Perhaps the ancient warriors had read Curtin's book.