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Extending Care to the Earth: A Strategy to Save the World or Insufficient Framework for Social Transformation?

Human Dependence on Nature: How to Help Solve the Environmental Crisis by
HAYDN WASHINGTON
Routledge, 2013 \$42.95

Reviewed by **LORELEI HANSON**

The message of this book is likely familiar to most readers of *The Goose*. There is an environmental crisis and people just don't understand the scientific facts and/or accept the reality of what is occurring; yet hope still exists for us as a species to survive, if only everyone will do her or his part. This book is Washington's explanation of, and strategy for, how to address the planetary crisis.

The first three chapters provide an overview of basic ecology and global environmental change. The text is tight, providing the reader with a succinct overview of the system or cycle under review (e.g., energy, water, and minerals like nitrogen) and how these systems have changed over time due to human activities. Washington provides a great basic ecology lesson in less than forty pages, supplemented by very clear and informative diagrams of these systems. However, the larger message that Washington hopes to convey regards the multitude of ways in which humans are dependent upon nature for survival. He argues that we deny the environmental crisis in part because we lack "ecological grounding," an understanding of how ecological systems function. Consequently, as he details in Chapter 4, we are pushing

ecosystems beyond safe levels and witnessing ecosystems collapse at a pace unprecedented in planetary history.

The inventory of the suite of ways humans depend on nature is broadened in Chapter 5 as Washington details how people are psychologically, socially, culturally, and spiritually fed by nature. Washington recounts how he spent much of his life in the Wollemi Wilderness in Australia, and it is these psychological and cultural experiences that led him to write this book. He believes that wilderness experiences are able to transform individuals and possibly act as catalysts for social transformation. Washington argues that because wild places can restore a sense of wonder, they are often pivotal to developing a sense of meaning, and this identification is key in helping us solve the environmental crisis.

Yet, according to Washington, an ecocentric ethics and worldview have been undermined by anthropocentrism supported by ideologies such as modernism and postmodernism. The mechanistic paradigm of modernism promotes a utilitarian view of nature whereas the postmodern "view that all discourses are equally valid" and rejection of grand narratives "undermines a rational assessment of the value of ecosystems and, the extent of the environmental crisis." Washington argues that it is misleading to suggest that humans can either control or construct nature, as both ideologies serve to distance humans from nature and further support anthropocentrism. Instead such anthropocentric views need to be challenged in favour of developing an

enlarged moral community through an “ethic of ecological obligation.”

Extending care to the earth requires first coming to terms with humanity’s denial of reality. This societal level of denial is manifest in three key ways: literally by asserting that events like climate change are not occurring; in an interpretive sense by accepting the facts but using euphemisms and technical jargon to minimize the reality; and, by disregarding the full extent of the problems and thereby not acting with immediacy. While there are many people who accept the facts about the extent and seriousness of the ecological crisis, nonetheless denial across society prospers due to a variety of factors: fear; failure to value nature; fixation on the economy and society; ignorance of ecology and exponential growth; willingness to accept a high percentage of risk; and disinformation spread by the media. Moreover, contemporary governance structures further support this denial by basing their economies on increased productivity and natural resource extraction, disinvestment in public infrastructure and social programs, and little consideration of the ecological and social consequences associated with infinite growth.

While we are allowing these illusions and systems to dupe us into maintaining the status quo, we are not powerless drones. Washington declares: “It is time to grow up and drop our delusions, our megalomaniac fantasy of being ‘masters of Nature’.” In spite of the extensive degradation of the natural world, Washington insists we can act to make a difference. His proposed solutions include: have only two

children; reduce consumption; buy fair trade products; reuse and recycle; grow your own food; forgive the developing world’s debt; talk about the intrinsic value of nature and ecological sustainability; become politically active; demand a renewable energy future; install renewable energy; and, adopt a more ecocentric worldview.

I have to admit I was hesitant to complete this book review, principally because my opinion of the book runs counter to all the lavish praise found inside the front book cover offered by such environmental luminaries as Paul Ehrlich, David Suzuki, Lester Brown, and Holmes Rolston III. I have no disputes with the general message of the book that society is largely acting as if we are not fundamentally dependent upon and connected to the natural world, and this has contributed to our current ecological crisis. Yet the book left me baffled and unsettled. I think Washington is misguided in many respects in his assessment of why humanity continues not to act with sufficient urgency and scope to our current planetary situation. He grossly oversimplifies the social, political, cultural, philosophical, and even biological factors at play in maintaining the status quo, and his solutions are insufficiently focused on the systemic forces that must be challenged. Although I follow almost all of Washington’s prescriptions for what a concerned citizen should be doing, I don’t believe that this is making the slightest difference to the economic and social trajectory most parts of the world are on, nor that the environmental choices I am able to make are options available to most people. And so

although Washington does briefly discuss social inequality and poverty, there is insufficient attention throughout the book on social and environmental justice. Finally, I am skeptical that acknowledging the intrinsic value of nature is enough upon which to build an alternative society that lives in harmony with the rest of nature.

Hence in the end, for me this was a disappointing read.

LORELEI L. HANSON is an associate professor of Environmental Studies at Athabasca University. Her current research interests include: the use of deliberative democracy in engaging the public on climate change and the transformative possibilities of urban food strategies and permaculture.