

Review by Gene Ruffin

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Story Earth: Native Voices on the Environment. Edited by Pablo Piacenti. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993. 214pp. US\$12.95 paper
ISBN:1-56279-035-8. Recycled, acid-free paper.

The paradigm of exploitative development that has characterized Western culture's relationship with Nature, as well as nonwestern cultures, has led to the global environmental problems we now face. Perhaps this model of development is flawed. Perhaps we should begin to look elsewhere for a fresh perspective, which, in many ways, may be an ancient perspective.

In *Story Earth: Native Voices on the Environment*, eighteen indigenous cultures are given a voice on the environmental crisis that besets the planet. They speak very clearly concerning the exploitation characteristic of the West's historical definition of the Earth as a resource to be consumed. Yet the reader receives more than just a critique of the West's destructive heritage. Through these eighteen voices one finds another, previously subordinate, perspective that promises a new model for relating to the natural world, and perhaps the fundamental constituents for a genuinely sustainable development.

Produced by the Columnist Service of the InterPress Service Third World, "a news agency specializing in information on the countries of the Southern hemisphere, on development issues and on North-South relations"(p.X), *Story Earth* presents the perspectives of a diverse cross section of the world's traditional societies. We hear from, among others, the Abenaki and Innu of North America, the Maya of Guatemala, the Basuto of Lesotho, the Sami of Finland, the Rapanui of Easter Island. There are lessons for living from Buddhist Sri Lanka, Hindu India, and Aboriginal Australia. One such lesson is "Practice what you preach: A Lesson in Sustainable Living". Sarath Kotagama, director of Sri Lanka's Department of Wildlife Conservation, describes the influence of Buddhist ethics on the pre-colonial Sri Lankan life-style. That perspective, grounded in a fundamental reverence for life, is contrasted with the colonialist and current, Western dominated, value system. Kotagama argues that a sustainable life-style was practiced in Buddhist pre-colonial Sri Lanka, that those traditional values are needed to regain a sustainable life-style and that the developed world should take the lead in their adoption.

As one might expect, throughout these lessons and stories comes a chronicle of environmental destruction and its repercussions for traditional societies. Thus, this book is a study in cultural, as well as natural ecology. For in these brief pages the reader learns of the impact of Western culture's development model on the world's traditional societies, from the destruction of the natural resources on which they depend for their survival, to the dissolution of their self-identity.

Although some narratives exhibit a romantic nostalgia for pre-Western existence, the message conveyed in *Story Earth* is a strong and much needed call for a more congruent environmental ethic. Ultimately therefore, *STORY EARTH* is a book on values; the values of domination, dualism, and exploitation versus the values of interdependence, holism, and a more balanced, sustainable relationship with Nature. This is a story heard previously in works of environmental ethics but the first person perspective offered here makes this book a welcomed addition.

Story Earth is a valuable resource for cross-cultural studies, environmental ethics, studies in cultural ecology, anthropology, and philosophy. Most importantly, it is a very human testament to the impact of Western culture's development model on the non-western world, and a potential source for the construction of a new, but in part ancient, healthier model for living with the Earth.

Recommended for general collections.