

**Review: Reconstructing Conservation**  
By Ben Minter and Robert Manning (Eds.)

Reviewed by Elery Hamilton-Smith  
*Charles Sturt University, Australia*

.....  
Ben A. Minter, & Robert E. Manning (Eds.). *Reconstructing Conservation*.  
Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003. 417pp. ISBN 1-55963-355-7.  
US\$27.50

This is an interesting and very competent book. It reviews the past and current debates about the nature of conservation, and for U.S. scholars in particular, will provide a useful reference.

The core focus of nearly all essays is upon a profound and scholarly review of the conceptual and philosophical basis of the United States conservation ideal. The book demonstrates an almost surprising common ground on many issues. The multi-disciplinary mix of authors enhances its quality and interest. Topics include the very nature of historical analysis (McCullough), restoration (Dizard), the impact of agrarian ideology (Thompson), regional planning (Minter), resistance (Freyfogle), progressivism (Meine), moral and ethical underpinnings (Norton), sociology of change (Manning), environmental economics (Bengston & Iverson), paradigmatic shifts (Caldicott), and stewardship (Lowenthal).

There is considerable attention given throughout to critical analysis of the ideas of Muir, Leopold, Marsh, and other pioneer thinkers of the conservation movement, and then to the impact of their ideas over the years. It is probably the best assembly of writings on the story of conservation ideology and philosophy in the United States.

The editors conclude the volume with an excellent integration of the common ground emerging from the book as a whole. They commence with an overview of the many directions that are explored, but then turn to key principles and strategies that emerge. They begin with the movement towards an integration of natural and cultural values, and it is interesting to note that this was also the theme of the recent U.S. ICOMOS international symposium. This in turn leads to more attention being given to landscapes undergoing continuing modification, although surprisingly, the current move towards sustainability receives relatively little attention. Wider and deeper scholarship is seen as one part of the future, although the ideal of integration between scholarship and action is not well developed. The long-range demands of stewardship, a focus on "land health" and a move towards an inclusive movement embracing the values of pluralism together set a

prospective social climate. Community-based strategies and increased public engagement with democratic political inclusiveness and social justice are seen as important drivers of the total process.

But I also find it to be a strange and unsatisfying book. In spite of Judd's particularly useful critical essay that compares eastern and western perspectives in the United States, one has the sense that the book as a whole is dominated by the eastern discourses of conservation. A further constraint is the obvious underlying assumption of virtually all authors that land conservation is essentially an idea born in the 19th century United States. The text is certainly profound and scholarly, but few authors link their discussion to specific examples. Only Stokowski provides an adequately detailed example of practical on-ground action while using that example to demonstrate the application of philosophical and other principles.

But further than that, this book almost ignores the world experience, and how much the United States might learn from it. Vivanco draws upon Latin America for examples of the significance of traditional culture in thinking about conservation. An essay by Mitchell and Brown certainly focuses upon the global situation, but it is both too brief and certainly not up-to-date with contemporary action or thinking in other countries. Only Mitchell and Brown demonstrate some realisation that very effective conservation practices and concepts were in place hundreds of years earlier in other parts of the world. From the world perspective, many countries have now built upon their own traditions, and sad to say, the United States now lags behind the forefront of contemporary philosophy and practice. So, in bringing together such an excellent review, Minter and Manning actually offer a challenge to their colleagues.

.....

Elery Hamilton-Smith, AM. <[elery@alphalink.com.au](mailto:elery@alphalink.com.au)>, Adjunct Professor, School of Environmental and Information Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Albury, New South Wales, Australia.