

Review: 2008-2009 State of the Wild: A Global Portrait of Wildlife, Wildlands and Oceans
By the Wildlife Conservation Society and Eva Fearn (Ed.)

Reviewed by Elery Hamilton-Smith
Charles Sturt University, Australia

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This book provides a comprehensive data-based review and assessment of the state of the world environment. It is also a model of clarity – easy to read and with excellent photographs. Like early volumes in this series, it also includes a review of a specialist area, and in this volume, that is focused upon the growth of new infectious diseases in both humans and other animals.

Not surprisingly, my overall impression is that in the year under review, we have experienced a remarkable mixture of winning and losing. Further, it is encouraging to recognise that there is some genuine progress in the state of our natural resources. Sadly, in spite of the fact that some of the losses have arisen as a result of climate change, tectonic events or other essentially natural phenomena, most of them are simply an outcome of human ignorance, greed, mistakes and/or stupidity.

The analyses in this volume provide a valuable demonstration of the basic tenet of ecology, that “everything is connected to everything else!” This in turn leads to an equally basic principle underlying resource management practice, namely that “you can never change only one thing!”

However, perhaps the best aspect of this book is its focus upon infectious diseases and their impact upon both human society and natural biodiversity. Changes in land use open up new opportunities for other changes including the movement of zoonotic pathogens from one species to another. We have seen the incredible impacts of Malaria, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Nipah Virus and Avian Influenza. Yet, we still place great reliance upon the use of stop-gap strategies, e.g., chemical insecticides, rather than recognising and acting upon the extent to which land use changes will either suppress or foster new emergences of disease. Often a new emergence comes hand-in-hand with processes of adaptation and hence the emergence of new strains of familiar disease conditions. One of my own former students was the third to die as a result of infection with a new strain of the ubiquitous *E. coli*. His illness took only 12 hours to advance from the first symptoms to the point of no return.

Despite my own very long experience in land resource issues, I found many new surprises in this work. As one simple example, I was amazed by the extent to which the prevalence of cholera is directly associated with population booms in marine plankton (p. 117).

But it has also served to reinforce some of my long held beliefs. One of these is the significance of the precarious balance between nature-based tourism and nature conservation. On one hand, nature-based tourism is a fundamental tool in conservation education. On the other, it may be a source of massive degradation of the environment when it is managed primarily for commercial profit and without proper understanding of the destination site.

I can only recommend this book to all those interested in the state of our environment.

Elery Hamilton-Smith <elery@alphalink.com.au>, Professor, Charles Sturt University, Australia. P.O. Box 36, Carlton South, Victoria 3053, Australia. TEL: 613-9489-77850.