

Review: Roots of Ecology: Antiquity to Haeckel
By Frank N. Edgerton

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Egerton, Frank N. *Roots of Ecology: Antiquity to Haeckel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. xiv + 274 pp. ISBN: 9780520271746. US \$75.00, hardcover; e-book also available.

When did the history of ecology actually begin? Probably long before our era, as argued by Professor Frank Egerton in his latest book, which traces in eight chronological chapters a detailed synthesis of ecological thought from the ancient ages until the late 19th Century. Indeed, even when the word “ecology” did not exist yet, some Greek and Roman philosophers from the Antiquity wrote about cosmos and questioned the relationship between God, humans and nature. Some of these founding thinkers took nature itself as a tangible proof of the existence of a God since “Plato’s creation myths and Herodotos’s natural history support what we might call providential ecology” (p. 4). The medieval millennium was equally rich and diverse in ecological thinking with the emergence of some interdisciplinary sciences that have been forgotten, such as biogeography (p. 23). The Renaissance witnessed the intense and rapid advancement of new fields of knowledge like botany, although it already existed in Ancient Greece (p. 33). A whole chapter is dedicated to scientific revolution including the origins of human and animal demography during the 1600s (p. 50).

Swedish scientist Carl von Linné (here spelled Carl Linnæus, 1707-1778) is seen as “the founder of modern nomenclature and systematic and first to conceptualize a formal science of ecology”, under the term “economy of nature” (p. 80). In 1866, zoologist Ernst Haeckel provided a very influential definition of ecology, understood then as

“...the whole science of the relations of the organism to the environment including, in the broad sense, all the ‘conditions of existence’. These are partly organic, partly inorganic in nature; both, as we have shown, are of the greatest significance for the form of organisms, for they force them to become adapted” (p. 199).

All the obvious scientists from 19th Century are introduced (see Chapter 7), including geologist Charles Lyell (who worried about the balance of nature and the extinction of some species) and later Charles Darwin (p. 143).

Although it is instructive and interesting from one cover to another, *Roots of Ecology* is most rewarding in its first half when we learn a lot about the primary intuitions and some lesser-known hypotheses from many centuries ago that altogether led to the construction of the ecological thought. This epistemological evolution of a core concept, somewhat like the ecology of ecology, is this book’s strongest asset for readers who are already familiar with environmental sciences.

Among my main quibbles, I was disappointed not to find any mention of Canada in this otherwise extensive book; the author should have taken profit of this immense reference book by historian Yves Hébert titled *Une histoire de l’écologie au Québec, Les regards sur la nature d’hier à aujourd’hui* (Québec, Les Éditions GID, 2006).

In sum, *Roots of Ecology* is like a history of ecological science or a history of ecological ideas, and therefore ranks among many other history books at the intersection of these two common genres which are history of science and history of ideas. Not a coffee table book, *Roots of Ecology* nevertheless comprises some small illustrations. Among many positive points, I especially appreciated the fact that the author stopped his retelling of the history of ecology with Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) and his immediate followers such as Carl Semper and Victor Hensen (p. 199), thus concentrating on the lesser-known periods, which I would label as “the ecology before ecology” as we know it, from more than one century ago. An experienced author, Professor Egerton writes elegantly and eruditely, in a straightforward style. Even undergraduates and non-academics will be able to follow and appreciate his rich book which conveys a variety of disciplines including natural history, limnology, zoology, botany, marine biology and, as we coin it nowadays, environmental history (see p. xi). I was surprised not to see any concluding remarks at the end, but I would suspect Professor Egerton to have in mind some kind of a follow-up to this book; this eventual second tome would only be *natural*.

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