

Book Review – Understanding Nature: Ecology for a New Generation

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Economics students must read this book because they do not know that “the economy is completely dependent on ecology”. To put it differently, it is high time they knew that learning economics is incomplete without learning ecology.

This is a typical non-mainstream viewpoint. It is owed, for example, to Satish Kumar, a most dedicated peace-pilgrim, life-long environmental activist and former Jain monk, influenced by Buddha, Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Schumacher the contrarian economist. He has made the case for replacing the words “liberté, égalité, fraternité” or “life, liberty, happiness” by the words “soil, soul, society”. The former words represent the egocentric approach that has “led to the current state of the world - misuse of natural resources, human relationships breaking down, wars and the much other violences”. The latter words represent what is imperative for humanity’s salvation—the ecocentric approach wherein “soil represents nature in its entirety - land, water, air, animals (including humans as he says we should not separate ourselves from nature) and the endless interactions of all. Soul represents each individual and their contentment with themselves, an inner peace. Society represents how these individuals interact with each

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other as a collective (neighbourhood, town, state, country, continent, [and] world) and how they value and appreciate nature.”

Economics curriculum must be integral to an ecological worldview, according to Satish Kumar: “the economy is a subsidiary of ecology. Without ecology there is no economy. Yet around the world, economy is taught as if there is no connection between economy and ecology. Nature, which is another name for ecology, is considered just a resource for the economy which in effect means a resource for the maximisation of profit through ever increasing production and consumption. Similarly, people are reduced to a resource for the economy. Endless production, consumption and the pursuit of profit, in the name of economic growth, progress and development have become the most cherished goals of the modern economy. According to an ecological worldview, if production and consumption, money and economic growth damage nature and exploit people then such economic activities must be stopped or pursued with restraint and within natural limits. In the economy of nature there is no waste. Whatever we take from nature must go back to nature. What cannot be absorbed by nature should not be produced. An industrial economy is a linear economy. We take from nature, use it and then throw it with the consequence that it ends up in landfills, in rivers and oceans and in the atmosphere. We need to replace this linear economy with a cyclical economy. All goods and products must be recycled and returned to nature, without waste. In the economy of nature there is no pollution either...whatever we make or use should be beautiful. Beauty is food for the soul. Our senses and spirits are nourished by beauty. Beauty ignites creativity and inspires the imagination...the beautiful should also be useful...what is beautiful and useful should also be durable. This BUD formula — beautiful, useful and durable — should be incorporated in the study of economics.”

I have found these wisdom-words of Satish Kumar as the best way of inviting the reader to open this book and study its wonderful knowledge unknown to economics students as well as their teachers.

Apart from the exciting and soothing Introduction and Epilogue chapters respectively, there are 31 well-crafted hard-scientific chapters in the book, which is a unique ecological textbook in that it has a historic framework. The author is a greatest professor of biology and environmental science in the world. Each chapter is followed by many thinking

questions which test the reader's internalisation of the subject matter. The book is invaluable for students doing the compulsory course of environmental studies like in Delhi University in particular and in general to anybody seeking to become an informed citizen.

The book takes us through discussions on definitions of ecology, natural history; biomes, life forms and ecoregions; individual species; evolution; microevolution; autobiography of the Earth; statistics; basics and profound questions of population ecology; basics and theory of community ecology; predation; succession; ecosystem ecology basics; energy; matter; ecosystem regulation; landscape ecology; wildlife management and habitat ecology; wildlife management for temperate farms and ranches and in temperate forests; conservation biology; restoration ecology; aquatic ecology; biogeography, and wicked problems.

The reader should not lose heart as many sections of the book are difficult to readily grasp. For example, the section on wicked and super wicked problems is one of the most difficult to read. As the author points out, "Wicked problems are without precedent, difficult even to formulate, with consequences difficult to imagine and considerable uncertainty and ambiguity." Climate change is super wicked as it has "the additional characteristics of time running out, no central authority, and the people trying to solve the problem are also causing it. Climate change is particularly complex because its effects are varied. It can increase or decrease rainfall and crop yields. It can affect human health positively or negatively. It can cause changes to forests and other ecosystems and impact our energy supply. Access to energy and disruptions caused by human migration have been at the heart of all the world's wars for the last 20 years...for a wicked problem, we cannot wait for outside entities to take leadership in finding solutions. Individuals working creatively and adroitly with other community members can find ways to adapt within the circumstances of an uncertain and changing situation."

Thus, putting oneself in a hopeful and positive frame of mind is not easy in reading this book. The point is that problem-solving solutions "require that many people adjust their mindsets and behaviour. Power structures and economic systems may need change. Stakeholders may have radically different views. The problems may change over time. Every problem may interact with other problems. Solutions may be contradictory.

Arguments from the participants may be illogical, replaced by value-based thinking. The problem may not be understood or named until after the formulation of solutions.”

However, like Satish Kumar, the author—Louise Weber—helps readers “build a personal relationship with the Earth, under the premise that those who love nature will walk more softly and work to heal Her. For students who intend to raise children, own property, travel to distant places, take visits to wilderness areas, or be leaders when environmental problems arise, this book can lead to a deeper relationship with the Earth. Whether the readers are health pre-professionals who may eventually prescribe outdoor time for patients or those seeking a nature-related occupation, this book can provide a source of therapy for Earth and self. Joy is essential. Ecopsychologists have observed that in the magnitude of the environmental crisis, people withdraw with a sense of helplessness. The environmental movement has been so successful that it has invented a problem too large to solve, in many people’s mind. The response can be regression to what feels good, creating further epidemics such as shopping, gambling, substance abuse, and screen addictions. The answer is not to scold people for their addictions and lack of concern, as environmentalists sometimes do, but to reconnect humans with nature in an expression of love rather than guilt and fear. The key remedy is to have people engage in reciprocity—healing self by healing Earth.”

This book is capable of effectively offering this remedy by examining the entire ideas specific to ecology at global, regional and local scales. In doing so, the author remains humble and cautious to conclude thus: “Ecology at best has been a body of knowledge, methods, and vocabulary. The body of practices for solving some of humanity’s most serious problems and to restore the more spiritual relationship with the land has been outside its parameters. We need a change. Our fate is not yet sealed on climate change and biodiversity loss, but the window is closing. Immediate action is vital in a way that many in the human population are terrified to embrace. For enlightenment we must realize the ways of thinking about nature that are less mechanistic. It is time to embrace natural history, traditional ecological knowledge, and ecopsychology as portals that are not as scary. It could work.”

The message is irresistible. Unless we understand what ecology is, we cannot understand the meaningful purpose of economics. The author is grateful to Mother Earth for inspiring

her to write this book: “It is still a beautiful world, even though She doesn’t deserve how we, her most intelligent species, have treated Her.”

So, let us learn from her to understand ecology--the connection between soil, soul and society, as Satish Kumar puts it. Let us drop ego in favour of eco and thereby become responsible residents of this planet. Moreover, given that the youth in the world are desperately seeking decent livelihoods along with emotional wellness, a book like this enables them to think about such possibilities within the ontology and metaphysics of losing their rapid “disconnection from nature”.

The book is very expensive, though. I can share its pdf copy as a gift if the reader wants to take it as a soulmate for actualising a regenerative present and future. One thing is crystal clear. The book is surely not airy; it is seriously grounded by meeting with the guidelines set forth in the Four-Dimensional Ecology Education framework outlined by the Ecological Society of America.

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