

# ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

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*Human  
Perspectives on  
Environmental  
Issues*



*Charles L. Harper*

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Human Perspectives  
on Environmental Issues

Charles L. Harper

Creighton University



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# Environment and Society

For

Anne

... my mate and best friend, who continues to make my life beautiful by loving me, blemishes and all.

And for

George Perkins Marsh, Aldo Leopold,  
Rachael Carson, Lois Gibbs, Karen  
Silkwood, Jaime Lerner, Chico Mendez,  
and Wangari Maathai

... in different ways, all pioneers in consciousness and concern about the connections between humans and the natural world. All appear briefly in these pages. Some were stigmatized by powerful people and agencies. Some paid with their lives.

# PREFACE

*Environment and Society: Human Perspectives on Environmental Issues* is intended to provide college students and other interested readers with an introduction to environmental problems and issues. More specifically, it is about the human connections and impacts on the environment—and vice versa. There are many specialized research reports and monographs about particular environmental topics and issues, but I intend this book to work as an integrative vehicle for many different human and environmental issues. It is intended to be usable in a variety of educational settings that are seriously concerned with the connections between human societies, ecosystems, and the geophysical environment. It is appropriate for upper division undergraduates and, with appropriate supplements, for beginning graduate students.

The book was stimulated by the enormous growth of interest in environmental issues and problems in higher education, and it is addressed to the diverse backgrounds of students in classes and programs that attend to environmental and ecological topics. My own classes have a yeasty mix of students from biology, environmental sciences, the social sciences, and sometimes others from education, philosophy, or marketing. I have tried to write a book that is at least understandable to them all. Its social science perspective is mostly sociological, but readers expecting a narrow disciplinary treatise will be disappointed. The book will be intellectually challenging for students, but perceptive readers will note that in some places the text alternates between more advanced and more elementary things. This is deliberate, because social science students know some things that natural science students don't, and vice versa.

The book treats blocks of material that recognizably constitute contemporary environmental concerns, debates, and discourses (about, for instance, resource concerns, population issues, energy and technology issues, economic growth and the environment, the social distribution of environmental problems, different ways of conceptualizing human–environment connections, environmental politics and policy, and the globalization of environmental problems). Like most such books, some chapters can be omitted or rearranged, but the

book is truly developmental and ties the topics of different chapters together. An emerging and pervasive theme is that there are very different intellectual views (paradigms) that different disciplinary scholars bring to the understanding of human-environmental issues. I argue that these different views are not ultimately irreconcilable. But if you don't like attention given to different points of view, this is probably not the book for you.

It is a book about big issues, but it is written in a way to engage individual readers. I had intended to include an epilogue to examine the connections between big issues and personal life, but decided to do so in smaller installments at the end of each chapter instead. So each chapter is followed by some questions and issues (Personal Connections) that attempt to make "macro-micro" links between large-scale issues and the lives of persons. They are not "review questions" that summarize chapter content; rather, they provide opportunities for dialogue between the book, students, and instructors. They may provide points of departure for discussion and argumentation, but they are clearly not everybody's cup of tea, nor will they be useful for every setting in which the book is used.

Every intellectual work is in some sense autobiographical. My early college education was in biology and the physical sciences, but I subsequently pursued graduate studies in sociology, and for years engaged in a professional life that dealt only peripherally with environmental and ecological issues. This book attempts to put together the chronological pieces of my education into a coherent whole, and to do so in a way that addresses some significant intellectual and social concerns of our times.

Intellectual works are not just autobiographical. They involve the insights, encouragement, and constructive criticism of many others. I am indebted to many persons for helping to bring the idea for this book to completion, and I need to thank them. I thank my colleagues and students at Creighton University who contributed substantially to this work, and who also tolerated me while I was working on it. Thanks especially to Tom Mans, who fed me a constant stream of relevant news articles and material for several years, and to James T. Ault, who had the patience to read and critically comment on many parts of the book. I thank Dean Michael Lawler of the Creighton University Graduate College for his important material support, and the Creighton University College of Arts and Sciences for the sabbatical leave program that enabled me to start the project.

I also want to thank a truly amazing network of environmental social scientists at other institutions who supported this effort. They include William Freudenburg (University of Wisconsin), Eugene Rosa (Washington State University), Thomas Dietz (George Mason University), Robert Brulle (George Washington University), J. Allen Williams (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), Andrew Szasz (University of California at Santa Cruz), and Paul Stern (National Research Council). Hearing of my project, they sent me—sometimes unsolicited—an incredible collection of their research papers and reports, many of which inform various parts of the book. I thank reviewers of the manuscript at

different stages of completion who were critical but universally encouraging. They include J. Allen Williams (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), David Iaquinta (Nebraska Wesleyan University), and William J. Hauser (University of Akron). I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Prentice Hall production editors Tony VenGraitis and Joan Stone, and particularly to Sociology Editor Nancy Roberts, who has been patient, supportive, and encouraging.

If you would like to contact me, I would be happy to hear your comments and reactions to the book and its uses. I look forward to improving it.

*Charles L. Harper*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Creighton University  
Omaha, Nebraska 68178  
charper@creighton.edu



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Part I

# INTRODUCTION

