Losing Ground: Environmental Stress and World Food Prospects

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BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Walter E. Hecox*

As an attempt to arouse world attention to the environmental crisis, the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was a short-lived phenomenon akin to the once yearly American Earth Day celebrations of the early 1970's. Any sustained public interest generated by the Stockholm meeting centered primarily on the environmental issues of industrialization and development, rather than on the problems of rural agriculture and underdevelopment.

Unfortunately, initial concern with the ability of underdeveloped countries to achieve a sustainable growth pattern coincided with more imminent problems in the industrial world, such as the cost consequences of the O.P.E.C. embargo, the pervasiveness of synthetic chemicals in the environment, and the increased popularity of terrorism as a form of political coercion.

Erik Eckholm's thin volume, Losing Ground: Environmental Stress and World Food Prospects, could not have come at a more critical time. Eckholm asks us to raise our sights beyond the pressing problems of the developed world to encompass the serious but silent environmental problems of the Third World. His plea, however, is endangered by the din of self-centered concern and the growing abrasiveness in world politics. According to Eckholm, the accelerating erosion of food production capacity is the environmental problem of the greatest magnitude. Eckholm stresses the need

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for worldwide concern and action to protect the land resource which feeds and clothes mankind.

Certainly others have tackled the issue of Third World environmental debasement; for example, *The Careless Technology: Ecology and International Development,*¹ and *Ecological Principles for Economic Development.*² But *Losing Ground* is in a different class, for Eckholm belongs to the select camp of qualified scientists who can communicate their knowledge and concern to an audience of diverse backgrounds and disciplines.

Case studies drawn from the hillside's of Java and Pakistan, the rangelands of Botswana and Afghanistan, the river valleys of the Indus and Euphrates, the rain forests of the Amazon, and many more geographical locations document a consistent ecological ignorance and abuse. Man, in his drive for expanding food supplies, has manipulated natural ecological systems to bend them increasingly towards man's service. The environmental stress created by this exploitation of ecological systems will extract its price over the next two decades. During this same period, the present explosive population growth will make every acre of productive land essential to sustaining, let alone increasing, world food production.

Historically man's indifference to environmental consequences has given the earth a legacy of increasing deforestation with resultant erosion, flooding, and reduced fuel base, catastrophic drought-related destruction of agricultural lands, encroaching deserts, deteriorating mountain environments, rising water tables in irrigated areas with resultant increases in water and soil salinity, diminished productivity of fresh and salt water fisheries, and short-term gains from lush tropical areas at the cost of permanently altered ecosystems.

*Losing Ground* centers around the particular problems raised by the symbiotic relationship between environmental deterioration and Third World poverty. The rapidly eroding food production potential of the Third World is critical because of the inability of some countries to earn sufficient foreign exchange for supplemental food and fuel purchases. The population explosion in these Third World countries pushes more people onto marginal lands where the natural ground cover is denuded for a few years of cultivable acreage. Simul-

taneously, traditional agricultural lands are called upon to produce greater yields. This encourages reliance on technology to increase productivity. Grinding poverty prevents these countries from fending off the predictable consequences of erosion, including not only reduced productive acreage but also clogged waterways from runoff silt. Accentuated desertification, occurring as humans and animals remove vital vegetative cover, and salinity and waterclogging resulting from inadequately drained irrigation systems, pose problems which poor countries are incapable of solving.

As a result, the noose of poverty is tightened, with a country’s environment and ecological balance endangered for the sake of another decade or two of survival. As Eckholm concludes:

What appears most likely, if current patterns prevail, is chronic depression conditions for the share of humankind, perhaps a fourth, that might be termed economically and politically marginal. Marginal people on marginal lands will slowly sink into the slough of hopeless poverty. Some will continue to wrest from the earth what fruits they can, others will turn up in the dead-end urban slums of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Whether the deterioration of their prospects will be a quiet one is quite another question.3

Losing Ground presents no persuasive arguments for expecting a reversal of the “ecological roots of impoverishment,”4 although it enumerates steps which should be taken to relieve this pressure. Primarily, a drastic curtailment and eventual halt to population growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America is necessary. Also, there must be development and dissemination of low cost energy sources for the majority of humans now burning crop residues, dung, or natural ground cover for cooking and heating purposes. Reforestation and soil conservation programs must be introduced on a massive scale, matched by innovative “food for work” programs which can reduce pressures on marginal lands until they recover and can sustain productive activities. Finally, developing countries must incorporate an ecological perspective into future policy formulations.

Eckholm optimistically states that the need for action does not depend on further scientific verification of environmental degradation; “only an appreciation of the price humans will pay for inac-

4 Id. at 185.
tion, should be necessary to justify initiating emergency salvage operations." But even if world concern could be generated concerning these problems, Losing Ground does not convince one that the necessary steps will be taken. Aside from man's humanitarian instincts, Eckholm's proposals depend on a prospect of worldwide unrest as the impetus for corrective action. This is a weak base from which to expect the kind of massive, comprehensive, sustained efforts he prescribes. Despite this weakness, Eckholm's work will have succeeded to some extent if it merely kindles interest in solving these problems in those who have the luxury of being able to contemplate them.


Something happened in Southern California in the early 1940's. In the first year of that decade . . . the area experienced a brownish, hazy, irritating, and altogether mysterious new kind of air pollution that was more persistent than, and quite different from, the isolated instances of irksome smoke that had troubled major urban centers from at least the mid-1800's. The new problem was, of course, smog.

So begins Pollution & Policy, a book written by James E. Krier, Professor of Law at UCLA Law School2 and Edmund Ursin, Associate Professor of Law at the University of San Diego Law School. Pollution & Policy examines the events leading to the discovery of the smog problem in California, the policies which evolved to control the smog, and the actions which have been, and may be undertaken to curtail motor vehicle pollution, a major cause of the smog problem. The increasing role of the federal government in air pollution control is also discussed throughout the book.

Pollution & Policy is a well-written, easy to read, and often amus-

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1 J. KRIER AND E. URSin, POLLUTION & POLICY: A CASE ESSAY ON CALIFORNIA AND FEDERAL EXPERIENCE WITH MOTOR VEHICLE AIR POLLUTION, 1940-1975 1 (1977) [hereinafter cited as Pollution & Policy].
2 Professor Krier has authored other environmental books, such as ENVIRONMENTAL LAW POLICY (1971).