

Book reviews

Saving the Tropical Forests

Judith Gradwohl and Russell Greenberg

Earthscan, London, 1988, 207 pp., PB £6.95

By way of gross simplification, there is a world view that holds that small and traditional developments are very wonderful and that we shall all live happily ever after, environmentally speaking, if we adhere to this philosophy. The opposing, simplified world view is that all things large and modern are very wonderful because they will make us rich and comfortable. The problem with *Saving the Tropical Forests* is that it could all too easily be dismissed as an example of the former philosophy by land-use decision-makers, who might then be immune to its valuable points, even if those same planners would not think of themselves as necessarily being advocates of the 'big and modern' approach.

In a lucid foreword, Michael Robinson explains that the book is intended to promote methods by which forests can be preserved in ways that are consistent with the continuing economic advance of tropical peoples. Local methods and species are to be emphasized where possible. So far, so good, but Gradwohl and Greenberg do succeed in pulling together a summary of (mainly Latin American) case studies, but I was left with the feeling that I was reading an uncritical desk review of inputs from a diverse collection of informants.

Arguments are put forward that are, in places, rather superficial. A chapter on sustainable agriculture, for example, scathingly dismisses large-scale agriculture as generally destructive and usually concentrating wealth in the hands of a minority. Even if this is true, then surely there is all the more reason to consider schemes such as those in Kenya (tea) and Malaysia (mainly oil palm, rubber and cocoa) that endeavour to spread wealth and

provide land for the landless on a large-scale. The experience of Malaysia at least suggests that if you can derive sustainable economic success and political stability from large-scale plantation agriculture, you might be in a better position to designate and manage areas of permanent forest in a tropical country. A book that seeks to review ways in which tropical forests can be conserved worldwide should not read as if this option does not exist.

The impression of superficiality continues in a chapter on natural forest management, in which the reader is cheerfully informed that 'it appears that the great dipterocarp forests of the Old World tropics, primarily found in Malaysia and Indonesia, can be managed fairly easily'. No doubt the forestry authorities of these two countries would like to know why it is that biological complexities, vast distances, inaccessibility, economic pressures, diverse human interests, etc., etc. make it all seem so difficult! To quote another example, this chapter refers, generally approvingly, to silvicultural techniques that involve the use of poisons without ever mentioning that these same poisons might have adverse environmental impacts (which they certainly do).

I would think that it would be difficult for anybody who is professionally involved in forest management in the tropics not to be irritated by this sort of thing, which brings me back to my original concern: will the people who make the decisions that will decide the future of tropical forests use this book? Directly, I think not. They could, however, be usefully influenced by it if the many interesting ideas that derive from the case studies reach them indirectly via workers in NGOs and universities who might read the book, get new perspectives and follow up through more detailed literature. To that extent,

the book is potentially useful; and in a similar vein, it could be a good teaching aid by getting students to grapple with new ideas and follow up references.

Michael Kavanagh, Director of Conservation, WWF Malaysia.

Conservation and Biology of Desert Antelopes

Edited by Alexandra Dixon and David Jones

Christopher Helm, Bromley, 1988, 238 pp., HB £25.00

The 22 chapters of this book consist of the papers and posters presented at the Symposium to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the start of Operation Oryx. Nine of the chapters are specifically devoted to the Arabian oryx *Oryx leucoryx*, three to the scimitar-horned oryx *O. dammah*, one to the Kalahari gemsbok *Oryx gazella*, and three to the Hippotraginae in general. Most of the remainder deal with gazelles, which were the subject of several posters. There is one chapter summarizing discussion points from the Symposium, and another one that examines the attitudes to wildlife, particularly large mammals, in Arabia.

The listing above fails to give an idea of the flavour of the volume as a whole. There is no attempt by the editors to obtain consistency of treatment or of presentation of material, and this has resulted in a pot-pourri of considerable charm. Thus the volume begins with three chapters of narrative, which record the beginnings and the conduct of Operation Oryx, a compelling tale of remarkable perseverance against considerable odds. Then there is a solid core of well-referenced scientific papers to which all those concerned with the biology, social behaviour, reproduction, captive breeding, and management of large desert mammals will wish to refer. The discussion section, as is commonly the case, comes across as

Oryx Vol 23 No 1, January 1989