Publications

Wildlife Conservation in China: Preserving the Habitat of China's Wild West by Richard B. Harris (2007), 384 pp., M.E. Sharpe, New York, USA. ISBN 9780765620576 (hbk), USD 74.95.

In 2008 world attention was on China during the Olympics and, thanks to the excellent BBC series *Wild China*, people's attention was also on the country's wildlife. For those that work in conservation the importance of China, in terms of the species it supports and the challenges it presents, have been known since the late 1980s when the country opened up to non-Chinese scientists. The recent economic growth of China, with its associated increased demand for natural resources and wildlife-derived products, means that the global conservation challenge that China represents has never been bigger. It is opportune then that Richard Harris has written an excellent book that provides a good introduction to wildlife conservation in China, drawing on his 20 years' experience of working in the country.

Although the book does an excellent job of setting the conservation scene in China it is really, as the subtitle suggests, a book about western China. The book is well written in an easy to read style and is illustrated with some nice photos. I personally would have preferred to have them scattered through the text rather than in a single block in the middle of the book but this doesn't affect the book's readability or appeal.

The book starts off by setting the biological, geographical and political landscape of the region and this should be essential reading for anyone (Chinese and non-Chinese alike) starting a career in conservation or undertaking wildlife research in the country. Of particular interest for me (as a bunny-hugging Westerner) is the chapter on The Chinese Perceptions of Wildlife. An understanding of the linguistic, cultural and religious reasons for the nation's perception of wildlife and how it can be utilized is fundamental for anyone wishing to work within the field of conservation and influence the way it is undertaken. The range of information contained within this chapter alone is extensive and should be essential reading. I very much enjoyed the section of the book that provides the species stories, and the cameos of selected species is an interesting read. The book has a very interesting chapter on the controversial subject of trophy hunting and concludes with a look into the crystal ball to assess the future for wildlife in western China.

In addition to the text, which I guess I have made clear is an interesting read, there are just over 100 pages of supporting information in the form of an appendix, notes on each chapter, and about 50 pages of references, a valuable resource in itself. This does make one wonder, however, whether it is a bit over the top for 30% of a 341-page book to be made up of such information.

All in all this is a very good book that I enjoyed reading and learning from. I have heard rumours that a Chinese version is under preparation and if true I hope that it is widely read within China.

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The Dominant Animal: Human Evolution and the Environment Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich (2008), 426 pp., Island Press/Shearwater Books, Washington, DC, USA. ISBN 9781597260961 (hbk), USD 23.10/GBP 21.95.

In the latest of a long list of thoughtful books written by Paul and Anne Ehrlich, they have again come out swinging against the behavioural excesses of our species. Following a line of argument Paul Ehrlich launched back in 1968 with *The Population Bomb* and quickly followed by *Population, Resources, Environment* in 1970, they have substantially broadened their critique of modern society and brought it up to date. Heaven knows, they have plenty to complain about, and they do an excellent job of mobilizing the case for the prosecution.

They are convinced that science 'can help us better understand the predicament we have created for ourselves and thereby avoid its worst consequences'. Yet, despite substantial increases in science since the late 1960s (computers, DNA, remote sensing, proliferation of high-quality field research, and so forth), the evidence they cite in this book gives scant reassurance on this point, perhaps because avoiding the worst consequences of our behaviour has much to do with politics and economics, and relatively little to do with science. Science may well provide convincing evidence about the dangers of 'fishing down the food chain' but this has done remarkably little to change the political economy of fisheries.

They consider the lack of knowledge about our relationship with the natural world to be a 'major contributing factor' to the deepening predicament of our species, despite dozens of scientific journals and hundreds of outstanding books on the subject. They end their prologue on an optimistic note: 'By knowing our evolutionary past and understanding the forces that have shaped our present, we will be better positioned to fashion a more sustainable future'.

Yet the remainder of the book essentially refutes this hypothesis, drawing especially on examples in the USA. Their outstanding chapters addressing evolutionary elements of many aspects of society demonstrate that the knowledge of evolution among the scientific community, at least in the USA, is substantial. Yet the country is also a centre of debate over the non-scientific idea of 'intelligent design', a social challenge to Darwinian evolution.

The Ehrlichs help address this seeming paradox by a stimulating discussion of religion, pointing out that even scientists need to accept some things on faith, such as that the physical laws that operated a million years ago still operate and will operate into the future indefinitely. They also suggest that religion persists at least partly because of the 'inability of science to provide a clear basis for ethics'. They call for paying careful attention to the difficulties of perceiving deleterious gradual change and how the various belief systems in the world can help cultures evolve to meet environmental challenges. But they perhaps could also have highlighted what Stephen J. Gould called 'punctuated equilibrium', where the gradual changes are interrupted by extreme events—in social terms, these are often considered revolutions.

The Ehrlichs have brought together a wide range of research, containing some surprising findings. One example is the sudden substantial decline in the crime rate in the USA, appearing around 1990. The Ehrlichs attribute this to the legalization of abortion in the 1970s and the resulting (hypothesized) fewer unwanted children, who often grow up to be socially handicapped adults.

They also refer back to the concern they helped raise about rapid population growth in the 1960s, based on doubts about the capacity to feed an expanding population. But the result has been a growth in food