

INTRODUCTION

Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures explores the beliefs and practices of cultures around the world. Ideas about land and nature are central to every culture. There are no universals regarding what it means to live in your environment. Environmental knowledge and accompanying practices in all societies are closely associated with other widely held values about how people understand the world and their place in it. Even though these values change with new knowledge and new technologies, we can still speak with confidence about culturally specific systems. A society's views on nature and the environment arise from and reflect its cultural beliefs and customs. At the same time, for centuries if not millennia there have been exchanges and cross-fertilization among environmental systems around the world.

All people everywhere transform nature. This is the case with huge industrial societies and with small hunting-gathering ones. The scales may be different, but people need to make use of the land and water to survive. Hunter-gatherers burned the forest to make it easier to find game and to encourage certain species. Some Native American cultures killed more buffalo than they could possibly eat or use. Early agricultural societies dammed rivers and irrigated. These practices were not necessarily harmful to the land – much of the latest evidence shows that controlled burning in many societies, such as in Aboriginal Australia, encouraged biodiversity and prevented large uncontrolled burns by keeping the understory low and limiting the fuel available to burn. At the same time, it is clear that practices like these are what we now call ecologically sound, even though the cultures using them did not always articulate the practices in anything like philosophical terms.

Why should modern Westerners be interested in the environmental practices and beliefs of other cultures? Do they offer something that might reverse some of the environmental degradation of the past 100 years, or can we find something in their beliefs that might make the planet more sustainable now? This is probably not always the case, and yet we are drawn to what we see as a gentler way of dealing with the environment. There are a few caveats and problems with this. First, after years of disparaging the scientific and environmental ideas of non-Western cultures, the pendulum is swinging the other way, and there is often now a tendency to over-romanticize and imagine a golden age of environmental harmony. This presents a rather simplistic notion of other cultures as monolithic and untainted. We have tried in this book to emphasize analysis over advocacy, although both do appear.

A potential danger is that by romanticizing other non-industrial cultures, we

sometimes prevent them from reaping some of the benefits of modernization. Arne Kalland talks about this in his chapter on Environmentalism and Images of the Other. To many people, whaling is acceptable only if it is for subsistence purposes, but he argues that to make it illegal for them to sell parts of their catch not only deprives them of potential benefits of the market but also denies them their rights of self-determination. Also, if we persist in using the romantic images of other cultures, we run the risk of belittling them, making it clear that they are so different from us that they are not welcome to share in our riches.

Another distinction readers must make is between the modern and the historical. When some writers discuss native perspectives of nature, there is a tendency to lump people together from across the recorded historical period. As Annie Booth says in her article on Native Americans, "The problems with this approach should be obvious: none of us lives like our ancestors did 200 years ago." We face different challenges from those of our ancestors, and many of those challenges affect how we relate to the land. We must not conflate what is known about the beliefs and behaviors of historical cultures and today's people. "While they inherit their past, they must live in the present."

Another theme that runs through this book is the interconnection between religion and nature. These are considered very separate spheres in the West, at least in recent times. *Nature Across Cultures* contains chapters on Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, as well as Mary Evelyn Tucker's essay on Worldviews and Ecology, but in fact what Westerners call religion is present in all the cultures discussed in this volume. Non-Western cultures, and not just tribal cultures, do not necessarily see people and nature as separate entities; they know that we are affected by our surroundings and we affect them. No great intellectual leap is needed to realize that where we are affects who we are.

Buddhism gets a lot of coverage in *Nature Across Cultures*. Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel discuss Buddhist views of nature and the environment, but Buddhism plays an important part in Tucker's article on Japan, in Kalland's Environmentalism and Images of the Other, in Chattopadhyaya's chapter on India, and in Darlington's on Thailand. In some of these, the authors argue that following Buddhist precepts can effect serious environmental change for the good, while Darlington shows how the Thai government used Buddhism and Buddhist monks to promote both development and conservation at different times. Kalland points out that we have to be careful when we try to induce ecological practices from philosophical traditions. That is really at the root of what we hope to do in this book: we present many different viewpoints and ideas from many societies, but we do not think that they necessarily offer a solution to the world's current environmental practices. Certainly if we followed the precepts of the world's religions, we ought to live in peace. But it is clear we are far from that. Similarly, no one can say that the historical Buddha (Siddhattha Gotama [or Siddhartha Gautama in Sanskrit], who lived on the South Asian subcontinent about 2500 years ago), for example, was an ecologist, but perhaps some of his teachings can be used today to promote a healthy environmental ethic.

Nature Across Cultures is loosely divided into three sections. The first six chapters deal generally with notions of nature and environment, although all use specific examples from many societies. Arne Kalland's introductory essay, "Environmentalism and Images of the Other", sets the stage for the rest of the volume, as he describes the concepts of both the Noble Savage and the Noble Oriental and how those images have shaped our views of and dealings with the rest of the world. Michael Dove *et al.*, in "The Global Mobilization of Environmental Concepts: Re-Thinking the Western/Non-Western Divide", use case studies from Amazonia, Borneo, Nepal, and the Northern United States, among others, to illustrate how systems of environmental knowledge and practice in even the most marginal communities are influenced by ideas from other parts of the globe. Roy Ellen's paper examines the extent to which knowledge of biological entities and processes varies according to different life experiences and cultural traditions. He shows how knowledge is culturally embedded and characterizes the relationship between biological science, folk knowledge, and scholarly knowledge. Roy C. Dudgeon and Fikret Berkes discuss Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, showing how an explicitly ecological approach to the study of traditional knowledge suggests that there is much more to be learned from traditional peoples than simply techniques for development. Richard Stoffle, Rebecca Toupal, and Nieves Zedeño consider ways in which human-nature relationships change through time and contribute to the development of local knowledge, environmental values, place attachments, and cultural landscapes. Mary Evelyn Tucker explores the connections between worldviews and ecology, using examples from many religions to explain attitudes and ethics towards nature.

The central core of the book explores nature and the environment in eleven different places, from Native America to Aboriginal Australia. Susan M. Darlington, in "The Spirit(s) of Conservation in Buddhist Thailand", shows how the Thai government was able to use Buddhism both to promote development and later to promote conservation, when the deleterious effects of development began to emerge. She also illustrates the mix of spirit belief and Buddhism, a hybrid form of religious belief common to many cultures. D.P. Chattopadhyaya talks about the long Indian tradition of naturalism in India. He draws a distinction between naturalism in terms of materialism, within the framework of naturalism without God, and as a complement to spiritualism. John A. Tucker provides an exploration of the diversity in understandings, positive and negative, of nature and the environment in works of Japanese literature, religion, philosophy, and political and legal thought, from earliest time to the present. Graham Parkes does much the same with Fengshui, the Chinese art of siting graves and houses and creating a peaceful space – a set of sensible recommendations grounded in sensitivity to the natural environment. John Kesby takes on sub-Saharan Africa in his essay, condensing the views of a vast continent. J.L. Kohen discusses Australian Aboriginal people, focusing especially on uses of fire and the negative results of banning controlled burns. In his overview of the vast region of Oceania, Edvard Hviding turns our attention to how the people of coral atolls and volcanic islands view, know,

use and manage their tropical environments. Hviding shows how Pacific islanders' worldviews emphasize connections of ecological character, between land and sea, and of social and cultural character.

There are four articles on the American part of the non-Western world. William Balée's entry on "Native Views of the Environment in Amazonia" explores how local peoples from across a cultural and linguistic spectrum recognize, name, classify, and manipulate the biotic and environmental diversity of the Amazon region. David Browman looks at Andean folklore regarding the weather and planting, and shows how modern scientific techniques validate the folk beliefs. He focuses particularly on the Lake Titicaca basin, and the use of stars, winds, and water colors and how they accurately predict future climatic events. Ellen Bielawski, in "'Nature Doesn't Come as Clean as We Can Think It': Dene, Inuit, Scientists, Nature and Environment in the Canadian North", shows how native knowledge differs from western science and how research based on combining indigenous knowledge and science might yield rich results. Annie L. Booth talks about Native North America south of the area covered by Bielawski, separating myth from reality and presenting a clear picture of native relations to the land.

The final section of *Nature Across Cultures* is devoted to the study of different religions and how they view nature. Of course, religious beliefs are not ecological ones, but there are connections between the two that may be used to encourage sensible, sustainable policies. Leslie Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel provide a systematic survey of the relationships between Buddhism and nature through their discussion of the life and teachings of the Buddha, the monastic and lay communities, Buddhism in the West, problems and limitations, and the future. John Berthrong traces the historical development of Confucian theories of nature by showing how various authoritative texts and individuals addressed the question of understanding how human beings live in the context of the cosmos. He treats Confucian theories of nature as part of a living, changing discourse of natural philosophy that stretches from the time of Master Kong (Confucius) to modern Confucian intellectuals today. James Miller examines classic Daoist attitudes towards nature, focusing on the sky, the earth and the body as the three important fields in which Daoism operates. Harold Coward discusses how Hindu principles and practices keep humans and their environment in harmony. S. Parvez Manzoor shows how Islam's vision of nature and culture emanates from its belief in the divine transcendence. The article describes the Islamic perception of nature as a symbolic phenomenon rather than an autonomous and self-subsistent reality. Finally, Jeanne Kay Guelke addresses the themes of water resources, crop production, climate, range management, and heritage resource preservation in both biblical and modern Israel.

Let us go back to the notion that other societies had and have a better way to live with nature. I can find no better way of ending these introductory remarks than to quote Michael Dove *et al.* As they say in their chapter,

The purported divide between Western environmental science and non-Western systems of environmental knowledge, although continually represented as an important boundary marker

heavy with symbolic meaning, is problematic. The two systems are historically inter-mingled. And there is also inter-mingling within each system. Neither is monolithic; both encompass multiple, diverse, and sometimes conflicting paradigms. The division between East and West or South and North, when discussing environmental knowledge and practice, is thus an essentialist fallacy. *The linkages are more compelling than the divide.* The boundary between East and West is more meaningful as a metaphor than as a geographic fact.

Helaine Selin
Amherst, Massachusetts, U.S.A.
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