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Book Review: Economics and Environmental Change: The Challenges We Face by Clement Tisdell

Michael L. Hirsch

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Tisdell, Clement A. *Economics and Environmental Change: The Challenges We Face*. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2017. xii + 235 pages. Hardcover, \$125.00.

In the Preface to *Economics and Environmental Change: The Challenges We Face*, Clement Tisdell tells us he plans to provide the reader with a “holistic approach” of the “environmental challenges we now face” (p. x). His holistic approach includes an understanding of history, biophysical, and social factors. All of this woven together provides a focus on “the relationship between economics and environmental change” (p. x).

Tisdell begins the text with a history of our species that reaches back 200,000 years and moves up to modern times. This history includes a discussion of frameworks that break human development into different economic epochs and a discussion of how religion frames human engagement with the environment, how economists monetize natural resources and environmental conditions, and how humans respond to environmental change (e.g., through migration).

Tisdell moves to a discussion of sustainability in general and what economic sustainability entails in particular. Tisdell reviews multiple dimensions of social sustainability including community writ large, social cohesion, and social capital. Of particular interest to me was his discussion of the environmental poverty trap, where near term gains lead to long term impoverishment and environmental destruction. This is smartly illustrated with his discussion of the Australian Aborigines.

How environmental change can be valued is the next major issue addressed. This discussion weighs deontological ethical concerns (i.e., “a search for moral imperatives or obligations that should apply to all human beings” p. 53) and individual preferences. It also considers the ways in which economic operations generate and sustain inequality. All of these factors influence if or how conservation efforts are undertaken and/or succeed.

A key to Tisdell’s analysis is the concept social embedding which stresses the importance of context in influencing the behaviors of individuals, groups, and societies. Social embedding includes structural, cultural, and economic dimensions. Similar to the approach of sociologists such as Durkheim (who examine society as an organism within which humans are subsumed), the concept social embedding suggests we exist within “superorganisms” (p. 85) or experience life within “ultrasocial” (p. 89) societies that delimit our ability to drive social change or even have the knowledge to make such attempts.

But knowledge is power, and working to incorporate bio-social consequences of environmental degradation into economic formulas and policy debates, is possible. The latter part of the text explores how this might be done. Tisdell looks to how private and public entities and NGOs could use economics to improve investments in time and money to optimize environmental outcomes. Even well-meaning environmental NGO’s err in their input-output decision making process. Critical consideration of this process is especially important if we are to address our largest concern of all, climate change and its effects on land and sea.

As a person who teaches Environmental Sociology and sits on my university’s Green Council, I was excited to read a book focused on the economic dimensions of our environmental crisis. If I am to be a good steward of the environment, I must have a better mastery of the economics of environmental change. I was not disappointed. *Economics and Environmental Change: The Challenges We Face* proved to be a good introduction to the relationship between economics and the environment. I come away impressed with the author, more informed in the field, and anxious to have this book added to our library’s permanent collection.

As is true of most texts, this book has a few weaknesses. Key terms (e.g., social embedding, Hedonic pricing, ultrasociality, consumer's sovereignty) remained undefined. An extraordinary number of the examples used to illustrate concepts/scenarios are drawn from a narrow geographic region (i.e., Australia), and all too often the research being cited in the book is that of Tisdell or Tisdell and his coauthors. Still, these limitations are minor given the breadth and depth of the work.

The work is well illustrated and very informative. It would be an appropriate text for upper division and graduate courses considering economics, public policy, and the environment. It would be a welcome addition to the library of scholars working in this field and would be an appropriate acquisition for most college and university libraries.

Michael L. Hirsch
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences
Huston-Tillotson University
Austin, Texas