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BOOK REVIEWS

Interpreting Environmental Issues

By

CLAY SCHOENFELD, *Editor*

Madison, Wisconsin

Dembar Educational Research Services, Inc. 1973

pp. 100, price unknown

Under the title of *Interpreting Environmental Issues*, Clay Schoenfeld has gathered a formidable array of essays. They span a range from biography to bibliography; from an analysis of the development of *Field and Stream* to an analysis of the Marxist view of conservation. There should be something for every taste in this melange of articles. The connecting thread is simply that each of the 67 essays contain some facet of the business of making citizens aware of environmental matters.

The enterprise is part of a new discipline labelled "Conservation Communications." Whether this is, in fact, a new social science or whether it is merely a formalization of the old interface between natural resource know-how and being able to get-out-and-talk-to-folks is unimportant. What is important is that both conservation and communications are matters of great interest of the American people at the present time.

The title of this collection leads one to hope that here, at last, is a distillation of the important findings, techniques and methods which are useful in presenting some of these exciting problem issues. Tantalizingly, the title suggests new insights or perhaps a concise general overview. The collection, however, does not live up to its title. A better title would have been "Readings in . . .," for that is exactly what this publication is—a collection of articles as printed in the 1969-1972 issues of the *Journal of Environmental Education*. The introduction is a re-write of an article in the October 1972 issue of *American Forests*. Thus, the articles included in the collection range from addresses delivered to some conservation-minded group to abstracts of theses. The styles vary from conservational to highly turgid and academic.

The articles are, in fact, often interesting, but they are quite separate from each other and they do not combine to produce any form of unified thrust. Each has its own introduction, body and

summary. Each is exhortative rather than practical. In the end, the reader is fully convinced that it is indeed imperative to communicate about natural resource topics—but he is little wiser than before about how to initiate such a project.

The book is apparently not aimed at the resource professional, nor at the classroom teacher who may wish to join the dialogue about conservation. It is evidently not aimed at the conservation journalist/writer editor. Far from providing exemplary journalism, the book abounds with errors which can result only from a lack of care. The type is small and hard to read. There are no illustrations nor is there an index.

The editors have performed a most difficult task, separating the essays into five groups of 10-17 and offering them together as sections. A section is made up of a number of essays preceded by an umbrella statement in which each essay rates at least one or two introductory sentences. That introductory statement is, in fact, the major connecting link among the pieces which seem forced together and arbitrarily assigned to a section.

Section One is an assemblage of ten articles somewhat loosely related to the caption "The Environmental Communications Ecosystem: An Overview of the Field." Unintentionally, the articles may reflect the relative infancy of this field, for they abound with introspection, definition, categorization, excessive statement of problems and a wearying array of questions all too familiar to any worker in the field. One grows weary, too, of such platitudes as "The natural environment embraces us all" and the banquet charges of "We must . . ." and "The challenge is clear . . ."

Section Two is entitled "Outlines of the Ecological Message: Changing Content and Clientele." In offering their suggestions for the basic issues of environmental education, the authors cover topics ranging from ghettos to basic values, population growth, evolution and even litter. "Key to the Environmental Crisis" is a noteworthy synopsis of the prevailing attitudes which have led society to its present morass of environmental problems. Hidden away in a two-page item by John Gustafson are some good techniques which may lead us out.

For the interpretive naturalist, the section on "Environmental Media and Methods in Perspective: Roots and Trends" offers results of the scant research completed in this area. Some topics of value here include: "Effectiveness and Preference for Selected Interpretive Media"; "A Study of Anti-Litter Messages"; "Interpreting the Prairie Potholes"; "Who Can Read Our Writing?"; and two articles on the

ecological content of outdoor magazines. Historical insights are provided through an examination of changing concepts in American nature writing and science writing, as well as in brief sketches of Freeman Tilden, Ernest Swift and writer Robert Cahn.

Section Four constitutes more categorization, defining and re-defining under the heading "The Role of Interpretation in Policy Formation: Essays and Investigations." Again, some historical light is shed in an article on "How Stephen Mather Sold the Park Service Idea." Research results related to the section heading are also presented. The remaining articles may be classified as (1) case studies on public participation in, and influence on, policy formation, (2) how institutions are, or should be, dealing with public participation in policy decisions, and (3) analyses and theorization regarding the why and how of public participation in policy formation.

The "meatiest" section of the book is the last group of articles entitled "Conservation Communications Frontiers: Reports of Behavioral Research." In introducing the section, co-editor Stamm goes beyond summarizing each contribution and adds his very capable commentary on the shortcomings and blind spots of the research efforts. In his own words, he also attempts to "sort out the more promising efforts, to see where they might lead" in a field yet having "no definitive body of theory and concepts" and "no distinguishing research methodology that sets behavioral studies of environmental communication apart from the several behavioral science disciplines." The reports in this commendable section range from "Testing and Teaching Waterfowl Identification" to more on "Environmental and Public Opinion."

Many oversights and typographical errors may have been overlooked because of the format of the book. Its format, like that of the *Journal* is cramped and badly in need of magnification. Undoubtedly, it is cost-effective to photo-offset directly from the old plates, but the "communication value" of the material has been notably decreased by it.

Among the cardinal rules taught in courses aimed at effective communication are (1) determine the target audience or public at which a book or article is directed, then aim for that "public," and (2) keep the messages as clear and direct as possible. This volume violates both rules. At whom, one wonders, is this potpourri aimed? And is this as clear and attractive as the message can be?

In conclusion, for anyone with a collection of *The Journal of Environmental Education*, this book would be little more than repetition. For others, it may present a somewhat disjointed array of

wide-ranging subjects grouped under headings as naturally as possible. The smooth flow of a single author writing on the interpretation of environmental issues is not to be found in this book, but the content of at least some of the articles provides valuable material in this important subject.

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