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Humanize Ecology!

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Humanize Ecology!

Abstract
Few would dispute the assertion that research into the problems of arid lands should have a firm ecological base. But "ecological" in practice is given different meanings in different programs. Though derived from the Greek oikos, which meant "dwelling" and extended to mean "environment," it was coined a hundred years ago to denote a new focus of interest in the natural sciences. This usage is understandable, now we recognize that most scientific endeavour has been conducted within an anthropocentric paradigm which militates against attention to human activity as an equal component of ecosystems.

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HUMANIZE ECOLOGY!

Few would dispute the assertion that research into the problems of arid lands should have a firm ecological base. But “ecological” in practice is given different meanings in different programs. Though derived from the Greek oikos, which meant “dwelling” and extended to mean “environment,” it was coined a hundred years ago to denote a new focus of interest in the natural sciences. This usage is understandable, now we recognize that most scientific endeavour has been conducted within an anthropocentric paradigm which militates against attention to human activity as an equal component of ecosystems.

Since the 1950's a more general “ecological” consciousness has arisen and has been given formal international expression in the Stockholm Conference and the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme. But although this movement might have been expected to lead to a more holistic ecology, it is skewed by a sense of mea culpa with regard to the natural environment. Instead of the integration of the ecological sciences, we have witnessed a fragmentation. Rather than become at last truly ecumenical, ecology has been broken down into natural ecology, cultural ecology, human ecology, urban ecology, etc., as each discipline has extended its sights to include a little of the immediate environment of its traditional subject matter. Ecology has become an ideology. Each ecologically-oriented disciplinary specialist claims to be more ecological than the next. The concept of the total system implicit in the concept of ecology is seldom realized.

In practice there are three major groupings of ecologists: natural, human-biological, and socio-cultural. The natural ecologists come from a background of the natural sciences, especially botany and zoology, and the newer applied sciences such as range management. The human ecologists come from human biology and public health, and the socio-cultural from the social sciences. The main problem of integration is between the social sciences and the rest. Attempts at integration seldom go beyond the natural ecologist requesting the ecological anthropologist to work out for him how to make the people behave in the manner that he, the natural ecologist, considers ecologically desirable. This orientation towards people in project areas is not only elitist, but reflects a misplaced faith in natural systems, which are expected to develop their potential best if relieved of the human component that is surely as integral to them as any other. Although prejudice against traditional pastoralism is a common manifestation of this attitude, an integrated ecological approach logically includes treatment of the human population of a project area as both physiological and cultural components of the ecosystem, and in the latter capacity involves them intellectually in the project which concerns them.

The integration of the human component into ecological research designs is a complex problem—perhaps more complex in arid lands than elsewhere. It goes beyond making the natural ecologist accept the input of the social scientist as an equal partner in research, rather than a servant in the business of application. One of the major problems was formulated in general terms in Report #17 of the Man and the Biosphere Programme to the effect that human use systems “are seldom if even congruent with ecosystems. They vary in size and composition from the household or tribe to the nation, state, or multinational corporation. Indeed they are often expressly organized to cut across several natural ecosystems in order to take advantage of the complementarities and contrasts of different ecological zones.” This is particularly true of arid lands where successful cultural adaptation depends on the development of alternative resources as insurance against the unpredictability of precipitation. The interdependence of socio-economic factors in cities and overgrazing of desert rangelands in Iran is an excellent example of this, and was noted in the opening address of the recent Regional Meeting on De-Desertization and Arid Lands Ecology held in Tehran under the joint auspices of the Imperial Government of Iran and the United Nations Environment Programme. It is not sufficient, therefore, to include populations immediately affected by a project. Decisions makers at each hierarchical level must also be involved. Only in this way—by including and involving natural, human and socio-cultural ecologists, project populations, and decision makers at each relevant level outside the project area—can a program for the ecological study and management of arid lands be truly integrated and truly ecological.

—Brian Spooner