

Critical Thinking About Environmental Issues

edited by Jane S. Shaw

PERC - The Center for Free Market Environmentalism

This is a new series of books offering a balanced view of controversial environmental issues. The series has three books (each hardback, 112 pages): *Endangered Species*, by Randy T. Simmons; *Global Warming*, by Jane S. Shaw; and *Pesticides*, by Samantha Beres. Two others, *Forest Fires* and *Energy*, are scheduled for publication in the fall of 2003. The publisher is Greenhaven Press, recognized for its many series of library books on topical issues for students from grades three to twelve.

Evidence that environmental education has gone awry has been accumulating since the early 1990s, when parents began to notice that their children came home from school with strange ideas about the natural world. Students condemned their parents for normal behavior such as driving cars or having a job as a logger. Students worried about cities being flooded by rising seas because of global warming or feared that rain was as acidic as lemon juice. To fill the need for objectivity, Greenhaven Press cooperated with PERC and the Competitive Enterprise Institute to initiate this series.

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As coauthor of *Facts, Not Fear*, a book about environmental myths taught in schools, I should be hardened to examples of environmental distortion. But this one struck me afresh. Following a talk I gave on environmental education, an education major at Lindenwood University directed me to a Web site lesson called “Damaged Planet.” The cover page has a drawing that depicts the earth as the round face of a girl (with clouds for hair). Tears are falling over the face of the girl. “Man has done much to damage the Earth,” says a line on the first page. “How do you think man has damaged the Earth [?] Write your answer on the lines below.”

Adults know that the Earth does not feel pain – but children do not. An Earth that looks like a child weeping is too emotional to be viewed merely as a symbol. Seeing that face,

And there is the perennial lesson that only governments can address environmental problems. Matthew Brouillette, President of the Commonwealth Foundation in Pennsylvania, listened to his son read this paragraph from *Ranger Rick*, a book from the public library: “Let’s start a club that will adopt the trees and protect them,” said one of the girls. ‘Great idea,’ said the boy pulling the wagon. ‘And let’s ask the city government to replace the trees that have died.’”

It should come as no surprise that by the time students reach middle school or high school they are ready to accept the wildest concoctions that textbook writers can dream up, and support heavy regulation to keep these catastrophes from happening. Textbooks offer images of cities flooded by rising seas due to global warming; they state

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what is a child to think of sentences like: “Giant earth moving equipment is used that is larger than many buildings. Very deep grooves are dug in the land”? Or “One of the ways we damage the Earth is through strip mining. It is a special way we use to dig for coal and other minerals. Huge volumes of dirt are scraped off many acres of land.” And: “Men have destroyed much soil. . . . If there were no topsoil almost no life could exist on the land.”

I’ve seen other signs, too, that the gloomy images that Michael Sanera and I exposed years ago in our book are continuing to shape children’s lives. Writing a poignant story about two children neglected by the public school system, University of Texas professor Marvin Olasky observed dryly, “Both children learned about the endangered Brazilian rain forest but neither knew how to read.”

that human beings are destroying 100 species a day; they stir fears that our food is poisoned with the residues from pesticides. All these claims are highly exaggerated, but they are standard fare in schools.

It always bothered us that although we alerted parents to the problems, we were not fixing them. So I’m pleased to offer news about a step forward in favor of good environmental education. Greenhaven Press, a recognized publisher of books for school and public libraries, has issued the first three volumes of a series called “Critical Thinking about Environmental Issues.” Michael and I initiated the series with the support of the Competitive Enterprise Institute and PERC – The Center for Free Market Environmentalism.

These books are directed toward young people – high schoolers and mature middle

school students; they are not textbooks, but reference books, the kind that a student might consult for a term paper. Unlike most environmental books in young-adult library sections, Greenhaven's *Endangered Species*, *Global Warming*, and *Pesticides* offer carefully balanced discussions of their topics.

One could scour many libraries to find a book on endangered species that asks whether it is fair for rural landowners to bear the full burden of saving species. Yet in the Greenhaven book, author Randy T. Simmons observes: "The Endangered Species Act, as it is currently implemented, illustrates a problem that the authors of the Constitution recognized: How much can the majority – in this case, those who enjoy the benefits of species protection – expect from a minority, those who are paying the costs?"

Most books about Rachel Carson and her book *Silent Spring* idolize the author. In contrast, Samantha Beres in *Pesticides* writes objectively: "In 1971 at a hearing on tighter pesticide regulation, William Hazeltine, an entomologist with the Mosquito Abatement District in Oroville, California, testified. Still stinging from the impact of *Silent Spring*, he argued that the public had been misled. "I contrast the predictions of doom and disaster with what I see: healthy people, living longer lives with more leisure. Yet the doom is repeatedly told from every corner."

Most young people today assume that global warming will be a catastrophe. Yet as I wrote in *Global Warming*, "Often ignored in the discussions of the future – and the images of parched earth and rising seas – is the evidence that global warming could do some good. . . . Longer growing seasons would allow more crops to grow in additional regions – farther north in the Northern Hemisphere and farther south in the Southern Hemisphere. This could make a major contribution to combating hunger as world population rises."

I hope that these excerpts show that a breath of fresh air, at long last, is flowing through environmental education. Keep in mind that these books don't take a position on the controversies surrounding these issues. They don't deny global warming, disparage endangered species protection, or dismiss the dangers from pesticides. The books are as balanced as we could make them, just as the next two books in the series, *Forest Fires*

and *Energy*, will be. What they accomplish is to open up discussion and encourage thought – something sorely needed in schools today, where the students march in lockstep to the drumbeat of environmental catastrophe.

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Each book squarely addresses the controversies surrounding its topic. For example, *Endangered Species*, by Randy T. Simmons, explores the difficulties of knowing how many species are actually endangered, looks at various efforts being made to save species, and raises the question of whether there is an underlying conflict, "species vs. people," that obstructs the resolution of problems.

In *Global Warming*, Jane S. Shaw examines the issue of whether the Earth is warming, and, if so, whether human activity is a cause. She discusses how scientists study these questions and explores the possible outcomes of government efforts to try to control global warming. In *Pesticides*, Samantha Beres weighs the costs and the benefits of pesticide use, both in agriculture and to fight disease, and discusses alternatives to current ways of using pesticides.

Most Greenhaven books are sold directly to libraries. However, others interested in purchasing these books (which are 112-page hardbacks) may obtain them at the discounted price of \$18 each through PERC. Please call 888-406-9532 or email Jane Shaw at shaw@perc.org.