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Book review

Land resources—Now and for the future by A. Young. Cambridge University Press, 319 pp., 1998. Hardback. ISBN 0 521 59003 5 £45. (see also http://www.land-resources.com).

Some soil scientists when they retire fill their days with hobbies, visit museums, play the violoncello, go fishing, painting, snowboarding or on holiday to exotic backwoods (but now excluding auger and a chock-full briefcase). That is fine of course. There are very few soil scientists who write their memoirs, this contrary to social scientists and despite a fairly strong Anglo-Saxon tradition to write an autobiography. I believe that is a pity. A number of retired soil scientists remain, however, active in the field. They keep an office, a chair, oversee their professional life, and do write about our common passion: the soil. To those we should be grateful, for the sharing of insights gained during a long career is valuable, now and for future. This book is an account of someone sharing over 40 years of experience. It deals with the important subject of land resource management. Land resources are defined in the widest context of the word and include the environmental resources of climate, water, soils, landforms, forests, pastures and wildlife. The focus of the book is mostly on the developing countries for, as the author points out, the need to develop sound land management policies is there much larger than in the developed countries.

The first chapter sets the scene with a historical sketch of the concern for the land, including an overview of important international meetings from the UN conference in Stockholm in 1972 to FAO's World Food Summit in 1996. The major land issues for the humid, subhumid and (semi-) arid tropics are subsequently described including the progress made in resource survey and land evaluation. Competition for land is outlined and the problems of land-use statistics and the absence of an internationally accepted classification scheme are highlighted (Chapter 4). The author states that the data inaccuracies are in fact an absence of knowledge which hinders fundamental discussions on, for example, world food supply and deforestation. Nevertheless, it is the author's belief that there are some plausibility in the broad magnitude of the statistics which is supported by field observations, or when travelling around.

Farmers and other users of the land are the key persons in the development of sustainable land-use systems. They should be the main stakeholders in land-use planning of which the author gives a brief historical overview including various examples from developing countries. A strong bottom-up or multilevel planning is essential for success-

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ful planning. Chapter 7 describes the types of land degradation (erosion, water shortage, forest degradation, etc.) and their causes and consequences. Some, if not most, of these are closely linked to climatic change and biodiversity. Since there is noticeable lack of information on degradation the author holds a strong and convincing argument for monitoring the status of natural resources. Analogue to GNP and human development indices, a 'land resource index' is suggested based on the status of soils, water, forest, rangeland and biodiversity.

In the next chapter, conventional economics with their discount rates are criticised and suggestions are made on how economics could be used in appraising land resources. This chapter is an interesting introduction for those who have had very little economics. Land management practises are treated in Chapter 10 and include land husbandry, LEISA, agroforestry and suggestions for improving irrigation and rangeland management. The author emphasises the need for more research (fundamental, applied, basic, adaptive) and shows dramatic differences in research budgets in developing and developed countries. Chapters 13 and 14 give a balanced overview of the various scenarios for food production in relation to population growth based on reports of FAO, IFPRI and the World Bank. The author is at his best in the last chapter while making a passionate but factual plea to treasure our land resources.

So far, a description of its contents, now my opinion about the book, for what that may be worth. I make notes in my books and they include question marks, underlined sentences (important, remember) and ideas and thoughts that the text inspires. Captious comments are written in the margins when I find an error, so that I later can see that it has been noted, but, admittedly, later rarely comes. In this book, I have written little in the margins but there is much underlined, particularly in the last chapters for they were the most interesting.

Overall, the book is meant for non-soil scientists though I have little doubt that soil scientists will enjoy reading this synthesis. It contains a great awareness factor of primary interest for those dealing with land-use planning and, not to forget, politicians. Like other books by the same author the text is scholarly and very readable. The book is sparsely but adequately illustrated and references in the text are avoided through numbers and endnotes.

After reading the book I thought of what has been said about Hans Jenny's Factors of Soil Formation, the text reads like '... one long argument'. Young's book is not so quantitative (the data are not always there) but the reasoning is bounteous underpinned with historical facts, insights and links the available information. It is hard to predict whether the book will have the same impact as Jenny's book but taking into account the seriousness of the issues addressed, we can only hope.

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