

Land Degradation Problems and Policies edited by Anthony Chisholm and Robert Dumsday

(Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1987) 404 pp., \$39.50 hardcover, ISBN 0521-340799.

This valuable contribution to the environmental literature derives from a workshop organised by the Centre for Research and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University. The list of participants and the range of authors indicate a broad, well-balanced treatment of this most important environmental issue.

The book covers the biological and social aspects of the degradation problem but unlike some previous attempts to overview the problem, it extends to the legal and economic aspects.

Perhaps the most telling chapters are those which deal with the on-site and off-site costs of land degradation. The data collected by Blyth and McCallum (pp. 89-90), indicating up to 51 per cent decline in wheat yield as a result of erosion, should speak volumes to political decision makers. Similarly the data of Upstill and Yapp, presented in comprehensive tabular form for the first time in this volume, should do much to strengthen the case for realistic allocation of funds to land care. Up to now, economic advisors have been unconvinced by the vague and descriptive assessments of the problem.

The critical issues of tenure and environmental law are well handled by experienced authors. The important matters of farmers' attitudes to land condition and the role of pressure groups are well handled by professionals in their field.

Of special interest are the three appendices which critically evaluate the foregoing chapters giving alternative views and some incisive comment.

Two major deficiencies are apparent in this work, if it is meant to facilitate solutions to the problem. The first is the lack of clearly worded and specific corrective actions. The second is the way in which the present national state of emergency is treated by many writers as simply another academic debate. The urgency of the matter at hand seems to have escaped some of the economists for whom the short-term profit motive reflects a lack of what good land use policy is all about, *viz.* a sense of permanence on the part of landholders and a recognition by government that soil is our common wealth. The editors have succeeded in large part in their purpose "to provide a conceptual and institutional perspective and to analyse in some depth, the issues of degrading lands and soil conservation in a way bearing directly on policy" (p. xvii).

This volume is a landmark in Australian soil conservation and land care. It should be a valuable source for teachers and students. If Commonwealth and state policy-makers heed its warnings and reflect its suggestions in their land use policies, this work will have made a major contribution to the stability of Australia's rural production.

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