

BOOK REVIEW

Environmental Social Work

Mel Gray, John Coates, and Tiani Hetherington (Eds).

Routledge, Abingdon, UK.

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Bushfires and floods in Australia, earthquakes in New Zealand and the growing threat of rising sea levels to Pacific islands and their populations: all highlight the critical necessity for social work's consideration of its response to environmental issues. This text, with editors and authors from Australia and North America, and inclusive of both 'slow' and 'fast' disasters and other environmental challenges, is a significant contribution to social work and social work education: its editors and contributors produce a compelling argument for an end to social work's lack of engagement with ecological concerns and the natural world and for the centrality of environmental and sustainability issues within the social work curriculum.

The book focuses equally upon generative theory for ecological justice and environmental social work, upon practice examples, and upon the challenges for social work education. As such, it fulfils the editors' aspirational goal of a flagship text informed by scholarship and research, which can serve as a basis for a re-evaluation of social work's engagement with the natural world.

The theory focus presents several chapters premised upon the deep ecological imperative that social work's traditional 'person-in-environment' perspective must of needs be re-framed as an 'environment-including-people' approach. Leading this argument, Besthorn's chapter signals a challenge to the accepted social work concept of social justice, arguing that "all justice is ecological" (p.31), and that the interconnectedness of people within a wider ecological context requires us to move to a radical equalitarian sense of justice where sentient and non-sentient beings have equal moral standing. Whilst not all of the authors echo the strength of Besthorn's call to remove social work from its anthropocentric frame of reference, this book consistently challenges social work to engage with environmental debates and practice in a manner that has considerable implications for how schools of social work frame up and deliver social work curriculum. Tester's chapter, for example, presents a strong argument for considering the impact of climate change as an international

crisis with impact on human rights, where issues of health, food, water and safety demand social work's attention as human rights issues impacting unequally upon marginalised populations, concerns played out in floods in New Orleans and in Victorian bushfires.

The book provides several chapters of examples of environmental social work in action, illustrating to practitioners, educators and students a range of examples of social work contribution to environmental projects, all of which serve to remind the reader of our profession's primary involvement with community-level, grass, flax or kelp roots initiatives that uphold core principles of rights, justice and advocacy for the marginalised. With examples such as community gardening projects; work with drought-affected families; animals; engaging young offenders in environmental projects; and engaging with corporate social responsibility, the 'social work imagination' is extended beyond what many of the authors in this text see as a modern, restricted and agency-mandated form of social work activity.

A considerable proportion of the book involves direct discussion of social work education and challenges the complacency of curriculum development that has for many years relied upon ecological systems theory with the concerns of humanity as its pivotal basis. Jones' thoughtful chapter outlines the need for social work programmes to demonstrate eco-literacy, arguing for an ecologically transformative approach to education to compensate for the paucity of environmental content to date. He argues that where social work education (in his context in Australia) has engaged with the natural environment and disasters, it is in reactive mode working with those disadvantaged and marginalised after the occurrence of adverse natural events. He signals a way forward for social work education, echoing the arguments of others within the book, that a reclaiming of social work's identity can be achieved by embracing the preventive and proactive structural and systemic interventions embedded within concepts of sustainability and ecological justice. A key contribution to social work education here is the substantive overview of the passage of social work theory through its different historical iterations and allegiances to meta-theory, a development which, in the authors' perspectives within this book, now needs to embrace a wider ecological perspective than ever before.

Perhaps one substantive critique of this otherwise important and robust text is its lack of consideration of sustainability and environmental matters from an Indigenous and First Nations perspective. Whilst several chapters acknowledge indigenous perspectives from the expertise of the authors, the engagement of indigenous peoples throughout the world and in the authors' homelands with struggles to retain their relationship with the land would, I argue, justify a contribution that openly talks from an indigenous perspective on environmental matters. The book strongly urges a reconciliation of people, social work and social work education with our natural environment: for many around the globe, including the wider Pacific, the struggles of indigenous peoples are about retaining their knowledge and security that they have never left their ecological location in the world.

'Environmental social work' should have a wide appeal for both educators and senior or post-graduate students, as well as to practitioners committed to the inclusion of environmental concerns into the definition and practice of social work. It signals that the socio-ecological focus of social work, with its natural affinity to systems thinking, needs a timely

revamp so that our concept of systems needs to expand to place humanity and the natural world on an equal and indivisible footing. It is a welcome contribution which can serve as a platform for curriculum development, and hopefully, for ecological justice.

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