

---

## **Book Review: Environmental principles and policies: an interdisciplinary introduction by Sharon Beder**

---

Reviewed by John Huckle

ESD Consultant and Visiting Fellow,  
University of York, UK  
E-mail: [john@huckle.org.uk](mailto:john@huckle.org.uk)  
Website: <http://john.huckle.org.uk>

**Published 2006 by Earthscan, London, 304pp. ISBN 978-1-884407-404-4, £24.95 paperback**

**Keywords:** book review.

**Reference** to this book review should be made as follows: Huckle, J. (2007) 'Environmental principles and policies: an interdisciplinary introduction by Sharon Beder', *Int. J. Innovation and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3/4, pp.466–468.

**Biographical notes:** John Huckle is a geographical and environmental educator with a particular interest in teacher education. After many years teaching in training colleges and universities, he is now a consultant on education for sustainable development. Further information can be found on his website.

---

A key challenge for those who seek to educate for sustainable development is to foster the learner's understanding of how environmental and social principles, such as those outlined in the Earth Charter, can be effectively translated into policies that deliver such development. Sharon Beder's book will help them meet this challenge for it evaluates the extent to which the latest wave of economic-based and market-orientated policies (for example pollution charges, emissions trading, and tradeable fishing rights) can deliver key principles that have been widely incorporated into international treaties and the national laws.

In selecting six such principles the author focuses on three specific to environmental matters (ecological sustainability; the polluter pays; and the precautionary principle) and three with wider social application (equity; human rights; and public participation). Parts one and two of the book (six chapters) consider the development and adoption of these principles and raise issues for continuing debate. Chapter One, for example, traces the development of the sustainability principle from ideas about spaceship earth in the mid 1960s through the limits to growth debate of the early 1970s, to the World Conservation Strategy of 1980 and later earth summits. The contribution of such concepts as carrying capacity and ecological footprints to the refinement of the principle are considered and the case made for adopting sustainability rather than growth as the prime

aim of economic policy. As with the other chapters the language is accessible and non-technical and the exposition clear.

In tracing the history of the six principles Beder recognises that the late 1980s marked a watershed in environmentalism and environmental policy. Faced with growing pressure to tighten regulation of the environment through new legislation, business elites and their allies in government, shifted the focus of policy from the state to the market. Echoing the general shift from social democracy to neo-liberalism, they claimed that markets and property rights could distribute environmental goods more efficiently and equitably than the state, optimising levels of pollution and resource use while encouraging conservation. Market environmentalism would be less costly than state regulation, generating new sources of revenue and allowing industry to find its own cost effective ways of reducing pollution. Crucially it would change the context in which decision-making takes place, allowing business elites to increase their control over economic production and development.

The remaining parts of the book deal with the major elements of market environmentalism. Part three (two chapters) is concerned with valuing the environment in national accounts and cost-benefit analysis. Part four (four chapters) examines the role of price-based measures (fees, charges, taxes) and rights based measures (rights to use or pollute the environment within limits) in controlling pollution. Part five (three chapters) deals with markets in conservation (the allocation of ownership rights in the environment to encourage conservation via such instruments as tradeable fishing rights, water and salinity trading, and wetland mitigation banking). In each part the major instruments are outlined, examples of their application in the USA, Europe and Australasia are discussed; and they are assessed according to their ability to deliver principles considered in part one. The case studies here, such as those on measures to tackle global warming or combat over fishing, should prove valuable to teachers seeking material on which to base their lessons.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) makes much of the participation principle or the right to know about environment and development issues and participate in decisions shaping local and global futures. Tracing the author's consideration of this principle through the text illustrates its value to ESD practitioners. Chapter 6 links participation to declarations of human rights, agreements such as Agenda 21, and associated rights to knowledge. Legislation that entitles workers, citizens and consumers to environmental knowledge is then evaluated before the focus shifts to people's rights to participate and the limitations of mere consultation. Echoing much in the ESD literature, Beder suggests that genuine participation requires and fosters critical citizenship and that education should both enable and require such participation.

Putting monetary value on the environment and using economic instruments to control pollution and create markets for conservation generally reduces access to environmental information and depoliticise the decision-making process. Cost-benefit analysis removes decisions from public scrutiny and "comes up with opaque and technical reasons to do the wrong thing". Learning and values clarification is replaced by 'pricing on the spot' that considers individual preferences rather than the social good. Dominant meanings of the environment and development are taken for granted and issues of morality put to one side. Economic instruments allow firms to decide how much to pollute (pay charges, buy rights); the public is rarely informed or consulted; pollution becomes an entitlement rather than an offence; and profit and self interest is promoted over ethics and the common interest in sustainability. Markets for conservation transfer

what were traditionally viewed as community resources (water, fish stocks) to private ownership with the result that they too reduce the public's access to information and decision-making. The decline of fishing communities around the world is just one outcome of greater reliance on such instruments.

Evaluation of the instruments against the other five principles leads the author to similar conclusions. The fundamental goals and assumptions underlying economic-based policies are at odds with environmental and social principles espoused and adopted by communities and governments around the world. These policies perpetuate unjust power relations; promote rights to profit above human rights; ignore the inequitable distribution of impacts among present and future generations; further commodify nature as a resource subject to market laws; discount scientific findings relating to complex ecological systems; fail to adequately regulate the markets they create; and erode the need and opportunities for policy debate. They are "an indirect and ultimately ineffective method of achieving environmental goals" such as sustainability.

Beder's is a comprehensive and powerful critique of market environmentalism. It is interdisciplinary in that it draws on ethics, environmental science, economics and politics, and critical in that it evaluates policy with regard to outcomes and widely accepted ethical principles. Greater attention to political economy would have enabled her to better account for the commodification of nature occurring with the continuing restructuring of global capitalism, and to suggest models of political economy and democracy that are more likely to live up to her chosen principles and deliver sustainable development.

As it is the book is a most valuable resource for all who seek to critically educate for sustainable development. Far too much ESD is idealistic in that it seeks to instill principles without empowering learners with an understanding of how such principles are subverted or bypassed in the real world, and what changes might be necessary if they are to truly govern our relations with one another and the rest of nature. This book presents an example of realistic ESD: one that acknowledges real power and policies and their capacity to subvert widely shared principles on which hopes for future sustainability are based.