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William V. Lombardi

Feather River College, USA

wlombardi@frc.edu

ORCID: 0000-0003-1342-6441

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Book Review: Simone Schleper's *Planning for the Planet: Environmental Expertise and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1960–1980*

by William V. Lombardi



About the Author

Will Lombardi is an Assistant Professor of English at Feather River College. He writes about geographies of the U.S. West. His writing explores Global Wests, while his environmental advocacy focuses on organizing citizen science projects on behalf of Friends of Plumas Wilderness, and inserting environmental humanities into public scholarship with Plumas Arts. His writing and advocacy are informed by the grassroots bioregional concept of a “watershed consciousness,” in which local action and global responsibility are intertwined. His publications can be found in *Western American Literature*, *ISLE*, and the collections *Left in the West* and *New Voices in International Ecocriticism*.

Book Review

William V. Lombardi

Schleper, Simone. 2019. *Planning for the Planet: Environmental Expertise and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1960–1980*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn.

The lure of this book is inescapable. Simone Schleper writes in a way that makes it impossible not to insert oneself into the conversations she has woven among leaders of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) as they imagine the guiding principles of environmental protection and adapt to evolving political, social, and economic concerns affecting conservation efforts worldwide. As she states, Schleper’s project is not an overarching history of the “environmental age.” Rather, by focusing on a single, major player in global conservation during that period, the IUCN and its central members, hers is a portrait of the insider’s perspective on the machinations of policy making (Schleper 6). There is not a tree or a green space anywhere to be found in this book; instead, one encounters the necessary struggles and commitments, the push-and-pull of science, scientific authority, and the less-than-satisfying compromises of enumerating and preserving natural spaces for their own sake and that of humankind. In what could have been a rather rote reading of the pertinent documents related to the IUCN archive, Schleper’s attention to the personal commitments of IUCN leaders asks her reader to consider their own commitments, and to position themselves within and alongside the IUCN’s decisions. I found myself quarreling with Edward Max Nicholson over his universalist, big data approach to conservation, for example, despite its lasting utility, and rooting for Raymond Dasmann’s local, watershed approach to conservation, no matter how provincial it may seem to some readers today. By focusing on an influential but less well-known organization during these pivotal decades in environmental history, what Schleper succeeds in is creating a narrative that looks inward and outward simultaneously. Through her near-range

portrait of an organization and its primary role players, she sheds fresh light on a formative moment in environmental history that has already been painstakingly discussed. At the same time, *Planning for the Planet* compels useful personal reflection on the business of environmental planning as it informs our practices today.

Planning for the Planet sets out to provide a thorough discussion of how approaches to environmental protection have evolved, and more so, it is preoccupied with the behind-the-scenes evolution of the voice and location of environmental authority through the lens of the IUCN archive. As it explores how environmental expertise is validated and authenticated, it illustrates how expertise is self-reflexively perceived and mobilized on a spectrum of disciplines and interests. The introduction and opening chapter outline the history of the IUCN, the “biggest and most considerable international and science-based nature conservation organization” (Schleper 5), while the remaining chapters roughly follow the three decades mentioned in the book’s subtitle. These successive chapters focus on the shifting cast of major players in the IUCN, on paradigmatic events and documents they either drafted, coordinated, or participated in, and the manner in which the organization’s positions influenced or failed to influence policy. In all, *Planning for the Planet* is a history that draws mainly from discourse in science and technology studies and the sociology of expertise (Schleper 13). However, it should be considered useful to an array of readers as a historical and philosophical document, as it conveys the tensions central to so many arguments made by scientists, economists, and those in the environmental humanities.

The first chapter, “Old Hands, Pastures New,” deals with how the IUCN viewed itself and how it hoped to position itself among struggles with globalization and the sanctity of science. Schleper explores how central members of the organization began “negotiating their position and expert authority” under the aegis of “scientific universalism” (27; 28) in an advisory role. She writes that they positioned themselves, perhaps naively in retrospect by my way of thinking, as “legitimate mediators between local and transnational interests.” The elaboration of such concerns is illuminating, in that they reveal just how early on the conservation movement became aware of global interconnectedness and the associated problems of scale, economy, and politics that environmentalism must confront. To witness the lofty aims and false starts of the organization in its early efforts underlines the trajectory of significant concepts such as ecosystem management and biospheric balance against the equally complex social realities facing the Global South. One sees, at least at the outset, the IUCN’s resolute commitment to clearly biologically determined policy making, yet intuits the blind spots associated with it. To my welcome surprise as a reader, amidst the meticulous and carefully researched detail, I found this early chapter fun and almost chatty in its

descriptions of insider frictions, even and especially as it discusses the ongoing harsh realities of postcolonial and decolonial politics. Seeing the commitment to maintaining politically independent scientific work, along with the negotiations, compromises, and adaptations the IUCN's members confronted, seems at this later date a crucial glimpse into the early ethical and philosophic challenges that scientists face today within and against the backdrop of expressing and tackling the manifold and complex crises of anthropogenic climate change.

Chapter 2, "Classifying Ecosystems," explores the IUCN's involvement in the International Biological Program, which sets out to catalogue the world's natural spaces in cohesive ways. Schleper explains that this effort to inventory ecological zones led to the advent of Ecology as a discipline. This chapter closely examines the competing approaches by Nicholson, who advocated for a centralized methodology, and Dasmann, who felt it necessary to decentralize the process. It describes something other than in-fighting between these two environmentalists, to be sure; rather, what Schleper details are the nuanced arguments between scientists advocating for their personal appraisals of best management practices. In reading her account, one senses the stakes related to Nicholson's data-driven scheme against Dasmann's preoccupation with a local and descriptive strategy. I found this discussion especially fruitful, since prior to reading *Planning for the Planet*, I was unfamiliar with Nicholson's work. It helped me frame what I knew of Dasmann through my studies in bioregionalism as received through writings by Peter Berg and Gary Snyder, both of whom were on my mind in this section and throughout the book. I gained a more circumspect evaluation of my own dearly-held localist environmental values through the context Schleper provides. Such reflection is powerful stuff. By illustrating the friction around conservation and classification systems, including the merging of the biosphere and technosphere that Nicholson advocated for, one recognizes the advent of arguments surrounding local control and solutions rather than resource conservation from outside and above. Further, one better understands arguments surrounding the local and global as areas of critical inquiry. Rightly or not, however, through Schleper's narrative I sensed that the shape of environmental advocacy was in the hands of just a few players. I felt a certain precariousness as I read this chapter and its discussion of the conflicting aims of neutrality and local, solution-based work. Still, these are necessary concerns that, as Schleper shows, led to a productive combination of visions, methods, and perspectives, at least for a while, thus cementing planning and policy around ecosystems.

The focal point of Chapter 3, "Expertise and Diplomacy," is the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment that took place in Stockholm in 1972 which, as Schleper explains, has "entered the history books as the moment when the world

community turned the global environment into a topic for international politics and diplomacy” (96). Citing earlier renderings, Schleper describes the conference as a watershed moment parsed by critics as one both “concerned with environmental protection, and, on the other hand . . . focused on economic interests in the development of natural resources” (98). What this chapter clarifies in its analysis of the Stockholm moment and thereafter, is the proliferation of stakeholders, including indigenous peoples, special interests outside of the environmental realm, non-scientists, non-governmental agencies, and representatives from the Global South. It represents a turning point leading to the heart of the “many stories” that those in the environmental humanities urge so forcefully that we consider. What Schleper reveals, however, are the many complications associated with such polyphony. What follows is a fascinating account of differing agendas, strategies, and solutions. Additionally, what the Stockholm conference demonstrates is the clash between “neutral” scientists of the North and the independence of the South. Problems of engineering and design, unequal distribution of resources, all set against the central question of who is/has authority in decision-making processes on the ground where the stakes are the greatest, are brought to bear in Schleper’s retelling. One senses, if such a thing is possible, that this is the moment conservationists realize that cooperation, even among allies, can never be straightforward. One is left with a disturbing realization of the factionalism involved in preserving the world’s wild places. The upshot, though, is a clearer differentiation of societal and biological expertise, even as the reader realizes that conservation after Stockholm became a matter of strategy as well as science.

The final chapter, “The Fault Lines in the World Conservation Strategy,” and the conclusion of *Planning for the Planet* discuss the difficulties and consequences of international environmental policymaking and the ascendancy of terms like sustainability and resilience, while stressing competing ways of “assigning value to nature” (162). Schleper documents the institutionalization of sustainable development as it coincides with cautionary statements from the scientific community about biological limitation. In my reading, as the immanent global crisis narrative took hold, competing approaches from outside of the IUCN appeared to articulate a sense of an acceptable, unavoidable environmental decline, trying to “understand how much damage human resource use could do without distorting the balance and benefits of natural ecosystems” (154), rather than following previous lines of scientific research to that point. Clearly, as scientists came to understand global science, both politics and decolonization problematized its practice. And, as Schleper points out, “their approach to conservation and environmental expertise bore the mark of centralized technocratic elitism irreconcilable with postcolonial reform politics and a growing international

recognition of socioeconomic inequalities” (175). In the end, Schleper contends, this “persistent field of tensions” (186) has become the hallmark of international conservation to this day.

Altogether, *Planning for the Planet* is a thorough, satisfying book. It provides necessary insights into the difficult choices environmental policy requires. It leaves one feeling conflicted but not exactly disheartened about the future of planetary ecosystem health. While its focus is intentionally narrow—the evolution of the IUCN—it quickly opens outward to reassess the connections between environmental organizations past and present. It addresses environmental advocacy through the lens of authority: not just which group, but whose vision within each group, gains traction; which groups become partners or adversaries, whose interests will be served, and where the money will come from to fund it all. Schleper’s is a healthy, clear-eyed, valuable critique that outlines past lessons and, in doing so, with luck, points to effective strategies for protection moving forward.

References

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