People and the Earth: Basic Issues in the Sustainability of Resources and Environment

By John J.W. Rogers and P. Geoffrey Feiss
360 pages. Cambridge University Press
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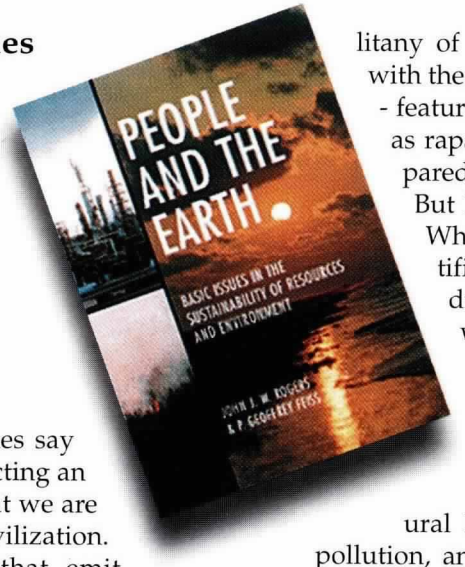

One dumb thing that scientists sometimes say about global warming is that we are conducting an experiment in the atmosphere. In fact, what we are conducting, or trying to conduct, is a civilization. Characterizing the economic activities that emit greenhouse gases as some kind of insane scientific experiment is to miss the most important part of the story. Global warming and other environmental problems are fundamentally economic problems. Physical scientists know next to nothing about economics. Actually, they know just about as much about economics as economists know about physical science. The difference is that, these days at least, physical scientists are not shy about holding forth on economic issues while economists are generally silent on physical science.

All this is to say that I was prepared to hate "People and the Earth" written by two geologists, John Rogers and P. Geoffrey Feiss. I was prepared for yet another litany of environmental doom and gloom, with the human race – the authors excepted - featured at best as heedless and at worst as rapacious. In other words, I was prepared for another "Earth in the Balance". But I didn't hate this book. I liked it. While it certainly focused on the scientific side of environmental issues, it did so in a balanced and informative way, avoiding apocalyptics and simplistic prescriptions.

The book consists of nine chapters, all but the last covering a broad area of environmental science: population, food, natural hazards, water, energy, minerals, pollution, and global change. The writing is lighthanded, the level undergraduate. There are lots of graphs, tables, and figures and a large number of boxes describing specific cases. Sprinkled throughout the text are "policy questions" aimed at provoking thought. Each chapter concludes with a number of problems, none very challenging, and a list of references.

I had a couple of quibbles. For example, the theory that the eruption of Santorini in 1628 BCE destroyed the Minoan civilization is no longer tenable. Also, biological oceanographers will be surprised to read that the nutrients supporting phytoplankton come from dead fish! But, all in all, this is a nice book and I recommend it.

Books Undergoing Review:

Coastal Ocean Prediction
Christopher N.K. Mooers, Editor
American Geophysical Union, Publisher

Global Ocean Science: Toward an Integrated Approach
National Research Council – Ocean Studies Board
National Academy Press, Publisher

Ocean, Ice and Atmosphere: Interactions at the Antarctic Continental Margin
Stanley Jacobs and Ray Weiss, Editors
The American Geophysical Union, Publisher

The Restless Sea: Exploring the World Beneath the Waters
By Robert Kunzig
W.W. Norton, Publisher

Tides: A Scientific History
By David Edgar Cartwright
Cambridge University Press, Publisher