

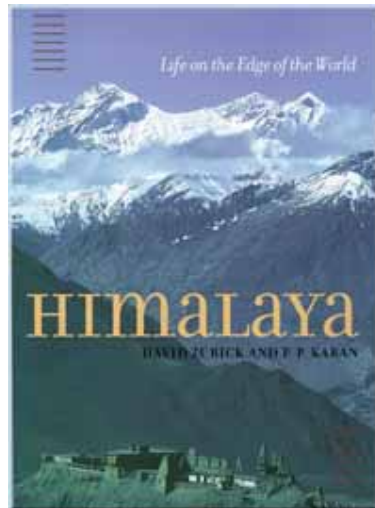
Book Review

Title: *Himalaya: Life on the Edge of the World*

Authors: D. Zurick and P. P. Karan

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In *Himalaya: Life on the Edge of the World*, the authors note at the outset that the study of environmental dilemmas falls into two paradigms: the first one argues that human activities are the main cause of the degradation of mountain environments, while the second contends that they are not. The first paradigm holds such factors as rapid population growth, deforestation, roads, mining, industry, dams, and overgrazing responsible for the looming mountain crisis', whereas the second paradigm refutes the first by asserting that "*the contribution of human intervention...has been insignificant when balanced against the natural processes at work.*" Natural processes here include factors such as rapid tectonic uplift of the mountains, seismic activity, and rapid incision of the rivers. Arguing that both these paradigms are untenable, since they are based on first impressions and hit-and-run micro-studies, the authors attempt to set the record straight by exploring, rather exhaustively, the dynamic changes taking place in the Himalaya.

Using geological records, scientific reports, findings from field studies (carried out over the past 50 years), and archival and census data on population, forest cover, and land-use change during the past century, the authors provide a comprehensive history of the region from the birth of the Himalayan mountains to the variety of landforms, habitats, and climates that are seen today. They painstakingly trace human history in the region over a thousand years and provide an in-depth analysis of the pressing problems of environmental degradation, explosive population growth, spiralling poverty, bio-diversity loss, and the effects of the globalisation process that are currently confronting the region and its people. They attempt to put the changes taking place in a socio-historical context.

The book sheds light on some contentious parts of the Himalayan theory of environmental degradation, foremost among them being the so-called 'mountain-plain linkages'. Earlier,

river siltation and floods in the Gangetic plains were linked to deforestation in upland areas, but some Western scientists began to question this thinking as early as the mid-1980s. They called for a review of environmental policy in Himalayan countries in light of this new paradigm. The book illustrates how the 'population explosion' caused by high fertility rates in the villages, coupled with advances in health care and medicine, are upsetting the carrying capacity of the natural environment and placing undue pressure on Himalayan farms and forests. It hints at reasons why efforts to combine environmental conservation and poverty alleviation must include the crucial support and commitment of local people, particularly women. It talks of how micro-hydropower schemes owned by local communities may be a better idea than big dams that displace people, result in loss of farmland or forest, incur foreign debt, or create safety risks due to seismic activity. It also cautions against unbridled industrial growth.

The authors examine in detail the fragile nature of the Himalayan mountains and discuss why this necessarily creates instability and marginality in the lives of the majority of mountain people. It touches briefly upon the idea of 'sustainable development': how it evolved, and how it is at odds with many contemporary trends and realities. It elaborates upon the role of infrastructural development and the promotion of tourism, livestock, horticulture, national parks, and other 'niche' enterprises in spurring economic growth in the mountains. It also acknowledges the crucial role of local knowledge, grass roots' participation, and indigenous rights in the successful overall management of environmental resources.

The central themes running through the book are the fragility of the Himalayan mountains and the idea of 'sustainable development' in counteracting the effects of the former. As the authors state in the closing paragraph of the closing chapter:

"Much of the current instability in the Himalaya is due to the fact that the forces of change that affect local communities have their genesis in distant societies and therefore lie outside the experiences of mountain people.... The fact that mountain environments, despite their appearances of immutability, are fragile places requiring unique environmental management compels close attention to the sustainable practices of the past as well as to modern innovations. The uncertainty of life in the Himalaya today is accelerated when this attention is not forthcoming."

This book comes at an appropriate time. The violent storm that killed most members of the Mount Everest climbing party in the spring of 1996, and the documentaries, films, books, and articles that followed in its wake, drew all eyes to the Himalaya. The world is now curious to know more about this region. However, the awesome landscape hides the grim fact: that most of the people in the region live in abject poverty. The per capita income averages a meagre \$157 USD, which is approximately one-sixth of the average income for the developing countries as a whole. The current ecological crisis in the region is most of all a crisis of poverty: poverty not only inducing environmental damage but also deepening it.

The book, thoroughly researched, amply illustrated, and written in a style suitable for both academics and mountain lovers, tells of the beauty of the mountains and the ugliness that they can no longer hide.