

Review of European Community & International Environmental Law

Focus on: Africa

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa; Implementing Agenda 21

Alia Jamal

Liability and Compensation for Injurious Consequences of the Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes

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Beyond Lomé IV: Future Challenges to EU-Africa Relations

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Law, Colonialism and Environmental Management in Africa

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Also in this issue:

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The Law and Practice of Joint Implementation

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**Reinventing Nature?
Responses to Postmodern
Deconstruction** Michael E.
Soulé and Gary Lease (eds.).
published by Island Press,
Washington, D.C., distributed
in Europe by Earthscan Publi-
cations, London, 1995; 187pp;
£16.95 softcover.

Rarely has there been a book on ecology and environmental policy that has been in reaction to, and that argues that gains in conservation are being threatened by, an emerging philosophical movement. The distinguished editors and some of the contributors to this small anthology even go as far as to argue, shrilly, 'that certain contemporary forms of intellectual relativism can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws' (p. xvi). The spectre is various forms of cultural postmodernism that occasionally critique the biases inherent in some examples of self-purported scientific objectivity. But the debates in this book, even when clearly biased towards certain scientific establishments – in this case the emerging field of conservation biology, do not substantiate the argument of some impending 'threat' with dire warnings evocative of those against the rising tide of fascism in Europe in the 1920s.

Much of the core of postmodernism is rooted in poststructuralism and deconstruction methods which emerged in France over two decades ago and were first articulated by a host of state-promoted and subsidized philosopher-superstars, the most famous being the Jacques

Derrida, the late Michel Foucault, and the late Gilles Deleuze. That certain sectors of North American academic chose, rather late-in-the-game, to have acquired, perhaps over-enthusiastically, the trappings of postmodernism is more a reflection of their perchance for the trendy than some sea change of land ethics. There is little evidence, presented in *Reinventing Nature?* or elsewhere, that various attempts at deconstruction of the contexts and biases of scientific investigations, as social processes that identify inherently incomplete truths, can and will be used in the courts or elsewhere to discredit the technical standards and thresholds set in certain laws and regulations. Still, the book is a curious document in the histories of both environmental law and policy and in science. The book is especially intriguing in the fact that the few impacts that the recent use of deconstruction methods may have had on regulatory and legalistic decisions is to simply highlight the diversity of interpretations of research on environmental problems.

The inevitable, socially influenced interpretations of science, even when part of legal deliberations, were never intended to be enshrined as scientific objectivity and as the kinds of singular, 'totalizing narratives' that today are so out of vogue.

The essays in *Reinventing Nature?* are most credible and applicable to environmental problem-solving when they veer away from the false dichotomy of (good) ecology and (bad) deconstruction. The initial essays on 'reality' and nature by

Paul Shepard and Albert Borgmann are useful to any introductory course in environmental policy or law. In these essays, cultural narratives indeed do structure how people experience the more absolute truths of what we may come to think of as the fixed reality of, for example, life support-related constraints on economic growth and pollution. Perhaps the most valuable essay in *Reinventing Nature?* is by N. Katherine Hayles where she asks, 'If nature is only a social and discursive construction, why fight hard to preserve it?' (p.47). Her affirmative response is argued carefully in a way that could be interpreted not to negate the positive implications of deconstruction methods. Much of the anthology is peppered with embarrassing smugness in a supposedly singular 'ecological' worldview where, for example, Stephen Kellert argues that, 'The deconstructionist notion that all cultural perspectives of nature possess equal value is both biologically misguided and socially dangerous' (p.118).

The final call to arms in *Reinventing Nature?* finds founding conservation biologist Michael Soulé speaking of a 'social assault' on nature, the principal 'tool' of which is deconstruction. One is compelled to wonder why Professor Soulé has come to blame a barely articulated philosophical position, as some kind of culprit in environmental mismanagement, at a period in history when the greed and complacency that is so crucial to its perpetuation, are so rampant.

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