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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Environmental Principles and Policies: An Interdisciplinary Approach*  
by Sharon Beder

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*Environmental Principles and Policies: An Interdisciplinary Approach*

Sharon Beder

Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006

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Sharon Beder's book *Environmental Principles and Policies: An Interdisciplinary Approach* outlines six major principles of environmental matters and uses these principles as the criteria with which to judge the success of economic theory and its applied policies with regard to environmental issues. The key question Beder asks is, 'how well do economic instruments and market-based (environmental) policies fit with the basic environmental and social policies that have been developed over the last 50 years?' (p. 10). Based on the body of evidence Beder has accumulated, her resounding answer to the question is: 'the fundamental goals and assumptions underlying economics-based policies are at odds with the environmental and social principles communities and governments around the world are seeking to achieve' (p. 275).

The book is separated into five parts. Part 1 covers three principles that are specific to environmental matters: ecological sustainability, the polluter pays principle and the precautionary principle. Part 2 of the book draws from the sociological and political disciplines in defining three more principles: the equity principle, the human rights principle and the participation principle. Part 3 of the book reviews economic methods of environmental valuation and then questions of whether monetary valuation is principled. Evaluating the monetary valuation of the environment against five of the six principles, Beder concludes the answer is a categorical 'no'. In this section Beder outlines the economists' view that the failure of the market system has resulted in environmental degradation. Free or under-priced environmental assets tend to be over-used or abused, resulting in damage. Many of these public goods, such as clean air and water, do not have individual property rights. Economic theory would argue that the environment could be more adequately protected if consumers and firms were charged real prices for using the assets and hence the environmental costs and benefits would be incorporated into market decision making. The assets would be properly priced to reflect the relative scarcity of natural resources. An evaluation of economic policies and instruments used to address a range of environmental issues follows in Parts 4 and 5. With each part of *Environmental Principles and Policies: An Interdisciplinary Approach* building on the previous one, it is advisable for the reader to read the chapters consecutively. The argument Beder conveys builds with each part until its succinct conclusion.

A key chapter in the book is Chapter 9 on 'Prices and Pollution Rights', which spells out the types of economic instruments used to address environmental issues. There are two types of economic instruments: (1) price-based measures, which include fees, charges and taxes, which aim to internalise environmental costs and benefits; and (2) rights-based measures, which aim to ascribe owner-

ship rights and include cap and trade emissions trading, open market emissions trading, tradable property rights such as water pollution rights and tradable fishing quotas, as well as carbon offsets. By assigning property rights to natural resources, those owning the rights to these resources will consider the longer term and manage the resources in a sustainable fashion. For both price-based measures and rights-based measures, Beder cites numerous examples, across many parts of the world where these economic policies have not led to sustainable growth. Environmental degradation has continued.

The title of the book, *Environmental Principles and Policies: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, though not misleading, does not capture the essence of what Beder has researched and argued. The interdisciplinary approach employed uses the tools and policies developed in one discipline (economics) to address environmental issues and concerns assessed by criteria (principles) arising out of other disciplines (sociology, politics and the environment). It is interdisciplinary in terms of transferring the methods from one discipline to another. Interdisciplinary approaches spill over disciplines, but the main objective still remains within the framework of disciplinary research. Beder points out that economics-based environmental policies, which are primarily designed to achieve economic efficiency and facilitate economic growth, fail to meet environmental social and political principles, which cannot be quantified in monetary terms. Beder argues that economic instruments are fine if only limited reductions in pollution are required, and illustrates this with many examples. But they tend not to work if larger reductions are needed. Open market emissions trading does not ensure that total emissions will be controlled.

The discipline of economics cannot provide all the answers to environmental issues. Capitalist economics seeks to explain how the capitalist system works. The real lesson from Beder should be to keep economics in perspective and economists in their place. Economists are experts in one important, but limited aspect of life: the material. Economics is very good at informing on how to best maximise production and consumption of goods and services. But societies do not maximise the material aspect of life; they optimise it. That is, they balance it against other, non-material objectives.

Yet the environment transcends disciplines, and relying solely on economics to provide adequate solutions is somewhat naïve (or as Beder believes, is politically motivated). The environment is transdisciplinary.<sup>1</sup> It requires the application of scientific approaches to problems that transcend the boundaries of conventional academic disciplines. As the prefix 'trans' indicates, a transdisciplinary approach would involve policies and methods that are simultaneously between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond each individual discipline.

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<sup>1</sup> A term introduced by Jean Piaget in *L'interdisciplinarité – Problèmes d'enseignement et de recherche dans les universités* (Paris: OCDE, 1972).

The length of the book, at over 300 pages, is both a strength and weakness, as some of the earlier chapters contain too much description, and can result in the reader becoming bogged down in minutiae. The book is very accessible and can be read by students of any discipline. The economic concepts are clearly explained and environmental terminology is clearly defined. The book is very well researched; case studies being included from both the developing and developed world. Similarly, examples of different types of environmental problems are highlighted: from pollution to over-fishing, from water salinity to global warming. The book strongly critiques the current wisdom that economics-based environmental policies can solve environmental problems by altering the conditions in which decisions are made rather than directly prescribing decisions. Her weight of evidence would suggest otherwise. The book will challenge both those advising economic policy and economic students to re-assess the role mainstream economics has in addressing environmental issues. The challenge for policy-makers and regulators is to not ignore the limitations of an economics-only based approach. Just as the environmental is cross-disciplinary, so the solution needs to be.

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