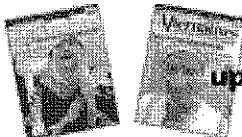


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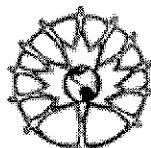
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## Colours of Green



Winter 2003  
Volume 29, Number 1

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## Ecology of Empire

**Book Review:** Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the Empire, 1895-1945, Peder Anker, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Reviewed by David B. Brooks

Peder Anker has written a fascinating account of how ecology from botany as a discipline in parallel (but competing) schools of thought in Britain and in South Africa during the first half of the 20th century. The extraordinarily detailed book contains at least two major themes: how, in each school, what had been natural science not just transdisciplinary but a worldview including human ecology, how, despite sharp differences between the mechanistic British school and the holistic South African school, both schools supported imperialist policies and colonial administrations.

Today, ecology is commonly seen as one of the "new" integrative fields of study that could avoid the tunnel vision that is alleged to characterize engineering, science and economics. However, in this characterization, Anker has demonstrated that the very international nature of ecology also contains dangerous tendencies. British ecologists concluded that politics was but another branch of ecology and that appropriate political conclusions could be determined "scientifically". South African ecologists concluded that, if animals had appropriate niches, so too did human beings - and they convinced themselves that northern races were more highly evolved than southern races. They concluded that black races should remain in submissiveness. A few ecologists challenged these conclusions, but, with the limited nature of higher education, they did not get much of a hearing. The book also describes how some Canadians wondering about many native peoples took note - though they had to rework the

Imperial Ecology will tell most readers more than they want to know, but Anker writes well, which makes the dense text easier to read.

Happily, he has an eye for juicy tidbits – such as the pronouncement by an ecology professor at Yale that climate had a lot to do with the Russian revolution and with sexual cycles, as it did with the Japanese brothels.

*David B. Brooks is director of research for Friends of the Earth.*

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