

CONSERVATION AND WILDLIFE

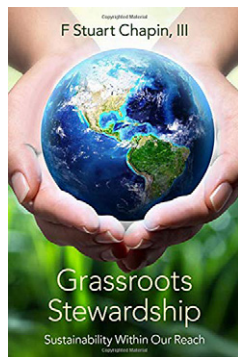
Grassroots Stewardship: Sustainability Within Our Reach

By F. Stuart Chapin, III. 2020. Oxford University Press. 240 pages, 34.95 USD, Cloth. Also available as an E-book.

How does one write and publish a book about current events right now? Our reality is shifting so quickly that everything feels dated within weeks. Chapin writes with a hopefulness and trust in the world that has escaped me in recent months (or years?). In reading this book, I was reminded of the tension between patiently picking away at what we can do to make the world around us better versus the feelings of rage and sadness that arise from the futility of individual action. I eventually forced myself to slow down and consider what Chapin is trying to achieve with this book.

Chapin defines the book's audience early on as a specific selection of four practitioner types: managers of private and public lands, Indigenous people with strong cultural connections to their lands, city residents who encounter and shape nature in their neighbourhoods, and people who tinker with nature or volunteer for community or conservation efforts (p. 14). By defining the audience, he's able to skim over a lot of preliminary information that seems to bog down other books in the Climate Change genre, such as the history of the agricultural revolution or how the greenhouse effect works.

The first half of the book establishes the problems—disconnection with nature and disintegration of community and social networks—that lead to ecological problems including habitat loss and



behaviours that contribute to climate change. He is resolute about tying each idea to a set of recommended actions, usually relevant for the intended audience of the book, and ends each chapter with a section entitled “What Can We Do?” containing ideas such as “join efforts to improve the well-being of less fortunate people” (p. 78) and “observe and record local ecological changes” (p. 36).

The second half of the book provides different types of actions to address the problem: individual, collaborative, and political. The chapter on individual actions fell flat for me. Consuming less, driving less, taking fewer flights, eating more locally, getting out into nature ... these are all ‘Good Things To Do’ but just not enough. Chapin argues that:

although environmentalists often blame environmental damage on companies that extract fossil fuels, mine minerals and clear land for agriculture, these activities are profitable largely because of public demand for products that we consume. (p. 90)

This seems unfair when we consider government subsidies for unsustainable industries and unrelenting corporate greed. The emphasis on individual responsibility comes across as sanctimonious and unoriginal; this unfortunately tainted my view of the rest of the book.

Although the rest of Chapin's recommendations did not resonate with me, his expertise and perspective really shine when he celebrates collaborators. He devotes a significant amount of time discussing the value and practice of dialogue, collaborative work, and effective communication:

This loading-dock model of communication, in which knowledgeable people produce and

deliver knowledge for others to use, is insufficient ... most of the public know a lot about their local systems and often have strong opinions about what information would be useful. (p. 111)

Chapin clearly feels inspired by the work being done around him, and it shows.

Considering the length of this book (<200 pages when you remove notes and references), Chapin tries to pack a lot in. It is a somewhat confusing mix of practical frameworks and tables for conservation and stewardship practitioners (e.g., what makes a novel species invasive; types of ecosystem services; how to best collaborate with different stakeholders), anecdotes from his long career, and sweeping generalizations about how the world works. He makes a lot of effort to extend his optimism to the political and corporate worlds; unfortunately, I think this optimism is generally unfounded. At one point he uses the example of ranchers unlikely to overgraze lands or community members unlikely to pollute their own watershed, to suggest that a hypothetical resource extraction company is unlikely to deplete the resource it is extracting to ensure there are resources for future extraction (p. 137). Unfortunately, corporations are not people—except on paper. In practice, they tend to extract until they are told by regulators that they cannot. He argues that “individuals ultimately determine whether market forces promote or undermine sustainability” (p. 172). If by individuals he means large collective movements that force governments

to implement more strict regulations, I would tend to agree. I would not, however, if he means me making the individual choice to buy recycled toilet paper.

Chapin is a well-respected ecologist, and I would love to see more ecologists writing about politics. They bring a balanced, practical, and holistic approach to a world that is otherwise polarized and harsh, and at the end of the day this is a hopeful book. But what about when the proposed solutions (read: individual actions) have been tried and are clearly not enough? Is that hope or willful naivety? I ultimately left this book feeling frustrated. A lovely hopeful book about collaboration and communication is nice. But maybe what we need now is rage. I’m angry about the state of the world. I’m angry that corporations are stealing our planet’s future. I’m angry that there is so much entrenched systemic inequality. We need urgent voices for these urgent times, but I keep coming back to Chapin’s words:

Understanding without emotional connection is sterile. Passion without understanding bypasses critical thinking and can trigger knee-jerk reactions with unintended consequences. Empathy without action creates more frustration than solutions. (p. 85)

Perhaps I just need to stop reading the never-ending ticker tape of bad news, and start acting—starting, as Chapin would no doubt recommend, in my own community.

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