Peter Ester, Henk Vinken, Solange Simoes, and Midori Aoyagi-Usui (eds.)

*Culture and Sustainability : A Cross-national Study of
Cultural Diversity and Environmental Priorities among Mass Publics
and Decision Makers*

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Addressing global level challenges to sustainability is a complex undertaking. While the number and significance of global environmental problems, such as global warming and declining biodiversity, continues to increase, the human capacity to develop responses and solutions appears at times to be limited. This is probably due in part to the comparative weakness of global regulatory regimes vis-a-vis national regimes. In other words, public and private action is oriented around, and reflects, political, economic and social realities at the level of the nation-state. One might assume, as the authors of this volume appear to do, that the development of multilateral responses to environmental problems is needed and requires mutual understanding of how citizens of various countries perceive environmental problems and their solutions.

The general objective of the authors of *Culture and Sustainability* is to provide such information and address the environmental problems we face as global citizens by collecting and disseminating public opinion data on the environmental attitudes and behaviors of citizens and "environmental elites" from several countries. All of the country based surveys analyzed in this collected volume were developed as part of a single, cross-national research project, wherein the team members examined how cultural setting may be associated with the relationship between environmental attitudes and behaviors, and whether this relationship is similar between citizens and elites in each of the project member countries of Holland, Germany, Japan, Canada, the Philippines, Thailand, China and Brazil. A significant practical objective of the project

appears to be to inform scholars and policy makers of the degree of willingness of citizens in different countries to accept public policies designed to ameliorate environmental problems.

The book utilizes a country-by-chapter approach in presenting the findings from its survey project. The first two chapters explain the general theoretical interests of the project team and describe the development and execution of the survey instrument. Chapters three through seven present the results of the citizen surveys for each of the countries that had representatives in the project, with the exception of chapter 5 which presents comparative findings from Japan, Bangkok and Manila. One particularly useful aspect of these five chapters are the discussions of the unique environmental issues present in each country that are given to provide context for the data results that follow.

Chapters 8 through 12 cycle through the member countries again, only this time presenting the results of the "environmental elite" surveys, the samples for which are generally comprised of business, government and NGO leaders. In these chapters, the authors also contrast the survey results of elite respondents with those of citizens in the country in question. This provides the bridge to the book's final two chapters, which summarize and contrast the findings presented in the previous ten chapters.

As members of an ambitious, multinational research team, the authors of *Culture and Sustainability* are to be commended for successfully completing

what was a daunting task — the creation of a survey instrument that could be utilized in diverse cultural settings and the implementation of that survey in the various countries. This volume will be particularly useful in graduate seminars in the environmental social sciences, as the survey results can be effectively utilized to stimulate a variety of discussions on the priorities citizens and elites in different parts of the world place on different environmental issues. Readers will be particularly intrigued to discover that, in some cases at least, citizens from “less developed” countries are more interested in environmental issues than citizens in “developed” countries, and that it is not unusual to discover that citizens express stronger environmental concerns than their respective elites. My own interpretation of these results is that average citizens, perhaps because their lives are more likely to be focused on basic livelihood issues, are also more likely than elites, and many of us scholars as well, to recognize that the so called “trade-off” between economic growth and the environment is a false argument, perhaps perpetrated by elites whose goal is to protect their own privileged economic and political power. Citizens are all too aware that their present and future economic well-being is dependent on sustaining a physical environment that can continuously provide crucial public goods, such as clean water and air!

The empirical findings presented in this volume

are numerous and diverse, and can provide the basis for other useful discussions regarding public perceptions about, and actions towards, environmental issues. What is disappointing about this book is that it fails to use theoretical debates to develop its own discussions. While the editors do present a comprehensive review of the literature on environmental attitudes and behaviors that provided the foundation for their project, the authors of the subsequent chapters generally do not refer back to the theoretically inspired questions raised in that first chapter to guide their own data analyses. This is particularly apparent in the conclusion section to each chapter, as well as in the last chapter of the book. These conclusions mostly summarize while failing to interpret the findings through the lens of any theoretical framework. This is a shortcoming I hope the authors will address in their intended, subsequent volumes.

As for myself, I will summarize this review by emphasizing that the authors of this book are to be highly praised for undertaking such an ambitious project, and providing us with a wealth of valuable data on the environmental attitudes and behaviors of citizens and elites in various parts of the world. In the future, however, I would encourage them to be even more ambitious and creative in interpreting their findings within the context of theoretical discussions that interest them.

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