

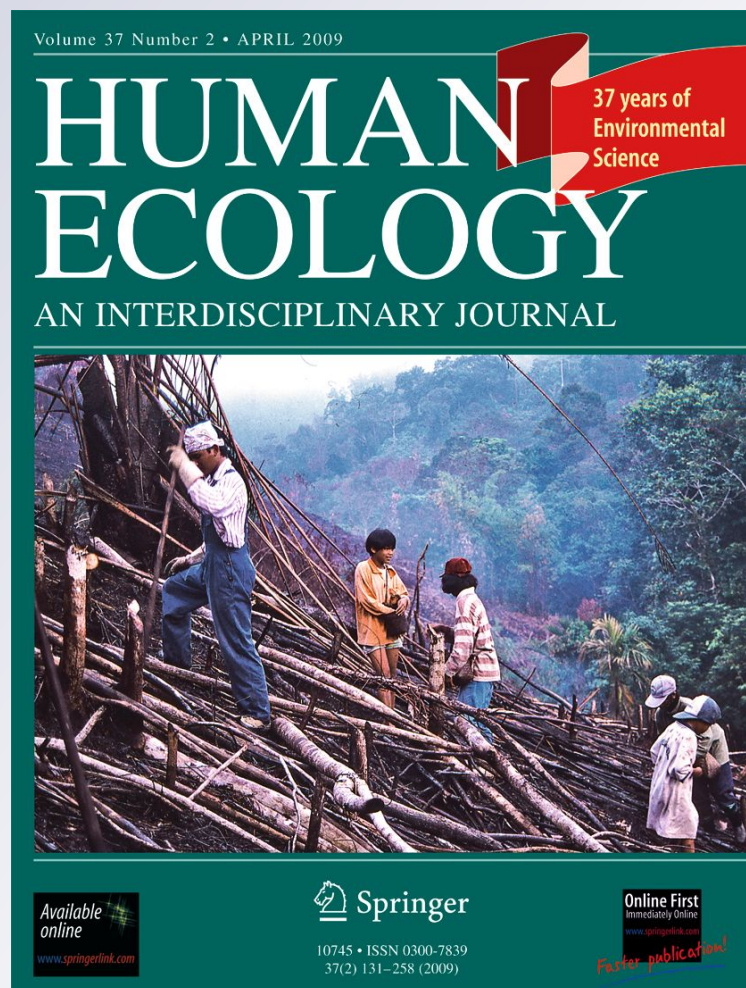
*Priscila Lopes and Alpina Begossi (eds):  
Current Trends in Human Ecology*

**Gerald G. Marten**

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## Priscila Lopes and Alpina Begossi (eds): Current Trends in Human Ecology

Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, ISBN 978-1-443-80340-3  
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This book contains a selection of presentations from the Society for Human Ecology's international conference in Rio de Janeiro in October 2007. The theme of the conference was "Local populations and diversity in a changing world." A collection of chapters about coastal fisheries in Brazil forms the core of the book. The other chapters reflect the diversity of human ecology topics in the Society's conferences.

The editors indicate that the book is intended to show how human ecology enriches our minds, builds tools for adapting to a changing environment, and identifies potential mechanisms and policies to sustain the environment. Every chapter is competently written, providing a wealth of detailed information. The bibliography is prodigious.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, titled "Human Ecology and the Environment," examines slash-burn agriculture, climate change, and other changes in the natural environment to show how local cultures perceive changes and cope with them, how culture bears on decisions affecting sustainability, and how environmental changes feed back to impact culture. The second section, titled "Knowledge and Management" is about using theories and methods from human ecology to correct unsustainable resource use. This is the section that focuses on fisheries – how they are changing, problems presented by the change, and collaborative "co-management" by academics, local communities, and governments to do something about the problems. The third and last section, titled "Integrating Human Ecology," contains a brief miscellany of topics: impacts of environmental changes on

human health; economic evaluation of the environmental and social implications of marine fisheries regimes; and a historical summary of human ecology instruction at several specific academic institutions in Australia, Germany, and the United States.

While *Current Trends in Human Ecology* is truly interesting and rich in substance, its title suggests a dynamism that the book does not fully deliver. The book provides a reasonable sampling of what is happening in human ecology today, but it conveys much less about how human ecology has been changing or where it seems to be headed. In fact, much of *Current Trends in Human Ecology* seems similar to human ecology publications twenty or thirty years ago.

My main apprehension is about the extent to which this book delivers on the worthy goals set out by its editors. While it is an academic book not intended for the general public, the topic should be of interest to a much broader public than human ecologists. After all, human ecology deals with matters that are central to major challenges of our time. Sustainability research could have far reaching consequences for us all. I wonder how a concerned citizen with no previous exposure to human ecology, a person who could move beyond the book's academic style, would react to its content. What does this book really offer for a better future?

I suspect that "outsiders" to human ecology would be disappointed with the book's practical offerings. It delivers on its promises to enrich minds and provide examples of the relevance of human ecology to sustainability, but there is a striking gap between the modest scale and impetus of the genuine achievements in this book and the staggering decline in sustainability that is so alarmingly apparent around the globe.

Of course this shortcoming is not confined to this book. Shortfalls in *Current Trends in Human Ecology* reflect

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shortfalls in human ecology as a field of research. Despite the undeniable contributions of human ecologists and their research to sustainability, if we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that human ecology as a science is not measuring up to the desperate needs of our time. It is not playing a large-scale, central, and actuating role for restoring sustainability in the way that some other sciences such as physics, molecular biology, and economics have provided a decisive impetus for technological or economic development, or altered how we think of ourselves and the world around us and how we function in that world.

I would not presume to say exactly how human ecology should step up to the challenge, but it is clear that the challenge demands some bold changes in the way that human ecologists go about their business. As a worthy reflection of the field, *Current Trends in Human Ecology* can help human ecologists to take stock of their science. Stocktaking is not new for human ecology. For decades, Society for Human Ecology publications have examined questions such as: “What is human ecology?”;

“What should it be doing?”; and “How should we be doing it?”. The answers have generally and justifiably highlighted a celebration of the rich diversity among human ecologists.

Individual and collective examination of the strengths and limitations of *Current Trends in Human Ecology*, and other books like it, could throw light on how human ecology could better meet the challenges of our times. For example, *Current Trends in Human Ecology* could be mined to clarify research areas that particularly deserve strengthening by virtue of their practical potential. It could also be mined to identify and consolidate “products” of human ecology science that already merit dissemination to a broader public – such as perspectives on “how the world works,” tools for promoting sustainability, and systematic facilitation for civil society, businesses, and governments to use the tools – setting in motion a reformulation of those products in ways that will connect human ecology with people outside the field and move it more effectively into the mainstream of human affairs.