

counter to environmental aspirations. Environmentalism is no longer a fringe activity confined to a small group of activists challenging the status quo, but a growing movement that is influencing court decisions. Indeed, this influence extends to laws and national constitutions around the world. Underlying these reforms are efforts to manage risk and uncertainty in a complex world.

The 1990s have witnessed attempts to integrate environmental considerations into institutional behaviour at national and international levels. International environmental conferences and treaties are regularly used to set the agenda for national action. But if we are to achieve this successfully, we must integrate environmental concerns into the functioning of our judicial systems.

In many cases, the judicial system has been called upon to decide between seemingly competing economic and ecological perspectives. Much of the emerging research suggests there is a false dichotomy between environment and economy. Eco-pragmatism adds to this research by seeking to establish a middle road between “tree-huggers” who support environmental conservation as a primary public-policy goal and “bean counters” who argue for the strict application of cost-benefit analysis.

Daniel Farber’s is therefore a timely and well-argued contribution to the understanding of how judicial systems can maintain the balance between competing environmental and economic claims. It does more than that: it puts forward a framework for using judicial pragmatism to integrate environmental considerations into economic activities.

Farber uses the case of the Reserve Mining Co. versus the United States government to show how a pragmatic approach makes it possible to promote environmental conservation while taking into account economic considerations. In this case, the court had to decide whether to rule that a mining company should spend US\$250 million on removing a possibly carcinogenic chemical from a city’s drinking water.

Arguing that “sanctity of human life is of too great value”, the judge ordered the immediate shut-down of Reserve Mining. An appeal court ruled that the evidence “does not support a finding of substantial danger”, and the discharges posed only a “possible medical danger”. The matter then turned to how to identify a feasible land-disposal method.

The book shows how the courts translated the environmental standards embedded in American culture into decisions that promoted conservation while applying cost-benefit analysis. It is a compelling account of how the judicial system dealt with a complex case under conditions of uncertainty and growing scientific knowledge. Generalizing from this account, Farber proposes an approach of cost-benefit analysis and feasi-

bility analysis designed to reflect environmental considerations.

Farber admits that “there are limits to how far Americans are willing to go to achieve environmental goals”. This lack of willingness itself requires explanation because of its implications for relations between the United States and the rest of the world. Many argue for approaches governed by caution. Given the current sweep of globalization, a dialogue between different value systems is essential. One of the key interna-

tional goals today is to reconcile pragmatism with the precautionary approaches that dominate European cultures.

A pragmatic approach should lead to an ecological renaissance and contribute to our understanding of how our existing cultures (and the institutional arrangements that come with them) influence our approach to environmental issues. □

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Hoffman’s Erdős is number one

Paul Hoffman’s book *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* was announced as this year’s winner of the Rhône-Poulenc Prize for Science Books at a dinner at London’s Science Museum last week. Hoffman was one of six finalists:

The Man Who Loved Only Numbers: The Story of Paul Erdős and the Search for Mathematical Truth

by Paul Hoffman
Fourth Estate, £7.99, \$12.95 (pbk)

“... Hoffman is very good at discussing the sort of problems that intrigued Erdős, which makes *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* an excellent introductory book for anyone interested in number theory. As a subject, however, Erdős is difficult. He led a very determinedly undramatic life and Hoffman is forced to fill up many pages with unrelated detail and stories about mathematicians. This upsets the flow of the biography, but frequently adds to the book’s interest... *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* is a fascinating, affectionate biography, but the title is untrue: Erdős loved many things besides numbers, including children (whom he called epsilons, after the mathematical symbol for a very small quantity) and especially his mother, who accompanied him on many of his early travels.” Alexander Masters, *Nature* 394, 535–536 (1998).

A Beautiful Mind

by Sylvia Nasar
Faber, £17.99

This book will be reviewed in *Nature* in July.

How the Mind Works

by Steven Pinker
Norton/Penguin, \$17, £9.99 (pbk)

“... Pinker has a gift for exposition, for witty analogies, for apposite quotation from his vast knowledge of culture, high and low. And he knows when to skip the details of difficult technicalities. He uses all these skills in his latest book. It is erudite, light in touch, but long... The most controversial aspect of Pinker’s package is his defence of evolutionary psychology... Pinker’s evolutionary psychology is useful heuristic for generating hypotheses, but not a refutable theory.” P. N. Johnson-Laird, *Nature* 389, 557–558 (1997).

Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge

by E. O. Wilson
Knopf, \$26

“... Its first thesis is that the humanities, sociology, religion, ethics, art appreciation and almost everything else outside the current remit of science that has not found its analytical roots in evolutionary biology will soon do so. Its second thesis is that, once we understand how we came to be, we shall be constrained in determining where to go. Wilson makes a formidable argument for consilience — unifying on the basis of a common theoretical framework — of those near-disciplines that have no rational structure... Wilson is a kind man, but he has no problems producing withering denunciations where they are called for. His description of our ecological plight, and his heartfelt plea for understanding and urgent action, are written with such authority, clarity and passion that I have read nothing to touch them.” Paul H. Harvey, *Nature* 392, 451–452 (1998).

One Renegade Cell: The Quest for the Origins of Cancer

by Robert Weinberg
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £12.99

Robert Weinberg’s brisk trot through the scientific efforts to understand cancer joins the recent spate of books in which experts write a history of their own field. It is amazing science, but the tired metaphors and unwieldy gene names will not make it easy reading for lay-readers even if it is all terribly relevant to them — as Weinberg points out, about 40 per cent of the population of the United States will develop cancer at some stage in their lives. Nor does the ultimately unsettling subject matter recommend the book as one to read in bed. — Harriet Coles

Mapping the Mind

by Rita Carter
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £25

See page 652 for a review.