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The Edge of Extinction: Travels with Enduring People in Vanishing Lands, Jules Pretty. Cornell University Press (2014). 220 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-5330-4, \$27.95 (hardback)

In his latest book linking people with planet, Jules Pretty uses a series of case studies from around the world to explore the intimate and changing relationships between local people and the lands in which they live. Each of the twelve chapters deals with a separate geographical area spanning most of the globe and capturing a range of environments from tundra through to desert and swamp. In each, Pretty attempts to examine not only the deep historical ties with the land that underpin local culture but how rapidly these are being eroded through a combination of societal and environmental change. The book is evocative, insightful and sensitively written in an accessible style.

The journey begins with the Maori in New Zealand. This, like so many others, is a story of attempts to preserve tradition in the face of modernity. Cockle beds are being overharvested by commercial fishermen, and eel harvesting diminished by habitat loss and change. However, traditional ways are providing insight into environmental change. Statistical analyses of records kept by Maori families of yearly harvests of sooty shearwaters have demonstrated a link to El Niño years, with low harvests of shearwaters in April-May predicting the onset of El Niño later in the same year. In China, Pretty contrasts the modernity of Shanghai with the mountains of Huangshan. Despite the enormous and rapid change that has occurred since the end of the Cultural Revolution, increasing numbers of Chinese are travelling to sacred places such as Huangshan to reconnect with nature. These spiritual ties remain undiminished. In contrast, the desert coast of Murujuga in western Australia offers only a memory of a way of life, preserved in the rich petroglyphs that adorn the rocks. Images of thylacines, lizards and people left by the now extinct Yaburara, convey 50,000 years of co-existence with nature, now juxtaposed with factory developments for mineral and gas extraction. Here industrialisation leaves no space for tradition.

More stories of subjugation and marginalisation of indigenous peoples can be found in the cases provided from Botswana, Canada and the United States. In Botswana the G/wi San people have fought a legal battle to return to lands in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. This is ostensibly about the government wanting the Kalahari as a wildlife reserve but, as Pretty highlights, it is really centred on how people should live – settled or civilised. A similar story emerges through the Indian peoples of North America. The Timbisha people of Death Valley in California have been pushed to the edge of extinction but have endured and fought a long battle to be granted a small reservation within the national park. Traditional ways of hunting and gathering are being revitalised. The Chitimacha of Louisiana have had their own reserve since 1917 and in recent years have become financially secure through allowing gambling within the reserve. However, with none of the tribe now speaking

their original language there remains the danger of loss of identity. The other clear danger that emerges is the marginalisation of knowledge. If human society as a whole is to reconnect with the land in an effort to find more sustainable ways of living, this knowledge must not simply be relegated to living museums. The real challenge the book poses is to find ways to get some of this understanding back into wider society.

Other stories offer more hope in this respect. The Amish people of Ohio are frequently viewed as an anachronism in modern American society. Yet the picture portrayed here is of a people who, although deliberately separated from broader society, have endured because of their adaptability: 'they innovate, but on their terms'. Nowhere is this clearer than in the agricultural practices they employ. They have adopted polytunnels for the cultivation of vegetables and rotational grazing for livestock. The latter frequently involves the use of portable electric fences to constrain animals in small patches of pasture for short periods, which makes more efficient use of the sward. Inputs such as artificial fertilizers and herbicides are largely eschewed and produce is sold at local auctions to minimize overheads. A solid income is generated with a lowered environmental footprint compared to conventional agriculture. It may be that this approach of blending the modern with the traditional offers the most effective way forward in reconnecting us with the land.

In sum, the book is at its best in highlighting traditional cultures and practices that are being lost. It makes no overt attempts to offer solutions but rather frames this loss in the context of our modern, technologically-driven society and its frequently problematic relationship with nature, leaving the reader to make his or her own choices. In most chapters the effect is convincing. However, at times there seems an unwillingness to be critical of tradition. The Maori, for example, were certainly responsible for the extinction of the moa and there is considerable evidence to suggest that Australian aboriginals played a role in the extinction of much of the continent's historical megafauna. There are lessons about stewardship of resources to be learnt here too. Furthermore, the case studies, although richly illustrated, have a strong bias towards the English-speaking world, particularly North America. There is little from Africa and nothing at all from South America, which gives the book a slightly unbalanced feel. Nonetheless, the cases that are provided are richly contextualised, evocatively presented and thought-provoking. The overall effect is accomplished and provides an excellent read for anybody with a broader interest in environment and society.

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