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Review: Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order

By Thomas Princen

Reviewed by Byron Anderson
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Princen, Thomas. *Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010. xiii, 210 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262-01417-5, US \$22.95, cloth

We live as if Earth is a planet with infinite resources. It's not. Though Earth is our life support system, we have fallen into an unsustainable pattern of endless consumption and justify it by way of economic values— growth, progress and consumer demand. Princen's goal is to turn this around by providing alternative ways of thinking and new ways of framing the language to help us see a path to ecological order. While we can live well within our means, there is no simple way to achieve ecological balance.

This is not another save the environment by living greener book. It's about developing paths toward treading softly and living within our means. This book creates images of the possible. It's a how to book, for example, providing five points on how to tackle overconsumption (pages 37-38). Princen believes that it's possible to change the status quo and gives two examples of society moving from abnormal to normal: acceptance of slavery versus acceptance of abolition of slavery and acceptance of smoking versus acceptance of smoking as hazardous to one's health. He also believes it will take hard work, for example, in "long negotiations, frustrating self-organization, and monotonous self-governance" (p. 16). Learning to tread softly will also require us to "reframe a problem which can change people's thinking, their worldview, and their language" (p. 195).

Princen argues for a new normal. What we take for granted today is not normal, but rather excess. There is "nothing normal or inevitable about unending growth on a finite planet" (p. 52). He spells out why we should move beyond the carbon-based-consumer economy toward an economical economy where we live within our means. It is an economic alternative that will counter the impossibility of endless material growth. Princen replaces our unsustainable economic values with noncommercial values, such as being a good citizen and steward, caring for others, and working for social justice.

The text is accompanied with chapter notes and an index. *Treading Softly* is highly recommended for those who want to move beyond on the green consumer stage and start believing that a sustainable world is possible. Those interested in consumption economics and economic aspects of sustainable development will appreciate the vision of this book. The book would be a timely addition to all general library collections.

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