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Peer reviewed

Review: The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature
By Scott Atran and Douglas Medin

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Atran, Scott and Medin, Douglas. *The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. 333 pp. ISBN 978-0-262-13489-7. RRP\$38.00, hardback.

The realization that our perception of nature is shaped largely by cultural factors has been slow to develop amongst conservationists and public agencies concerned with land management. Although now well established in the International Union for Conservation of Nature, even many of the formal documents from that organization show that the realization is not fully understood, and not internalized as it might have been.

This book reports on a series of empirical studies of conceptualization about environmental phenomena, comparing different indigenous cultural communities in the United States and Central America. It also compares concepts as expressed across generations, and hence provides a picture of change from the very young to adulthood.

Findings certainly establish the need to understand culturally based ideas of nature in respect to a specific cultural context, namely, to not rely upon uninformed generalizations. That understanding may well reveal that attempts to educate through standard methods in science education may fail simply because the inherent understandings which children bring to education are overlooked or ignored. A cultural pattern of knowledge organisation may well be in conflict with the knowledge organization which prevails in the classroom.

Many land managers will find this a difficult book. It is essentially based in the philosophy of nominalist ontology, namely exploration of the subjective experience which helps people to identify and understand the nature of their thinking and ideas. It thus uses a complex methodology which appears to be somewhat abstract and is often discussed with a complex vocabulary. Those without an established understanding of this genre of research might do well to commence by reading the first chapter, then jumping to the last for an overview of the outcomes which result prior to tackling the detailed body of the text.

On the other hand, researchers may find that the book points them towards more effective methodologies and strategies for understanding folk biology and the ways in which cultural perceptions exercise a major control over both thinking and behavior.

So, in summary, my personal judgment is that it has served to deepen my own understanding of folk culture, and hence to assist me in developing more effective guidelines for trans-cultural policies. But the book is abstruse to the point where I could not simply use it or extracts from it as recommended reading for the land managers with whom I work.

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