Book Review

The Book of Hope


Conservation biologists tend to encounter the word refuge in positive contexts, often preceded by the words wildlife or biological. But the refuge of David Orr’s new book, The Last Refuge: Patriotism, Politics, and the Environment in an Age of Terror, is from Samuel Johnson, eighteenth-century commentator: “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” From this title onward, relevance to our current sociopolitical circumstances is never hard to trace.

The 13 essays in this slim volume—more than half of which were originally published in Conservation Biology—are full of lively, cross-disciplinary connections. Even though the book is, in part, about the woes of the world, it is a good read: by turns I laughed, shook my fist in the air, and took notes. In spite of the dour subject, the reading is uplifting—in part because it’s just plain pleasurable to have someone think and communicate so clearly, but more because his tone is ultimately optimistic. It is a measure of Orr’s skill as a writer and his insight that when he proclaims that we “are failing, and we ought to ask why,” (p. 22) we find inspiration rather than despair.

Orr has a knack for dipping knowedly into the deep wells of many disciplines—politics, economics, and ecology, for starters—without becoming beholden to any of them or lapsing into their professional jargon. In this volume, he makes penetrating, often pointed, analysis of recent political events in the United States and abroad (and shows how the two realms cannot and should not be separated), focuses attention on what is really involved in a transition to sustainability, and makes bold assertions about the types of changes needed to move toward a fundamentally different human culture. He is explicit about his assumption that “tinkering at the margins of our problems won’t do. It is time to think more deeply about the intersections of human frailties, possibilities, and obligations with global ecological realities” (p. 7).

Along the way, he explores the nature of leadership and the pitfalls of the U.S. Constitution (challenging the assumption that it should serve as a model for the world), dissects the flawed arguments made by the Bush Administration for war, and tells some good stories. One of the latter relates his journey into the White House as member of a delegation of “sane,” mostly Republican, environmentalists, intent on upgrading the administration’s environmental policies. This meeting—the success of which can be guessed—took place just a month after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. Another essay puts that disturbing event into larger social and political context—as a “clash between two kinds of fanaticism” (p. 41). On one side, he tells us, “are those wishing to stop all change…” (p. 41), while on the other “are the free-market fundamentalists who intend to change everything for everyone, everywhere, all the time” (p. 41).

Facing the ecological calamities that are all too familiar to readers of this journal is what Orr calls (following Father Thomas Berry) “the Great Work” (p. 34), which he defines as “…the moral and ecological recali-
intellectual messes than it is to clarify complicated issues” (p. 51). Moreover, to say that we have a lack of visionary leadership is an understatement. Orr spends one chapter imagining what our leaders could be. “For good reasons,” he writes, “we penalize drunk drivers. The same should be true of those intoxicated by ego, power, and ideology... We should not ask less of our leaders than we do of drivers” (p. 128).

If left at this sober assessment, this would be a much less satisfying book. But Orr asserts that the public “...is hungry for authentic vision, committed leadership, and real solutions” (p. 51). In his postscript, “The Hour Before Dawn,” he offers 10 moving reasons for genuine hope and ends with this statement: “The power of humor, creativity, and enthusiasm will prevail. That, I believe, is how the universe is made and what we are made of” (p. 135). Ultimately, this is a book of hope, an eloquent declaration for a better world—for, as Wendell Berry once said, “standing for what we stand on.” The Last Refuge offers a sturdy, trustworthy handrail while we struggle to our feet.

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Literature Cited