

'Plundered Planet' nicely balances economy-environment discussion

"Nature matters and we are making a mess of it," Paul Collier observes in his new book, "The Plundered Planet: Why We Must – and How We Can – Manage Nature for Global Prosperity."

"Our relationship to nature brings into play powerful emotions and ordinary people can sometimes be misled into beliefs that may seem comforting but ultimately prove destructive," Collier continues. "My theme is not how the natural world can be preserved as an end in itself, but how it can be harnessed to transform the poor societies without placing unreasonable demands on the rest of us."

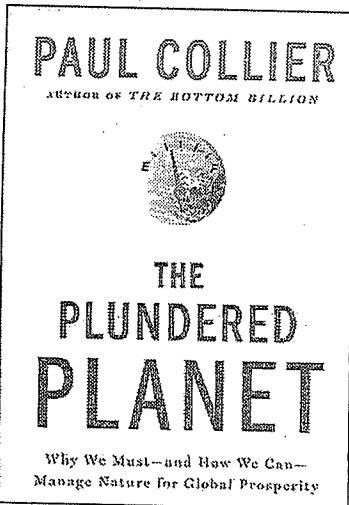
"The Plundered Planet" is composed of 11 chapters arranged in five major sections. Although Collier delves into some pretty heavy-duty ideas and principles, it should be noted that the book is accessible to anyone with only a cursory understanding of economics and science.

I found Chapter 3, "Cursed by Nature? The Politics of Natural Assets," to be especially intriguing. Here Collier posits a very interesting hypothesis centered on the notion that the discovery and exploitation of natural resources often has profound and devastating consequences for the societies indigenous to the region.

"There are some high-visibility instances of natural assets appearing to ruin a country," Collier explains. "Sierra Leone's diamonds, for example, seemed to shred the fabric of that society to pieces; Nigeria's oil fueled the corruption of the political class."

"But are these just outliers?" Collier continues. "After all, Botswana harnessed its diamonds to produce the fastest growing economy in the world, and Norway used its oil to achieve the world's highest living standard. The question becomes whether there really is a 'resource curse,' and whether, if it does exist, it is limited to countries with deeper problems."

This type of balanced discussion characterizes Collier's approach to the subject matter at hand and helps distinguish him from many of his contemporaries who seem to overly accentuate the evidence supporting their particular viewpoint while downplaying the alternatives. Moreover, it is refreshing to note that Collier does not see the issue of how we should go about accessing



"The Plundered Planet: Why We Must – and How We Can – Manage Nature for Global Prosperity" by Paul Collier. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 288 pages, \$16.95.

our natural resources as an "either/or" proposition, as so many authors have a tendency to do, when arguing for restraint in the rate at which we are currently consuming resources that are admittedly finite in nature. Collier's fundamental thesis is that we can essentially have it all – economic development and ecological sustainability – if we are more creative and resourceful in the way we collaborate and proceed.

"Harnessing natural resources for prosperity depends upon the decision chain," Collier asserts. "As with a real chain, if any one link is broken the chain as a whole is broken. Harnessing natural assets is therefore a weakest link problem."

Collier also understands that to be successful in accomplishing our goals and meeting our needs on several fronts, patience and perseverance are equally important: "The process by which the extraction of natural assets transforms poverty into prosperity inevitably takes time, typically around a generation. Even if decisions are initially wise, they can be reversed. Plunder looms before the society."

Chapter 10, "Nature and Hunger," is particularly relevant as it deals with a natural resource that is near and dear to most of us on a fairly routine basis:

"Between 2005 and 2008 the world price of basic foods jumped by over 80 percent," Collier

reveals. "In the poorest countries the rise in food prices was a major political event. There were riots in some 30 countries; in Haiti they brought down the government. The increase in prices proved to be temporary; the global economic crisis was an effective though catastrophic remedy. Commercial agriculture may be irredeemably unromantic, but if it is part of the route to full stomachs then it should be harnessed to that purpose."

Ultimately, Collier is optimistic that we can reconcile our growing appetite for energy with our fundamental need to keep the planet habitable.

"For any particular global problem, the approach that is most feasible depends upon what citizens, country-by-country, conclude is acceptable," Collier writes in Chapter 11, "Restoring Natural Order," near the end of the book. "The question is not whether the citizens of China and other countries will have the power to discipline their governments; citizen power will be unstoppable. If people recognize a common responsibility for the custody of the natural world then governments will have to deliver it."

For the record, Collier is director of the Center for the Study of African Economics as well as a professor of economics at Oxford University. Prior to his current position, he served as director of development research at the World Bank. His previous books include "The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It" and "Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places."

"What looms ahead is a battle between the ethics of custody and the seductive sentiments of national self-interest," Collier concludes. "You, like me, will be in that battle."

And it is obviously important that we win this battle.

I strongly recommend "The Plundered Planet" for anyone striving to understand what the current environmental hoopla is all about as well as for those of you who truly believe we can find "win-win" solutions to the enormous problems that lie ahead.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.