
Dr. Spedding has put together a fascinating treatise that addresses in a unique way the interaction of worldwide agriculture and the maze of issues that affect daily lives of the citizens of the world. I emphasize world because this book has a good international flavor even if it does emphasize the northern hemisphere. Maybe this book could be described best as a grouping of facts (well expressed in graphs and simple tables) about agriculture, the environment and the people of the world, wrapped around some level opinions (often set aside in boxes) about what these facts might mean for present and future generations and flavored with good quotes (and background of the quotes, a very unusual but much appreciated approach), and an excellent bibliography, and topped with some thought-provoking questions at the end of each chapter. It is hearty fare indeed. I only wish I had access to this book when I was teaching a course entitled Soils and Environmental Pollution.

Dr. Spedding starts with a chapter defining agriculture from a global perspective. And refreshingly, he does not dwell only on production but on larger issues such as capital, international trade, and population. The Feeding the World chapter is one of my favorites; Dr. Spedding opens it with the lovely African proverb, “Whether elephants make love or war, the grass suffers.” He does an excellent job putting poverty and hunger together, pointing out that needs of the world for food are different from the economic demand for food. At the end of this chapter he asks two questions: (i) What is the optimum rate of population increase? (ii) Why do cereals dominate food supplies? The next chapter struggles with developing countries and appropriate agriculture to help these countries produce their own food. Dr. Spedding throws in some good thoughts and some tough questions at the end of the chapter to make it hard to stop reading once you start. The next chapters look at the role of plants and the role of agriculture. They put plant and animal nutrition together and do good work with classification of plant and animal diseases. A good thought-teaser at the end of the animal section is: If a harvest mouse is about as small as an animal can get, can its offspring survive? And of plants, how much can one feel, and if so, can they suffer?

Dr. Spedding has an excellent discussion of systems that I think is a main course for any agricultural student. He can do justice to this major contribution. One question: Is it only production systems that can serve these together. He applies them in the chapter on efficiency of feed conversion to some tough topics. Agriculture and the environment are the topics of the next chapter. How can we move from ford to get an eight-page side salad. But this left room for one does not normally see in agricultural texts: animal welfare, agriculture and human health, and research needs.

I am sure it was tempting for the editors to quit at the research needs section, but this book ends much better. 19 pages devoted to the future. This chapter touches on a whole of topics ranging from the various alter- systems possible in the future to implications for agriculture and the food industry if some of the alternates become the reality. The chapter ends with some great philosophic after-dinner repast offers background on each system defends well the humour (British spelling) of the quote “Common sense and a sense of humour are the same thing moving at different speeds. A sense of common sense, dancing.” Or even more apt for the long staff meeting “No-one is exempt from the misfortune is to do it solemnly.”

No one could read this book and not do a little thinking with some good salt and pepper humor. It’s funny. If you can keep it in the reference stacks long enough.

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