

Book Review: An Ecology of Happiness

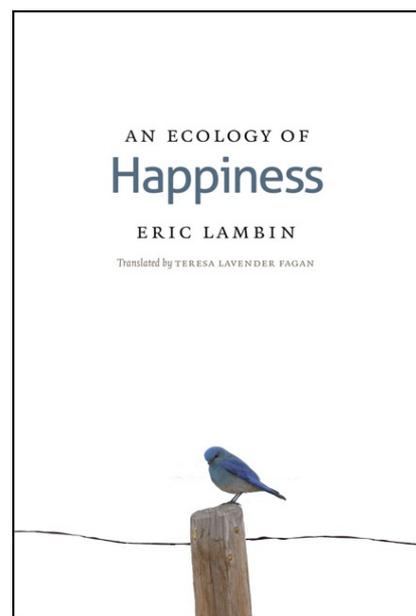
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*In **An Ecology of Happiness**, Eric Lambin asks us to consider that there may be no better reason to value and protect the health of the planet than for our own personal well-being. Lambin draws on research in the fields of geography, political ecology, environmental psychology, urban studies, and disease ecology, among others, to answer such questions as: To what extent do we need nature for our well-being? How does environmental degradation affect our happiness? What can be done to protect the environment and increase our well-being at the same time? This book is a fresh contribution, as well as a welcome change of tone, to the most important conversation in our world at the moment, finds **John Cullen**.*

An Ecology of Happiness. Eric Lambin. University of Chicago Press. October 2012.

Find this book:

Many of the contemporary cultural products which attempt to provide some form of eco-friendly curriculum do so with a distinctly 'be-green-or-else' attitude. Think of the graphic images of tsunamis crashing over the Tibetan Himalayas with the ominous tag-line 'we were warned' that advertised [2012](#), the urgency contained within the title of [The Day After Tomorrow](#), or the unrelenting bleakness of what can happen to us, humankind, in [The Road](#). Although such attempts by the mainstream to create a sense of impending crisis about climate change have their hearts in the right place, for those who believe that we have waited too long to take action to protect and preserve our natural environment the result can be one of downright negativity. James Lovelock's pronouncements that humans are too stupid to understand and prevent climate change, to the dreariness of the cover image of John Urry's otherwise excellent [Climate Change & Society](#) all create the impression that safeguarding the ecological is something that must, rather than should, be done.



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Eric Lambin's *An Ecology of Happiness* tries to remove the idea that protecting our eco-system is a necessary chore and instead can be a significant contributor to human happiness. This is an attractive approach which appeals to our self-interested search for pleasure. Lambin takes on the obvious contradictions to this from the outset: life-expectancy, average income, and general health have improved since the middle of the twentieth century; a time when economic growth began to be 'bought' at the cost of large-scale environmental degradation. The separation of rich and poor countries and the ensuing division between human beings and nature is emphasised in the first chapter and becomes something of a leitmotif throughout the text. Having quickly disposed of claims of necessary progress, Lambin clarifies the central theme that the text engages with: how can protecting and preserving the biosphere sustain happiness for humans? We have become so accustomed to the hegemony of consumption, that we can scarcely imagine life without it. We can show shocking pictures of melting ice-caps abroad and endure increasingly erratic weather at home, but the fact remains that many will not change the way they live their lives because they imagine that it will come at some cost to their personal welfare.

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Lambin begins by assessing the evidence that having a relationship with nature as something one is part of, rather than something one consumes or uses, has a positive impact on well-being. He then explores the impact that rapid rates of environmental degradation have had on the world, before considering some economic development policies of Vietnam, Costa Rica, and Bhutan, which all have strong environmental aims. Lambin reports that Vietnam has experienced significant economic growth since the mid-1980s, which has resulted in the some pollution. However, because reforestation is an integral part of Vietnam's rural development policy, the net result is that the country has experienced overall reforestation. Costa Rica, a country which has made massive achievements in terms of social progress and reaping the benefits of investing in renewable sources of energy (95% of energy consumed in that country comes from environmentally-friendly sources) has also experienced many benefits from protecting its natural forests, not least of which are the economic gains from eco-tourism. Perhaps, most interesting, is the small landlocked Kingdom of Bhutan, which appears to have developed its policies within a Buddhist framework that prioritises happiness and the natural world.

Interestingly, the countries which have developed 'national policies that have been put in place to reconcile a quest for happiness with a preservation of the integrity of nature' (p. 134) are not 'rich'. This is one reason why the example that they set to the rest of the world is particularly intriguing. Another is the fact that the approaches that they have applied are so diverse. Lambin, however, is careful not to present Vietnam, Costa Rica and Bhutan as utopian enclaves within an unsustainable geo-political order, and emphasises the internal and external challenges which the policies adopted in these countries face.

Citing Charles Darwin on the need for popular treatises, Lambin writes: "This book offers a synthesis of recent original research from very different specialized areas which are very rarely examined alongside one another. And yet, all of these areas of research deal more or less directly with various dimensions of happiness" (p. 9). By the time the reader reaches the conclusion, Lambin has managed to demonstrate the connection between happiness and the environment via evidence from a range of social scientists and economists. The varied forms of contribution mean that this, the central argument of *An Ecology of Happiness*, can be utilised in a number of different educational settings and the potential for including the thesis of connecting environmental anthropocentric selfishness with the protecting of the natural environment in future debates very clearly. In concluding, Lambin presents us with five choices that humans have if we wish to reconcile the search for happiness with protecting our natural world.

1. Do we change our values from enjoying the material, to experiencing the natural? 2. Do we continue to promote urban cultures or cultivate our biophilic tendencies? 3. Do we change our relationships with animals? 4. Do we change the way that globalization has been used to benefit the very few into a social process that delivers returns to all? 5. Do we change from being ego-centric to altruistic?

The arguments in *An Ecology of Happiness* are solidly presented and tied together very neatly in the conclusion, which functions as a sort of spiritual overview for the ideas discussed in this short text. "A relationship with nature is a source of realization of the self, it gives meaning to life and procures happiness. The yearning to interact with the natural environmental is inscribed in human nature. To preserve the natural world and its diversity is thus in the profound interest of individuals and of humanity. A positive perception of natures and its benefits promotes the adoption of behaviours that are in accord with sustainable development. Indeed, respect for the environment is based on an affective connection with nature, and thus contributes to human happiness" (p. 160).

The writing throughout is somewhat 'pacy' with each of the eleven short chapters (including the introduction and conclusion), neatly segregated into vignette-like sub-chapters, making the read of this handsome little volume somewhat pleasurable itself. *An Ecology of Happiness* is a fresh contribution, as well as a welcome change of tone, to the most important conversation in our world at the moment.

John Cullen lectures in the School of Business at NUI Maynooth. His research work is concerned with management learning & spirituality, and particularly their impact on our relationship with the natural world and society. [Read more reviews by John.](#)