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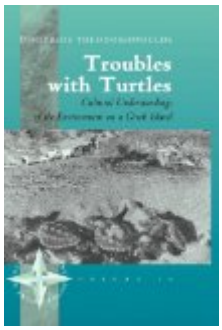

Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Troubles with Turtles: Cultural Understandings of the Environment on a Greek Island.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003. x + 208 pp. $25.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-57181-697-9.

Reviewed by Eirini Saratsi

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Troubles with Turtles provides an enthusiastic and provocative anthropological account of human-environment relationships in the island community of the village Vassilikos, Zakynthos, Greece. Writing in defense of the local population's resistance to conservation legislation that has been imposed during recent years, the author centers his discussion around a familiar and captivating theme: namely, the cultural discourses embedded in indigenous populations' understandings of their surrounding environment. At the heart of this analysis stands a concern to explore the importance of local traditions and practices in relation to regulatory impositions of external agencies. In this respect the book offers informative reading for those who are interested in exploring ways that different cultures might respond to environmental directives.

The introductory chapter calls attention to problems generated by the introduction of radical practices by environmentalists in Greece. In doing so, Theodossopoulos brings up the important issue of the "under-representation" or many times "lack of representation" of the culture of indigenous communities in decision making regarding nature conservation. The author very accurately notes that "conservationists, politicians, and journalists in Greece have failed to identify anything worth mentioning in the relationship of rural Greeks to the animate and inanimate environment" (p. 2). I would also concur with him when he points out that although professionalism is increasingly abundant amongst conservationists in Greece, their actions remain in many respects drastic, and often result in them being classified by local communities as "hostile, untrustworthy, alien individuals" (p. 8). Though not exclusively, the scope of this book, then, is to provide a justification for local resistance to nature conservation regulations by exploring the cultural background that informs it. However, despite what its title suggests, *Troubles with Turtles* is more than anything an ethnographic monograph where the author explores the cultural environmental values of a Greek rural society, rather than a decisive account on the actual conflict with turtles.

The author draws on the setting of Vassilikiots' confrontation with the natural world by

analyzing the history of land ownership in Zakynthos, arguing that peoples' behavior can be explained through their attachments to their land. Rural populations of Vassilikos were landless tenants to their rich landlords up until the Second World War. As these people managed to obtain pieces of land, this land became, therefore, invaluable beyond any "narrow conceptual calculation" of its economic worth. In short, for these people land tenure represents social status and sustains ideas of well-being. It is the right of land ownership and the labor that people have invested in this land that justifies their claim that they legitimately deserve to use their property as they wish.

Although the author provides a very detailed and generally convincing account of the intangible dimensions of these attachments, there is nonetheless a veiled discrepancy in the empirical corroboration of his arguments. While he advocates that problems with conservation start where it contests the logic or meaningfulness of peoples' struggle in life, it is clear from his analysis that such problems are often generated where conservation regulations harm the financial prospects of some indigenous actors. For instance, confrontations with conservation regulations for turtles often arise on an economic basis where tourism development is prohibited on certain pieces of land.

The author claims that turtles have historically resided in a category of wild animals, ones that are neither considered legitimately useful for the locals nor harmful for their property, since they do not cause any damage to their animals or their field cultivation. So, people seemed to be indifferent to the turtles and unaware of any ecological function of these animals. The author points out that "before the recent introduction of turtle conservation on their land [people were] totally uninterested in this rare reptilian species" (p. 114), without particularly elaborating on the fact that troubles started because conservation regulations impinged on the economic interests for future tourist development. Instead, the author seems to suggest that people would remain hostile to these regulations regardless of its economic value, simply because they confronted deep-seated attachments to land ownership and management. I would strongly doubt, given the right information, that people would be so affronted about these regulations were it not for the economic potential of their land.

The author often appeals to the deep sensitivity people feel for the animate or inanimate world around them and the book embraces local people's actions with sympathy. However, it does not suggest any relation between these actions and ideas of a balanced environment; the author seems to ignore a logic of survival that often has been formulated by indigenous populations depending on strictly local sources, through practices that have longstanding relationships with principles of conservation. Such principles are not explored and the book fails in this respect to make the case for how peoples' cultural understanding of their environment now comes to be confrontational with environmentalists' ideas. Where the main weakness of the book lies, I believe, is where people's sensibility about their surrounding nature is not linked with obvious consequences for the existing world.

For Theodossopoulos, the Vassilikiots's behavior towards animals is directly connected to an anthropocentric religious cosmology. He believes that this religious context is so important that he must discuss in detail the classification of animals and plants given by Saint Basil in the *Hexaemeron*. Yet he rarely investigates the influence of religious upbringing on material action. He spends much time and effort analyzing this religious cosmology to come to the conclusion that:

"This cultural background does not always provide Vassilikiots with ready-made solutions in their everyday day interaction with their environment. It only suggests some conceptual principles regarding the position of the human protagonists

in the physical setting that includes wild and domesticated animals, cultivated fields, and wilderness. In their daily practice, farmers constantly have to improve while experimenting with cultivation and animal husbandry and apply their own empirical solutions to problems related to their human-environment interactions" (pp. 170-171).

I found this discussion regarding religious cosmology barely convincing in relation to Greek people and unnecessary and redundant in the text; not because it is impossible to conceive that philosophical principles can inform peoples' behavior towards the animate world, but mainly because there is no empirical evidence to illustrate how such ideas might come to work. Indeed, as it stands, these claims read more like an obligatory theoretical statement than an essential and formative part of the discussion. This is particularly so, given that the author suggests in conclusion that "anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, antagonism and veneration of animals and nature, can hardly be confined to general categories spanning broad historical periods and cultural regions" (p. 173).

The author also deals with gender distinctions in the Greek village and women's participation in the household. Although I am familiar with the significance of their role in producing the household's income, I did not detect any sense that this identity position may be contested. On the contrary, the author emphasizes a wholly affirmative reading of these social relations by claiming, for instance, that women's willingness to participate in harvesting is not merely a contribution to their "household's self-sufficiency and prestige," but also a statement of their intention to invest in "meaningful relationships" with their husbands and other members of their households (pp. 81-86). I would like to have seen gender attitudes handled more critically, exploring how gender relations might inform human-environmental interactions in a variety of ways.

Of course these criticisms are intended only to highlight points that would strengthen an already worthy account. Though predominantly informative about Greek rural life, the book constitutes an illustrative and informative account about human relationships with the natural world more generally. My honest opinion is that despite some weaknesses, it is a fairly sensitive addition to the growing literature of ethnographic studies on society-nature relations. Ultimately, the book urges the audience to pursue a more holistic and thoroughgoing incorporation of lay peoples' knowledge of the environment when confronted with local nature conservation issues, which is perhaps the most important claim of all.

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