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Imperial Ecology: Environmental order in the British Empire, 1895-1945

Peder Anker

£41.50 Harvard University Press



AS CHILDREN of the new physics, we like to explain unexpected events from superstorms to stock market plunges by invoking chaotic behaviour within apparently stable systems. *New Scientist* was at it in November with a cover feature on a theory that linked earthquakes, premature births, market crashes and mass extinctions. But 70 years ago when the stock market crashed, they called in ecologists to explain.

Oxford's Charles Elton--on his uppers because nobody could afford to buy furs from his chief sponsor, the Hudson Bay Company in Canada--made an attempt to explain business cycles in terms of ecological succession, climax and plague.

He compared bull and bear markets to the demographics of voles, mice and lemmings. He then went on to promise that the markets would one day recover as assuredly as a population of lemmings recovers.

Peder Anker's *Imperial Ecology* is the unexpected story of how late-imperial British ecologists took their arcane studies of marine life off Spitzbergen or the game of southern Africa and brought them to bear on very different areas of interest. These ecologists fashioned from their studies a view of human ecology broad enough, in this telling, to embrace cycles of sexual activity in Japanese brothels, famine in central Asia, the building blocks for national economic planning and the cultural underpinnings of Nazism. An eye-opener.

Fred Pearce

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