



An Ecology of Happiness
By Eric Lambin
Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan
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We face a great contemporary paradox. Many domestic economies are stagnating and in desperate need of growth. At the same time, the apparently free natural resources of the planet are being used up. We are told that consuming more may restore growth, yet this will in turn damage the planet further. Most people think that having more money will make them happier. But the more we have, the more we seem to want. It is true that the poorest, who lack food, water and security and the human dignity they bring, are made happier as they get wealthier, but after a certain threshold is passed, well-being is independent of consumption. Yet consuming more is associated with progress. And does not progress equal more happiness?

In last year's *UK National*

Ecosystem Assessment, a whole chapter was devoted to the health and well-being benefits that arise from our engagements with nature. We now know that ecosystems provide direct positive effects on mental and physical health, and indirect positive effects by furnishing locations for contact with nature, physical activity and social engagement, all of which positively influence well-being and offer a catalyst for behavioural change in encouraging the adoption of healthier lifestyles. Health and happiness are, in short, services we partially obtain from ecosystems.

The ecosystems of happiness are thus complex and worthy of

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study. This book's title seems to imply two potential explorations: an analysis of the ecosystem of interactions among natural and human-made systems that surround us, and observations of how natural ecosystems make us happy. Sadly, Eric Lambin's contribution is unable to do either. Just one of the 10 chapters explores how the experiencing of nature influences humans. There are others on the exploitation of animals; how infectious agents, arthropods and microbes emerge as threats to health; the environmental damage caused by cities; environmental conflicts and refuges; and finally how some poor countries are setting good examples.

Much of the book is thus not about happiness, nor really about how the environment affects it. The chapters on threats to human health make an assumption that their removal will result in happiness. But the subtraction of a negative does not automatically mean the creation of a different positive. The chapter on animals, for example, documents the ills we often do to them – but changes in practices to improve the lives of animals do not necessarily mean that human happiness improves. The blurbs for the book suggest that Lambin makes “a persuasive case for strong links between healthy ecosystems and happy humans”. There is clearly a rela-

tionship, also recently addressed by the 2012 Royal Society's People and the Planet project. But this book adds little.

An Ecology of Happiness further suffers from the translator-editor problem: where metric units are used, imperial ones are added in brackets, leading to recurring irritations over implied spurious accuracy: examples include 25,000 litres (6578.9 gallons), 39°C (102.2°F) and 30m (33.3 yards). The search for journalistic subtitles also grates: the chapter on zoonoses contains a section on bird flu and is called “Gifts from Asia”. Some observations are equally odd: “a typical illness in cities is type 2 diabetes”, writes the author. This implies an increased likelihood of diabetes in cities, but lower levels of physical activity, the popularity of modern diets and genetic predispositions are no less likely in rural than urban areas: it is just that more people live in cities, so there are more cases. Other comments are equally simplistic, including the suggestion that the catastrophic industrial pollution in Chernobyl “led to a change of regime”. A nuclear accident in the Ukraine led to the fall of the USSR. Really?

The penultimate chapter does nonetheless draw on promising evidence from three poorer countries where a variety of progressive policies have improved ecosystem services with the aim of improving well-being. Costa Rica has enlarged both forest cover and protected areas, and has substantially increased ecotourism to nearly 2 million annual visitors. Bhutan famously implemented a middle path of development with a focus on using Buddhism as a foundation for a metric of gross domestic happiness (rather than gross domestic product). Vietnam has increased reforestation while improving agricultural practices that have served to boost farm output from smallholders. These are small steps, and there is a long way to go, but they are a start.

My wishes when reading the title of this book were not met. It seems that I have been made unhappy. Perhaps I should have gone shopping.

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