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Terrestrial Ecoregions of North America: A Conservation Assessment.

Taylor H. Ricketts, Eric Dinerstein, et al. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999. xxiv+485 pp. Figures, tables, notes, references, index. \$75.00 paper (ISBN 1-55963-722-6).

Terrestrial Ecoregions of North America provides a comprehensive assessment of the status of biodiversity and conservation within the United States and Canada. Part of a global program conducted by the World Wildlife Fund, it is essentially a reference work offering baseline data for conservation planning and restoration. The book emphasizes the precarious condition of many natural areas in North America, at the same time illustrating the great diversity that still exists in some areas and stressing the sense of urgency required to ensure the preservation of viable plant and animal populations in their natural habitats. It is not a textbook on conservation, however, but an evaluative report based on carefully described methodology and summary analysis that integrates an index of "biological distinctiveness" and an index of "conservation status" for 116 ecoregions. Ecoregions are defined as relatively large areas of land or water that contain geographically distinct assemblages of natural communities. As part of this assessment, ecoregion maps were compared with the ranges of over 20,000 North American species of native vascular plants, birds, butterflies, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and terrestrial molluscs. Other procedures, equally comprehensive, considered information collected in other studies and assessments by expert committees.

The authors have adopted a rather unusual format: the main body of text is only 105 pages in length and includes six chapters of narrative and summary analysis accounting for less than 25 percent of the book. Included in this section are nineteen essays that mostly discuss ecological aspects of threatened species and habitat conservation. Generally quite readable, they offer a welcome distraction from the methodological jargonese found on subsequent pages. The remainder of the book is devoted to appendices in which methodology and results are described more fully. The volume is structured to enable the reader to "choose the degree of detail appropriate to his or her interests" (4). Most readers, however, will probably refer to the later pages for clarification and amplification, especially in sections where the text is so distilled as to make it little more than a list of ecoregions. For this reason some of the material in the appendices might usefully have been incorporated into the main text. Because of this unusual approach, the detailed summaries of each ecoregion are presented in Appendix F, some

264 pages in length; the map showing the locations of the ecoregions is found on page 8, which readers are likely to refer to frequently. Included in Appendix F are essays focusing on groups of ecoregions of similar type, creating a somewhat inconsistent procedure. Only the Hawaiian Islands, the Great Plains grasslands, and the Mediterranean habitats of California are treated in this way. Ecoregions in the Canadian North and Alaska, for example, don't receive a similar overview, yet they "offer rare opportunities to conserve globally outstanding biodiversity in relatively intact landscapes" (98).

Terrestrial Ecoregions of North America summarizes a considerable amount of information and the work of many regional biologists and conservation experts and succeeds in its goal of assessing the biological wealth of the continent, describing the types and severity of threats the natural world faces, and enumerating the activities needed to enhance biodiversity. The massive scope of the project has necessarily caused some organizational problems, but in general it is a well-produced book. Few typographical errors are apparent, though a major error occurs in the maps: figures 3.5e and 3.5f (butterfly richness and endemism) are the same as figures 3.5g and 3.5h (reptile richness and endemism). With this exception, the quality of the color maps is excellent. Unfortunately, some of the color photographs did not print as well. But these minor points barely detract from a reference handbook anyone interested in the environment and conservation will find useful. **O. W. Archibold**, *Department of Geography, University of Saskatchewan*.