Europe and Asia. Like other recent uses of biological and ecological factors to understand the evolution and fates of human societies (*3*), Pomeranz has rooted his argument in variables that need much more attention. His most striking argument is that European industrialization was contingent and by no means inevitable. In the histories of human societies (as in the course of biological evolution), chance and geographical accident may play a much larger role than we once thought.

References

1. L. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994).
2. E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia.* (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, ed. 2, 1987).
3. J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (Norton, New York, 1997).

CD-ROM: CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

Preserving Diversity the U.S. Way

Hugh Possingham

"What discount rate do you use in making financial decisions?" "Do the mosquitos that spread malaria, or the protozoans that cause malaria, deserve the same protection as disease-resistant strains of rice or endangered peregrine falcons?" These are just two of the thought-provoking questions that E. O. Wilson will ask you if you explore Dan Perlman's CD-ROM *Conserving Earth's Biodiversity*.

The first question reminds us all that conservation biologists need a basic understanding of social and economic issues. The second question is great for stimulating minds; I have used a version of it for many years in lectures to groups that range from primary school children to bird clubs. Unfortunately, that same question also provoked me to get annoyed, once again, by the parochial attitude of U.S. conservation biologists. Peregrine falcons are distributed across the globe, are not endangered now, and have never been endangered in Australia. Like many U.S. books in fields related to ecology, this CD focuses on case studies from the United States and other places where U.S. researchers have done much of their work, such as Costa Rica. Although illustrating concepts with examples from one part of the world is no great crime, the CD is also conceptually parochial. Too frequently it ignores fundamental advances made outside North America, for example in reserve design theory.

Conserving Earth's Biodiversity, with E.O. Wilson
by Edward O. Wilson and Dan L. Perlman

Island Press, Washington, DC, 2000. CD-ROM with User's Guide. $39.95. ISBN 1-55963-773-0. CD-ROM with User's Guide and Instructor's Manual. $39.95. ISBN 1-55963-774-9.

With my pet prejudices out of the way, the obvious question remains: What does a CD called *Conserving Earth's Biodiversity* do that a book will not? The lively impact of E. O. Wilson's taped questions, which get you thinking and provoke responses, is one indication that CDs can provide a viable and exciting advance on printed media. (One wonders when *Science* will be available with interactive graphics.) Navigation through the CD is as transparent as reading a book, yet more flexible. From every page, there is a range of options for further exploration, which will be enjoyed by high school students and lower-level undergraduates. The CD also enables the viewer to explore ideas and facts linked in a "Web-like" fashion. For every topic discussed on the CD, links to related Web sites are provided through the Island Press Web site, thus they can be updated continuously. (The links can be independently accessed through www.islandpress.org/ceb/intro_1/index.ssi.) Although the CD's slideshows, animations, and interactive maps are only small advances on what a book can do, the provision of a small number of interactive models and quizzes adds enormous educational value. How could you enable a student to explore the consequences of demographic stochasticity in a book? Wilson and Perlman have produced a first exciting step. Their approach offers plenty of room to deliver more methods of interactive learning: better models with tutorial exercises, more puzzles and quizzes, learning games, tools for overlaying spatial data, and other online activities.

Conserving Earth's Biodiversity is an impressively engineered product with very few errors. The academic rigor behind the CD is highlighted by an incisive statement about interpreting map data that accompanies the presentation of global biodiversity patterns: "No data set is perfect, and you, as a consumer of data, should have a healthy skepticism about the information that others present." As soon as I get that unsolicited tenured job offer from an Ivy League school, I'll buy copies for all my undergraduate classes.

Costa Rican dancer. An *Argia* damselfly photographed in the tropical cloud forest at Monteverde.

Teeming waters. With some 22,000 described species, fish form the most diverse class of vertebrates.

CREDIT: (LEFT) D. PERLMAN/NATUREUPCLOSE; (RIGHT) FROM J. G. WOOD. *THE ILLUSTRATED NATURAL HISTORY, V. 3: REPTILES, FISHES, MOLLUSCS, ETC.* (ROUTLEDGE, NEW YORK, 1863)

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