

# Book Reviews

Ali, Saleem H. 2009. *Treasures of the Earth: Need, Greed, and a Sustainable Future*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

*Reviewed by Michael Schoon*  
*Arizona State University*

Rather than write a simple book on extractive industries and humankind's insatiable desires, Saleem Ali crafts a nuanced story of need and greed, of balancing what the author calls the "treasure impulse" with the use of "treasure" (mineral resources) for improvement in human livelihood. With critical acclaim from such disparate sources as Grameen Bank founder Muhammad Yunus and *Forbes* magazine, this book attempts to walk a tightrope between the continued consumption of non-renewable resources as an environmental sin and as a means of improving the human condition and alleviating poverty. While the message stumbles at times, Ali, for the most part, successfully accomplishes the balancing act. In part he does so because his polymath knowledge enables him to tell an engaging story that ventures from biogeochemistry to economic history to religion to environmental policy, and because of his ability to write in such a readable fashion.

At its heart, this book provides an engaging experience as the author steps nimbly from the world of mining for gold, gemstones, coal, oil and other non-renewable resources—the earth's treasures—to discussing how these mineral reserves became one of the main sources of today's distribution of global power. Along the way, the author engages with the perpetually striving nature of people in capitalist systems, how power and wealth lead to development in some cases and impoverishment in others, the ecological cost of the head-long pursuit of mineral extraction, and the role of recycling and restoration ecology in minimizing environmental damage. Most refreshingly, the author attempts to paint a pragmatic path between the Cassandras who often emerge in environmental literature and the Cornucopians and technologists from the economic sphere. One of his interesting examples is how the demand for whale oil in the nineteenth century nearly led to the extinction of some whale species. He then draws parallels with the current trajectory of petroleum and the concern about peak oil. The first oil crisis led to international whaling regulations and the search for alternative energy sources. The modern oil situation requires not only technological solutions and alternative energy sources but also new governance arrangements and rules of engagement. While whale oil is mostly an issue of the past, the use of fossil fuels remains to be resolved. The author stresses, however,

*Global Environmental Politics* 10:3, August 2010  
© 2010 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

that solutions for the future must move beyond looking at societal energy needs in isolation, to include the impacts of resource extraction on the environment and on human development. While it remains impossible to keep everyone content on this balancing act between environmental concerns and economic development, neither side gets short shrift or is cursorily dismissed.

While the book provides a pleasurable reading experience, several shortcomings exist, most of them attributable to the goals for the book's use. Pop culture references (from *Blood Diamond* to *Jurassic Park*) and a broad swath of topics lightly engaged may make for an enjoyable read, but the lack of a clear central research question and theoretical foundation weaken the book's appeal to academic audiences. For example, after setting the stage in the first few chapters on the rise of global power through mineral extraction, the fourth chapter presents a long aside on the psychological facets of wealth creation and the capitalist system. Ali veers from memes and selfish genes to chaos theory and non-linear feedback loops to the complex relationship between affluence and happiness. Although fascinating in its own right, the discussion leads the reader away from the prior consideration of power and its links to development that follow. Many theories are presented, but none used to form a base for the book. Given the author's expertise in international relations and conflict resolution, some theoretical grounding from this perspective might have been expected. Second, overstated and under-defended arguments weaken the book's usefulness for research. In several places allusions to issues of governance emerge, but the author never fully engages them beyond acknowledgement of the need for better institutions. Few disagree that better institutions are a good thing, but how should society go about making these changes? In other places, lists of recommendations are made with little background or explanation of why. One instance comes from a discussion on recycling in which the reader suddenly confronts a bullet point list of recommendations for manufacturers based on industrial ecological concepts. It is not clear from where or how this list is generated, and it breaks the flow of the narrative. Third, the lack of references beyond the footnotes makes the book difficult to use for more formal research.

If the goal of the reader is to enjoy a pleasurable reading experience across a wide variety of topics around material consumption, the book succeeds in this regard. Likewise, for professors looking for book chapters to introduce mineral extraction, material consumption, and issues of sustainability for undergraduate class discussion, this book will engage students. If the goal is to read new research or applications of theory to some of the modern world's biggest issues, however, the book does not deliver. It is neither groundbreaking in originality nor deeply theoretical. But although *Treasures of the Earth* is not a scholarly treatise, it is an enjoyable read.