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The Indus River - Biodiversity, Resources, Humankind. Proceedings of a symposium held in Burlington House, London (13-15 July 1994), edited by Azra Meadows & Peter Meadows, 1999. Published for the Linnean Society of London by Oxford University Press, 2001 Evans Road, Cary, NC 27513, USA; XLI + 441 pages, 163 figures and 37 tables, hardcover; no price listed. ISBN 0-19-577-905-3.

At one time in the past, geography as a scientific discipline was one and undivided, and this involved a largely deterministic view on human activities. At a later stage, it was understood that the mountain-dweller was not doomed to be either cowherd or clockmaker. History, culture, political and educational system, technical know-how and physical environment all interacted to determine the socio-economic condition of man with the last-mentioned factor sometimes bearing a subordinate weight only. As a consequence, the once-united discipline split into human geography and physical geography with each of the two going its own way. Some forty years ago, with a shock, it was realized that nature rather than an obstacle to be surmounted, is the very berth of life, including human life. These conceptual changes increasingly stood in the way of an integrated, holistic approach to the study of phenomena on the surface of the earth. It, therefore, comes as a surprise that the editors succeeded so well in presenting a classical geography text on the Indus River region in which the interaction between environmental factors and human activity (at present and in the past) are dealt with in a coherent manner.

The Indus River extends from the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea, a distance of nearly 2,900 km. About two-thirds of the river flows through Pakistan where the Indus Basin covers about 70 per cent of the total land area. Its headwaters in the glaciated mountains and adjacent foothills, its floodplain, delta and offshore cone and fan are all part of the river system. Barrages, dams, reservoirs, man-made levees and an extensive network of irrigation canals have turned the Pakistani part of the Indus in an almost fully managed river. On the surface and in the subsoil of the Indus Basin, evidence of ancient civilizations is abundant.

The book consists of a useful Introduction by the editors, three sections with thirty-one articles by Pakistani and foreign authors, a brief report of the symposium discussions and, lastly, a five-page Index. As the titles of the sections adequately reflect the content of the work, they are quoted here. Section 1: Biodiversity. Animal and plant communities/ Endangered species and habitats / Conservation and management; Section 2: Resources. Hydrology / Geomorphology / Geology / Climatic conditions / Environmental protection and resource development; Section 3: Humankind. Archaeology, prehistory and palaeo-anthropology of sites of human habitation.

The decline of ancient civilizations in the Indus Basin often was linked, directly or indirectly, to gradual or catastrophic changes in the environment which had a natural cause. In our time, however, such disturbances often have an anthropogenic cause. They are due to large-scale human interference in the environment spurred by population pressure or financial considerations. Small wonder, therefore, that a profound concern about the environmental degradation of the Indus Basin runs as a red thread through the whole of this remarkable book.

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