Marine Pollution: what everyone needs to know.

Judith S. Weiss

This book, in the “What Everyone Needs To Know ®” series, is intended for non-specialists including students, policy-makers and scientists in other fields. After an introductory chapter describing the marine environment and general aspects of pollution, chapters cover pollutants such as nutrients, oil and related chemicals, metals, pesticides and industrial organic chemicals. There is a chapter on marine debris, and another on ‘emerging concerns’ such as pharmaceuticals and personal care products, a range of additional organic chemicals, nanoparticles, noise, radioactive materials and light. There are chapters on bioaccumulation and biomagnification, climate change and ocean acidification, and biological pollution (covering microbes and non-native species). The book concludes with a chapter about regulating and reducing pollution. Within each chapter subjects are presented as a series of questions, while the text answers those questions.

I do not know to what extent the format was imposed by the publishers, or how much interaction there was between the author and editors, but I was left with the clear feeling that this book could have been much, much, better. I can only assume that the book is written for dipping into, not to be read as a whole. If the reader simply selects a particular question, and reads the answer, then there is useful information to be gleaned fairly quickly. If, as I did, the reader tries to read the text then it quickly becomes repetitive to the point of distraction. The same facts are repeated in the answers to questions in different places, to the extent that sometimes it seems that the questions are different but the answers are the same.

The lack of clearly attributed references is also irritating. It is often unclear whether statements are supported by research, and even when they are individual pieces of research are presented in a way that suggests that research documents facts, rather than explores possibilities. The breadth and depth of references, and much of the subject matter of the book, seems highly restricted with a narrow US-centric focus, missing out many if not most of the classic pollution studies worldwide and different policy responses to common problems. Some questions are not appropriately answered. For example, the answer to a question “How is the degree of toxicity measured?” is about defining and measuring low concentrations, not about toxicity at all.

There are several excellent popular books documenting aspects of marine pollution and what people can do about them. There are several excellent text books on marine pollution aimed at students, some of which have seen several editions. This book may prove useful to individuals, but the extent to which it proves useful to its target audience remains to be seen.

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