I teach environmental technology or the application of science to eliminate or minimize our adverse impacts on the natural environment. We are a part of nature. What impacts nature eventually impacts us. Wastewater treatment and air pollution abatement are examples of environmental technology. Environmental technologists differ from environmentalists. The latter advocate from their hearts on behalf of the environment; the former use their heads to plan and implement solutions for a sustainable economy.

Periodically, I receive copies of textbooks to review. One such is "Free Market Environmentalism" by Terry L. Anderson and Donald R. Leal. The authors work for the Political Economy Research Center (PERC) in Montana. As westerners, they raise topics and perspectives not frequently discussed by easterners. However, PERC is not a publicly funded institution embracing academic freedom whereby scholars study and express their opinions free from censure.

PERC is a private, non-profit, tax-exempt, environmental think tank funded by donations from foundations, corporations and private individuals. Organizations like this are typically married to an ideology. PERC appears to be no exception. PERC promotes market approaches to environmental management and the use of private property rights to advance stewardship of resources. PERC opposes government subsidies which they allege often degrade the environment.

Chapter by chapter the authors fit fact to theory trying to sell the singular efficacy of "free market environmentalism." They argue that all resources must be privately owned and the discipline of an unfettered, or modestly regulated, market resolves environmental problems best. I agreed with their list of environmental problems, but I wasn't sold on their solutions.

In 1969, the Cuyahoga River, which provides drinking water for Akron, Ohio and drains into Lake Erie at Cleveland, was so polluted that it erupted in flames. There were few environmental regulations then. For some, the burning Cuyahoga was the cost of business and employment. Others were less resigned. Shortly thereafter, the US Congress passed the Clean Water Act (CWA).

The Cuyahoga is cleaner today as a result of regulations limiting discharge of untreated waste. Arguably, regulations even created wealth: property values along the river rose, and costs of pollution-related illness fell. Businesses remained. The point is not that regulations were the only solution or even the best solution. However, they cost-effectively restored the Cuyahoga thus proving their merit.

This book doesn't make that concession. The authors are unstintingly dogmatic. They state, "... the environment's only value derives from human perceptions … People cannot manage natural resources for the sake of animals, plants or other organisms because there is no Dr. Doolittle to talk to the animals and find out what is best for them. As long as humans have the power to alter the environment, they will do so based on human values ..."

This opposes ecologists who reject this infantile, human-centred perspective. They argue that nature has its own intrinsic value distinct from human perceptions. This also opposes modern resource managers who attempt to balance sustainably the environment's commercial values with social, cultural, aesthetic and recreational values.

If the authors' goal is to jar our thinking, they've succeeded. If their goal is to offer a simple solution to complex issues, their success is dubious. I favour a regulated market economy, but I admit that some resources defy private ownership, are without substitute, have value beyond money or are intangible. What substitute exists to drink when all the earth's water is polluted? What substitute exists to breath when all of the earth's air is fouled? This book is of minimal use for environmental technologists who put science before ideology to find sustainable solutions.