



A group of chinstrap penguins congregates on an electric blue ice formation in Antarctica

FRANS LANTING/CORBIS

The price of progress

Mark Cocker on how environmentalists now put money at the centre of their argument

What Has Nature Ever Done For Us?

by Tony Juniper
336pp, Profile, £9.99

It is pretty much official now that the world is going to hell in a handcart. Just in case we might have forgotten about the relentlessly draining impact of 7 billion humans on the Earth's life-support system, this impassioned book reminds us of the key elements in that dismal story.

Juniper documents with ferocious pace and articulacy how the stock practices of hi-tech farming, such as deep ploughing and the ceaseless application of chemicals, have degraded about a third of the world's soils. In our efforts to boost farm production for ever-burgeoning populations we have in less than 30 years used half of all the synthetic nitrogen fertilisers that have been applied in our entire agricultural history.

In the oceans about a third of the world's fish stocks have been exploited beyond the limits of their endurance (some authorities suggest that over-harvesting affects four-fifths of all fisheries). Yet the story Juniper tells that I found even more hypnotically disturbing was that of the discarded flotsam now bobbing in the oceans.

Our mindless dumping of plastic has built up in sea areas with little current into a slow-swirling gyre of oil-based particles; one of the contributors to the book likens the problem to an "unflushable toilet". Every square kilometre of the affected maritime zone contains 50,000 indestructible items and, although they reduce in size, they never diminish in volume. A UN report in

seabirds and 100,000 sea mammals every year. Who knows how many countless fishes are also consuming it, but when we eat fish we are, in effect, ingesting our own plastic effluent.

Juniper frames his arguments impressively. Like many environmentalists he understands the typical response to these horror stories - either because the induced sense of hopelessness is so unbearable or because the challenge of triple-dip recession seems so much more important, we find a way to bypass the news of ecological catastrophe.

Whatever the reason, and Juniper has convincing explanations for our balefully short attention span, we cannot quite submit to the idea that every mouthful we eat, all our wealth, everything we have from our Cox's orange pippins to our Apple Macs, comes out of the Earth or is given to us by the sun. After 10 generations of industrial society, and with most people in the west removed from a world of soil and sweat, we are so oblivious to the ways of nature that we cannot bring ourselves properly to absorb its vital importance.

Juniper's answer is not to hit us in our chests, but where it really matters: in our pockets. The thrust of the book is now orthodox environmental thinking. All the multitudinous donations that the Earth makes free of charge to human society are known as "ecosystem services". In a whistle-stop tour of these many kindnesses, which involve almost every aspect of life on the planet, Juniper presents a detailed breakdown of how they work and what they would cost if we actually had to pay for them.

At times the relentless repetition of telephone-number cash sums is overwhelming, but the overarching point is well made: we are in serious debt to the Earth. Juniper has a storyteller's gift for moving from the cold statistic to the affecting tale. Consider vultures - unattractive and seemingly disconnected from us. It turns out that these reptilian-headed scavengers are invaluable: in India

12 million tonnes of rotting flesh every year.

Indians have learned the hard way about the generosity of vultures, because in the 1990s they started unwittingly to kill off 40 million of them with a veterinarian's painkiller called diclofenac (given to working animals to reduce joint pain so as to make them work longer). Juniper details the chain of unforeseen consequences. Not only did the loss of the birds' sanitary service give rise to a mountain of cattle carcasses, it also triggered a vast increase in the dog population which, in turn, caused 40 million more dog bites and 47,000 additional deaths from rabies. The total bill for losing the nation's spiralling flock of avian scavengers has been calculated at \$34 billion.

This is small beer when you compare it with a universal service such as the Earth's provision of drinking water. We load our rivers with an unwanted cargo of nitrate fertiliser and plastic rubbish, even though it is these freshwater sources that quench our collective thirst.

Perhaps even more impressive than Juniper's research on the price of such services is an ability to remain upbeat in the face of so much bad news. In every chapter there are leavening examples of intelligent government planning or commercial best practice so that the book is as full of hope as it is despair. In New York, instead of creating a sediment-stripping plant at massive cost, the authorities worked with landowners who control the city's watersheds to safeguard habitat and water quality in order to provide the largest unfiltered supply system in the US.

What is good for nature turns out to be what is best for us. Disconnected or alienated we may be from the planet's circulatory systems, but we are utterly dependent on them. Whenever we manage to preserve nature intact, we are healthier - and wealthier too.

Mark Cocker's *Crow Country* is published by Vintage. To order *What Has Nature Ever Done for Us?* for £7.99

Ian Sansom is charmed by an erudite history of national etiquette

Sorry! The English and Their Manners

by Henry Hitchings
400pp, John Murray, £13.99

One suspects that a man who writes a book about manners is in fact a seething, mad-eyed malcontent, and there are certainly moments in *Sorry! The English and Their Manners* when Henry Hitchings begins to bubble with anger and disquiet, eyes a-popping, mouth a-frothing, fingers feverishly scratching at the sacred cows and filthy pigs of contemporary culture. "You know how that looks and feels," he insists at one point: "the shared gasps of distress as Trendster McFucking blurts once again into his tiny electronic conch."

Hitchings's little fits and rages, however, are more often caused by those who take too simplistic a view of the decline of modern manners, rather than by the jostling, beheadphoned, Pringles-munching, onsie-wearing loudmouth barbarian hordes. "I dispute the claim that manners are in decline across the board," Hitchings concludes, preferring instead the idea that "new social relationships entail new social codes", and thus manners today might be understood to be "more complex than ever before". This is not a book likely to be serialised in the Daily Mail.

Hitchings is quite an enigma. A writer of apparently limitless learning and intelligence, who writes works of scholarship masquerading as popular narrative non-fiction, he somehow manages to combine what must be marathon stints at the library with a full-time day and night-job as theatre critic of the London Evening Standard. He files a review most days and knocks out a summa every couple of years: the man is something else. Though exactly who or what is not entirely clear.

His first book, *Dr Johnson's Dictionary* (2005), was a work of such vigour and verve that it might have impressed the great multi-tasking Doctor himself; *The Secret Life of Words* (2008) was a history of the English language that seemed to leave no etymological stone unturned; and *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English* (2011) waded confidently into a vicious battle that has been going on for centuries with no signs of ceasing. Now, in *Sorry!*, a book as diverting and wide-ranging as ever, the footnotes and bibliography alone would put the average PhD student to shame.

Perhaps a key to understanding Hitchings's width and heft comes in his *Who's Afraid of Jane Austen? How To Really Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (2008), a guide to bluffing your way through conversations about great literature. In this most curious of his curious books, Hitchings recommends various shortcuts to pretend knowledge, including skin-reading, waffling and avoiding the genuinely learned.

How we learned to mind our Ps and Qs

In *Sorry!* he's able so confidently to cover the history of courtesy, civility, etiquette, privacy, hat-tipping, kissing, hypocrisy, names, name-calling, table manners, the fascinating usage and abuse of the word "sprezzatura", and the rituals of bereavement. Who's to challenge his knowledge and authority in all of these areas?

And yet there is clearly nothing counterfiet about any of Hitchings's research. If anything, it's a kind of restless, wandering, burrowing through history and ideas that results not so much in an argument as in a demonstration of its own endless curiosity. If one begins occasionally to become indifferent to its shambling charms, it's perhaps because we have become inured to what another great odd, unpredictable intelligence, Geoff Dyer, in *Zona* (2012) - his great looping book about another great looper, Andrei Tarkovsky - calls moron-time (in which nothing can last for longer than two seconds). We are too accustomed to art and literature that moves at the speed of *Speed*, with all of its predictable knock-out punches, take-downs and Robert McKee-style story shapes.

Hitchings acknowledges at the outset that a global history of manners would necessarily take in Confucius, Cicero, the Talmud, the Islamic code of *adab*, and goodness knows what else, so he wisely restricts himself to the English and starts with the medieval. "Let's for a moment project ourselves into this world. If you live in 13th-century England, your home is draughty and smoky ... you will be obliged to slumber on a clay floor strewn with rushes that have become ingrained with filth ... You may also share your bed with a stranger. Inhibitions are low, which is in some ways a good thing, but you see an awful lot of other people's dirty, blemished bodies. You blow your nose directly into your hand."

Mannerly behaviour in England, according to Hitchings, emerges from the moral teaching of the Christian church, develops in the monasteries, spreads throughout society through the dissemination of books and pamphlets, and gradually becomes codified over the course of hundreds of years, until finally we're all familiar with certain "acts or gestures of avoidance and restraint" that signify good behaviour - like, not blowing your nose in your hand. This at least is the chronology. More interesting are the insights along the way and where Hitchings ends up: "the ability to evaluate and regulate the effects we have on other people is part of a fine awareness of our selves. If we stop thinking about those effects, if we stop caring, we are not expressing the freedom and wonder of our selves, but limiting them. If we do not control our desires, they control us." This surprisingly firm, high-toned

conclusion, proceeded as it is by page-on-page of learned meanderings and musings, and musings, finally the kind of writer Hitchings really is: an overseer, guardian, wise man, guide. The Right Reverend Henry Hitchings: scholar bishop.

Ian Sansom's *Paper: An Elegy* is published by Fourth Estate. To order a copy of *Sorry! The English and Their Manners* £13.99 with free UK p&g go to guardian.

