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Review: Pesticide Drift and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice

By Jill Harrison

Reviewed by Jamie L. Conklin

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Harrison, Jill. *Pesticide Drift and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011. xvii, 277 pp. ISBN 9780262516280. US \$23.00, paper.

Why do pesticides continue to drift into residential areas, placing farmworkers, their families, and other community residents at risk of both short and long-term effects? Harrison, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder, attempts to answer this question from an environmental justice standpoint. Harrison hopes to “demonstrate that environmental problems are as much about different ideas of what justice means as they are about technical issues or lapses in individual judgment” (p. xiii). She does this by pointing out how libertarian and communitarian ideas of justice used by the crop protection industry, the environmental regulatory state, and the alternative agrifood movement fail to provide solutions to pesticide drift.

Pesticide Drift focuses on the Central Valley in California, an area residents have deemed “California’s dumping ground” in part due to its high rate of toxic pesticide use (p. 20). California relies on immigrant farmworkers to maintain its profitable agricultural industry, and it is these farmworkers and their families who repeatedly experience pesticide drift occurrences. Many of the residents have become pesticide drift activists, campaigning for pesticide regulatory reform and speaking out for a form of justice that allows for participation by all and that fights inequality and oppression. The book contains honest and earnest quotes from these activists throughout and includes examples of the type of work they do.

Harrison depicts how the crop protection industry, which lobbies against government regulation, uses “going green” practices by adopting voluntary sustainability reporting and regulatory practices. Meanwhile, regulatory agencies rely on cost benefit analyses and risk assessments that fail to recognize the severity of the pesticide drift problem due to unsuitable monitoring methods, lack of funding, and the adoption of a communitarian vision of justice that calls for agreements among neighbors and communities. Finally, those participating in the alternative agrifood movement, including organic farming and buying fair trade or local products, have “embraced the market as the primary mechanism of social and environmental change” (p. 161). Harrison concludes with a vision of justice, including the adoption of the precautionary principle, which she believes would begin to correct pesticide drift and other social injustices.

This book makes readers aware of how ideas of justice can shape one’s views of a complex problem like pesticide drift. It describes in detail how pesticide drift came to be a problem and how it has remained largely ignored. Interviews with pesticide drift activists describe both the methods and perspectives of justice needed to stop pesticide drift. Part of the “Food, Health, & the Environment” series, *Pesticide Drift* will appeal to anyone interested in pesticide use, food systems, or environmental justice. It would be a useful text in sustainability-related courses and is recommended for libraries maintaining collections on social, economic, and environmental issues. The book includes notes, references, illustrations, maps, and an index.

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