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Book review

UNCERTAINTY AND RISK: MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Gabriele Bammer and Michael Smithson (eds), Earthscan, 2009, ISBN 978-1-84407-851-6, £24·95, 400 pp.

In this addition to the library of books concerning risk and uncertainty, this collective text sets itself the aim of providing insights and guidance to academics and to a lesser extent to practitioners dealing with uncertainty based on current research and well-considered practice in a wide range of disciplines and sectors. The book originated from a symposium organised by the editors and held in Goolabri, Australia in 2008 when participants from 20 distinct disciplines were invited to present papers on uncertainty. These papers form the basis for the 20 chapters in the central section of this book.

Unlike most of the other risk texts this book does not commence with a general overview of the theories, tools and techniques but presents a series of three introductory chapters demonstrating the need for the nature of uncertainty, discussing uncertainty metaphors and then offering glimpses of how the management of enterprises with an identified combination of threat and opportunity might be approached in very general terms.

The central core of the book is the collection of 20 chapters as mentioned above. Most people are experienced in one discipline, some in two or three, but it is rare to consider concepts, ideas and approaches from such a diverse range. The disciplines covered include infectious disease control, religion, physical science, statistics, philosophy, music, art, history, drug addiction, economics, security and a range of management applications. This is fascinating reading but not always easy to follow. The work is probably of more interest to researchers rather than practitioners but neither group would be likely to sit down and read the book in sequence. It is more appropriate to select specific chapters to probe various aspects of uncertainty further rather than to assimilate everything. Naturally being based on a symposium in Australia there is a slight bias towards local customs and practice.

One of the strengths of the book is that although not immediately relevant to the reader's particular problem or interest, one gains an insight into the perceptions of uncertainty from other disciplines stimulates new thoughts and ideas. Repeatedly, but from differing standpoints the same issues are raised, often focusing on the basic dilemma that if a change is made to an uncertain system it takes time for the outcome to become clear; however, by that time it may be too late to make further changes easily.

The book then contains three chapters covering the Unifying Diversity, which highlights some of the similarities and trends from the differing chapters and a concluding section gives some general guidance on the use of intelligence and adaptive management methods as likely methodologies for managing uncertainty. One of the editors, Michael Smithson, writes 'No clear steer on how much effort should be expended in reducing uncertainty versus understanding, accepting and managing it'. This statement neatly encapsulates the fundamental dilemma of uncertainty management. Naturally, there is no precise answer to this challenge but the book contains many insights into the potential processes necessary to work in areas tending to being driven into complex and/or chaotic conditions.

Overall I think the book is a useful addition to the library and more likely to be consulted as a useful reference or secondary reading book by researchers.

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