Books and the environment: A curious paradox

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Books and the environment: A curious paradox
Iain Stevenson is professor of publishing at University College London (UCL). For a quarter of a century he was a practising publisher, working for Longman, Macmillan, Pinter, Leicester University Press, Wiley and The Stationery Office. He set up the pioneering environmental imprint, Belhaven Press, in 1986, publishing some of the earliest books on climatic change, environmental sustainability and globalization. In 1999 he joined City University London to establish a new master's degree in publishing whose graduates now occupy many senior publishing positions. He was one of the founders of UCL's Centre for Publishing in 2006 and was appointed to the first established chair of publishing in Britain at UCL. He is currently writing a history of 20th-century British publishing to be published by the British Library in 2009. Email: uczcwis@ucl.ac.uk

In the days when “environment” meant countryside, books — fiction, non-fiction and documentation — were ambassadors which not only captured attention of city dwellers to the beauties of nature but also led to new concepts of the landscape and its management. They contributed to a change in human interaction with the landscape itself. For example, in one generation the English lakes were forever changed by the intervention of human ingenuity, desolate wastes to be avoided, to make awe-inspiring “fields of beauty” to be avidly explored. This was due in no small measure to the influence of the Romantic poets — Coleridge, Wordsworth and their acolytes — and the widespread “domestication” of landscape. People now shared a new understanding of the nature of place.

The influence of books on the environment today is enormous. Not only do books convey information about climatic change and the saving of endangered species (“inconvenient truths” to quote the title of one of the most famous of the green books of the 1980s), they also travel books, guidebooks, atlases, and joke books are among the most flourishing sectors of modern book publishing industry. Today’s books have a dimension not present in those of the past. They advocate the responsible use of nature by those who enjoy nature. They act to preserve the environment and protect endangered species. They save them.

But behind this positive role lies a paradox: the books themselves are made from paper with insignificant environmental impact. Books themselves are not “green”.

If the publishing industry is serious about tackling green issues, rather than just doing what is easy, it needs to consider the environmental impact of the production of books, from the paper to the ink to the printing process. The industry needs to make a commitment to using sustainable materials and processes in order to reduce its environmental footprint. This could include using recycled paper, soy-based inks, and energy-efficient printing methods. Publishers should also consider the impact of their supply chains, including the sources of paper and ink, and work to ensure that these are sustainable.

Affiliations: 1: Iain Stevenson is professor of publishing at University College London (UCL). For a quarter of a century he was a practising publisher, working for Longman, Macmillan, Pinter, Leicester University Press, Wiley and The Stationery Office. He set up the pioneering environmental imprint, Belhaven Press, in 1986, publishing some of the earliest books on climatic change, environmental sustainability and globalization. In 1999 he joined City University London to establish a new master's degree in publishing whose graduates now occupy many senior publishing positions. He was one of the founders of UCL's Centre for Publishing in 2006 and was appointed to the first established chair of publishing in Britain at UCL. He is currently writing a history of 20th-century British publishing to be published by the British Library in 2009. Email: uczcwis@ucl.ac.uk
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