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Review: Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle

By Carolyn Raffesperger and Joel Tickner, eds.

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Raffensperger, Carolyn, and Joel Tickner, eds. *Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle* Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999. 352 pp. US\$30.00. ISBN 1559636882. Recycled, acid-free paper.

The Precautionary Principle has its roots in the German principle of *Vorsorge*, or "foresight." In 1970s, the *Vorsorgeprinzip* (consideration before taking action) was introduced into German environmental law. The Principle was also written into numerous international treaties and conventions, including the Bergen Declaration on Sustainable Development, the Maastricht Treaty on the European Union, the Barcelona Convention, and the Global Climate Change Convention. Although not specifically mentioned in U.S. environmental laws, the spirit of precautionary action and foresight flows through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA).

It was at the January 29, 1998 Wingspread Conference on the Precautionary Principle the idea of precautionary action was first formally discussed in the U.S. Scientists, policymakers, citizens, philosophers, and regulators representing a variety of groups and countries debated environmental and regulatory issues within the context of precautionary action. At the conclusion of the three-day conference, Wingspread participants issued a statement calling for governments, corporations, communities and scientists to implement the Precautionary Principle into regulatory policymaking. The gist of the Precautionary Principle is as follows:

"if a practice seems likely to harm the environment, even if proof of harm is not definitive, actions should be taken to eliminate or control the practice."

It is within this framework that *conference organizers* Carolyn Raffensperger and Joel Tickner edited *Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle*. Raffensperger is coordinator for the Science and Environmental Health Network, and Tickner, a research associate at the Lowell Center for Sustainable Production, University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

This work is an important collection of essays on the Precautionary Principle

by Wingspread conference participants Nicholas Ashford, Peter deFur, Peter Montague, Mary O'Brien, Timothy O'Riordan, David Ozonoff, Ted Schettler, Sandra Steingraber, Bo Wahlstrom and others. Articles ranging from Carl Cranor's discussion of the burden of proof to Michael M'Gonigle's "Political Economy of Precaution" provide insight into the philosophy behind the Principle as well as application of the Precautionary Principle to complex public policy dilemmas.

In addition to seminal articles relating to the Principle, the work also contains a foreword by Wes Jackson and preface by Ken Geiser of the Toxics Use Reduction Institute (TURI), University of Massachusetts, Lowell. Valuable material is presented in the book's appendices. Appendix A, "Lessons from Wingspread," provides a well-thought out discussion of democracy, scientific uncertainty and human rights. Appendix B outlines the uses of the Principle in international treaties and U.S. law. The Afterword, "Why Use the Precautionary Principle?" was written by Sandra Steingraber (*Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*, Vintage, 1998), and is a passionate essay on the relationship of polyvinylchloride (PVC), breast-feeding and dioxin exposure. Steingraber's essay is not for the faint hearted.

Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle is a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion of precautionary action, environmental health and regulatory reform. The work is highly recommended for graduate students, academicians, policymakers, activists and citizens who are interested and committed to environmental justice and participatory democracy.

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