

William H. Alkire. *Coral Islanders*. Arlington Heights, Illinois: AHM Publishing Corporation, 1978. Pp. x, 164, bibliography, glossary, index. \$10.00. Paper \$4.95.

Coral Islanders is the latest in the excellent series of books edited by Walter Goldsmith entitled, "Worlds of Man: Studies in Cultural Ecology." Each book in the series focuses on a given geographic location for the purpose of better understanding the ways in which its peoples interact with their environment; the complexities of human adaptation, cultural evolution, cultural dynamics, and environmental modification are the principle themes. The main focus of Alkire's book is on those features of traditional subsistence economies that reflect a successful adaptation to the realities of the environment.

The book is divided into seven chapters: Chapter One, "Coral Islands," sets the stage by discussing the origin as well as physical and biologic components of atoll ecosystems. Darwin's "subsidence theory" and present-day knowledge regarding plate tectonics are used to explain atoll origins and their various stages of reef development. Such "limiting factors" as simple calcareous soils, lack of fresh water streams, and vulnerability to typhoons and hurricanes are emphasized in the discussion of atoll ecosystems. Humans enter these atoll ecosystems in Chapter Two, "Settlement, Survival, and Growth." Dates and migration patterns of Pacific peoples, along with their accompanying housing styles, canoe types, horticultural tools and method are interwoven into a discussion which end with information regarding present-day population densities and distributions in Oceania.

Chapter Three, "Daily Activities," serves two purposes: First, to exemplify daily activities of traditional islanders by focusing on Woleai atoll in the central Carolines over a period of a year; and more importantly, to introduce and define the differences between "Coral Isolates" (atolls and islands that are so isolated from other islands and archipelagoes that their residents are restricted to the limited ecosystem of the single island or atoll, its surrounding reefs, and ocean), "Coral Clusters" (coral islands and atolls lying in close proximity to one another where the adaptation of the residents is not to a single island alone, but to the larger ecosystem of the coral island cluster), and "Coral Complexes" (coral islands that are part of a complex and extensive chain, occasionally either interspersed with volcanic islands or in proximity to high islands, thus providing greater resource diversity and possibilities for its human occupants).

In the next three chapters each of these types are discussed in turn: Chapter Four--"Coral Isolates;" Chapter Five--"Coral Clusters;" and Chapter Six--"Coral Complexes." Alkire hopes to demonstrate that as the

basic environmental system grows larger the cultural alternatives also multiply. And, . . . “as the population increases to the limits of the carrying capacity of the system, however defined, the society often is faced with decreasing options so that, at certain critical points, the ultimate cultural choice within the complex may vary little in its basics from the osolate.”

“Emerging Structures,” the seventh and final chapter, brings out the effects of modern transportation and communication systems on lessening the importance of isolation as an adaptive variable for coral island areas of the Pacific. Alkire concludes that island societies are running in the opposite direction of what is really needed in today’s world of resource shortages--and that is self reliance. Islanders are becoming less subsistence based and thus more interconnected and dependent on outside sources for now vital and scarce resources, e.g., gasoline to propel their outboard motors and automobiles. Unless there is a revitalization in subsistence horticulture and maritime exploitation, Alkire sees the possibility of further decline in the standard of living for many coral islanders.

Although Alkire should be credited for seeking to discover the social consequences of living on island ecosystems, his conclusions merely seem to restate the findings of past Pacific researchers: very little new is offered, and the book is simply too encyclopedic and lacks in-depth cultural ecological analysis. Minor flaws further take away from the book’s potential: the diagrams representing coral isolates, coral clusters, and coral complexes are of questionable value as they are presently drawn; the tables are graphically very poor; and the book’s photographs are poorly chosen in terms of subject matter. In sum, *Coral Islanders* falls short of the overall high quality of the series in which it appears.

Gary A. Klee
Environmental Studies Department
San Jose State University