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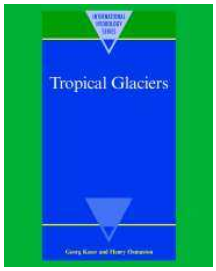
Tropical glaciers, by Georg Kaser & Henry Osmaston, 2006 (first paperback ed., with corrections). International Hydrology Series. Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU, Great Britain. Paperback, xx + 207 pages. Price GBP 29.00; USD 50.00. ISBN 0521020964.



This volume forms part of the International Hydrology Series, which has been developed by the International Hydrological Programme (established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO) in collaboration with Cambridge University Press. It seems to me that the role of Cambridge University Press (CUP) is mainly restricted to that of distributor, and that UNESCO is the real publisher (UNESCO also holds the copyrights).

For a scientist it should, obviously, not be important which publisher is finally responsible for the publication of a book, but in this case it is. Cambridge University Press has a good reputation, but only few positive remarks can be made about this book. And that is not only because it is an (only slightly) corrected version of a 2002 hardback book (ISBN 05211633338) that was far too expensive (USD 165.00) for what it had to offer.

In principle, this book could have been highly interesting, particularly in the framework of the present-day interest in global warming. Tropical glaciers are both highly sensitive indicators of global climate and they form fresh-water reservoirs in some fast-developing countries. A theoretical and practical analysis of tropical glaciology—including a useful definition of tropical glacier-climate regimes and the analysis of the main glaciological key variables—that this book intends to provide, would therefore have been most welcome. Also in this respect the book offers less, however, than might be expected from its title. The Rwenzori (Uganda) and the Cordillera Blanca (Peru) are investigated in reasonable detail as examples of tropical glacierized mountains, the fluctuations of their glaciers since the end of the Little Ice age are reconstructed, and the probable climatic reasons are discussed, but this in not sufficient to provide insight into the global development op tropical glaciers. The summary of the expansions and retreats of tropical mountain glaciers during the Quaternary is therefore also too limited.

The above does not imply that the contents of the book are of insufficient scientific quality. In fact, the authors have collected a wealth of information, but it dos not cover a wide enough range of topics and examples to satisfy a reader who wants to know about both earlier and present-day developments of tropical glaciers. If the title had been less promising and more informative about the topics dealt with, less readers would feel that that had got too little value for money.

In fact, the authors inform the reader too late (viz. at the last page of their book, a half-page chapter called “Prospect”), what they should have stated more clearly at the very beginning. The core purpose of the book is not to overview tropical glaciers, but to interpret tropical glaciers as climatic indicators. In part I of the book (The Nature of Tropical Glaciers) assessment is attempted through a theory-oriented analyses of key variables of the glacier/climate relationship. Part II (Modern Glacier Fluctuations in Tropical High Mountains) deals with the processes of present-day glacier fluctuations with the help of various information and observations, but the authors admit themselves that data are incomplete; yet they state that the data lead the way to better understanding of the ice and water balances. Part III (Former Quaternary Tropical Glaciers) is a critical evaluation and development of the techniques for assessing the evidence left by

tropical glaciers. According to the authors, these methods may help to provide a firmer basis for our knowledge of climatic change in the Quaternary, but this statement is hardly supported by the text in Part III.

The lack of a true overview of both previous and present-day tropical glaciers would not even have been that bad, if the presentation of the book would have been at the average level of CUP books (or preferably even better, as a compensation for the incorrect title). Unfortunately, however, the presentation is far below acceptable levels for a scientific book of the 21st century. First of all, it is apparent that UNESCO had the last word containing the contents: UNESCO, like all comparable organisations, considers quantity of text far more important than quality. Therefore countless pages of non-informative text are included; an example is the 9-page list of titles of figures and tables. Another example is the page with the same promotion text that is also printed on the back cover. Numerous figures that could easily have been printed on a 1-clumn size (the book is printed in two columns) are printed page-width, which commonly implied page-large. The information density of many illustrations is therefore extremely low.

Even worse is the quality of the photos (most line drawings are Okin this respect). Almost all photos are of inacceptable quality, in which the individual black and white dots can easily be discerned. They look like photos in daily newspapers from the fifties. Some photos date from long ago (but even then their quality should have been better now), but the same unacceptable quality is present for photos of less than ten years ago. Even though almost all photos are printed page-wide (which would not have been necessary of normal reproduction techniques had been followed), details cannot be discerned, so that the scientific value of the book would hardly S if at all S have suffered if no photos had been included!

The colophon of the book mentions that it is a corrected version of the 2002 book. It nowhere becomes clear where corrections are made. In my opinion, it would have been only logical if a new edition with corrections would also be updated. So much news is now to be told about glacier behavior in a world with rising temperatures. This has, however, apparently been considered too much work. An up-to-date text seems never to have been the objective, as the reference list (most probably a bibliography, but I did not want to check all ~500 references) contains S if I checked correctly S 1 2001 publication (from one of the book authors), 2 2000 publications, 1 1999 publication and some 5 1989 publications. The great majority is far older.

Lack of editorial precision (supervised by UNESCO) is even more properly illustrated by the page devoted to this book series. Even in this 2006 corrected version the book itself is indicated as “in print.” One may wonder whether the text has ever been read by one of the members of the Editorial Advisory Board.

In short: the book shows all shortcomings that are so common in texts/books/reports (more or less) political organisations such as UNESCO. It must be disappointing for the authors that their work, which reflects a huge scientific effort, has been so badly treated. It is not understandable at all that Cambridge University Press ruins its reputation by the (co)publication of such a book. Even at it much lowered price, the book is certainly no value for money.

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