

**Crucial current**

◆ Every few years in December, warm seawater surfaces in the Pacific Ocean near the equator. This is one sign of the reversal of wind and ocean currents christened *El Niño* by Peruvian fishermen. Michael Glantz, the author of *Currents of Change* (Cambridge University Press, £14.95/\$19.95, ISBN 0 521 57659 8), explains *El Niño*'s profound influence on climatic events worldwide, ranging from droughts in Australia to hurricanes on the east coast of the US. Between its appearances, now sometimes occurring every year and sometimes in the spring or summer, *El Niño* is mostly forgotten. This book aims to change that, in user-friendly style.

**Encrusted**

◆ Earth's Restless Surface (Natural History Museum/Stationery Office, £5.95, ISBN 0 11 310056 6) is a lavishly illustrated, informative, expensive, awkwardly shaped, 60-page companion to a Natural History Museum exhibition. It is beautifully produced, with exemplary photographs and diagrams revealing the long-term turmoil that our planet is constantly suffering—even if on a human timescale it looks reasonably settled and permanent. The text has been edited to satisfying clarity and there is a useful glossary and an index for instant illumination on any particular subject in this broad field.

# Reheated greens

Fred Pearce on Stephen Schneider and Tom Athanasiou

ENVIRONMENTALISM is marking time. Greens are in the mainstream now, sitting on committees and having tea with the powerful. They don't seem to have the time or the inclination for radical thinking, and it shows.

Back in the 1980s, climatologist Stephen Schneider was a vocal pioneer of concern about the greenhouse effect, a crusading scientist for our times. But much of his latest work, *Laboratory Earth*, in the Science Masters series, is a rehash.

Schneider is best on his own specialism of climate modelling. He is honest and humble enough to admit a sneaking admiration for the crusading skills of his nemesis, the MIT physicist and greenhouse sceptic Richard Lindzen. "Once in a while the outliers will be right," he admits, "Their views must be heard, but not presented as equally likely."

But he remains keen to extend climatology into a broader study of the way the planet works and how we are influencing it through biology, economics and politics. He dabbles with the Gaian idea of a self-sustaining, homeostatic planet. He rambles through the fringes of a complex debate about the application of island biogeography to estimating how fast species are disappearing. And he muses on why free-market economics has not persuaded Americans to adopt energy-saving technologies. But the result lacks rigour and degenerates into soft-nosed espousal of "no regrets" policies to slow down global warming. Fodder for all those green campaigners turned Al Gore



Tony Stone Images

acolytes who are lobbying away on Capitol Hill.

Tom Athanasiou lays into the "feel-good environmentalists" who reckon there can be gain without pain. His book, published last summer in the US as *Divided Planet* and now out in Britain as *Slow Reckoning*, trawls through a ragbag of American environmental preoccupations, successfully demonstrating that their roots lie in the divide between the world's rich and poor.

While this idea may be a no-no in Washington, the rest of the world surely knew about it already. This is not, as the cover proclaims, "one of the most important books of this decade". And it is hard to warm to a book whose narrow range of references barely acknowledges the existence of Europe, let alone the poor nations it claims to place at the heart of its analysis. □

# Dial P for philosophy

JUST as we take plumbing for granted until a burst pipe floods the house, so we take our fundamental conceptual "plumbing" for granted until it is stressed beyond its limit and buckles. Time to reach for the Yellow Pages and call a philosopher. At its best, philosophy combines the poet's vision with the lawyer's logical doggedness: it helps us to construct alternative conceptual systems when those on which we rely break down.

One part of our tacit philosophy that is now breaking up is the social contract, according to Mary Midgley in *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers* (Routledge, £17.95/\$22.95, ISBN 0 415 13377 7). It needs tempering with a vision of people in relationships bordering on the organic—ideas with their roots in ecology—rather than as fundamentally isolated atoms in contractual union. Other problems requiring the construction of alternative philosophies include environmental pollution and artificial intelligence.

Midgley's book is a clear and sustained assault

on the anti-intellectualism that proclaims: "It may be right in theory, but not in practice." Midgley scotches this: if an idea does not work in practice, something is wrong with the theory. The most dangerous and self-undermining philosophy is the assumption that there is no real philosophy, that we can exclude fundamental precepts. But we must also be careful, Midgley warns, to weave abstract considerations back into practical concerns.

Midgley's philosophy will be needed as new technologies open up unforeseeable opportunities and problems. We share a tacit assumption that few people live to see 100. The assumptions will have to be rewritten when people live for two hundred years. A child born when you were 25 will be 175 years old, seven-eighths of your age, but with perhaps eight-sevenths of your wisdom. Parents are already challenged by their children catching up with them. Perhaps, like Boethius, they may cope successfully with adversity through philosophical reflection.

Ray Scott Percival

**Laboratory Earth** by Stephen H. Schneider, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, £11.99, ISBN 0 297 81644 6  
**Slow Reckoning** by Tom Athanasiou, Secker & Warburg, £12.99, ISBN 0 436 20282 4