GRAB BAG

BOOKMONGER

Coping with intractable problems

The Pacific Northwest is home to some fine academic publishers, and this week I'd like to call your attention to a thoughtful new book from Oregon State University Press that considers how serious environmental and other challenges are dealt with by scientists, policy-makers and citizens.

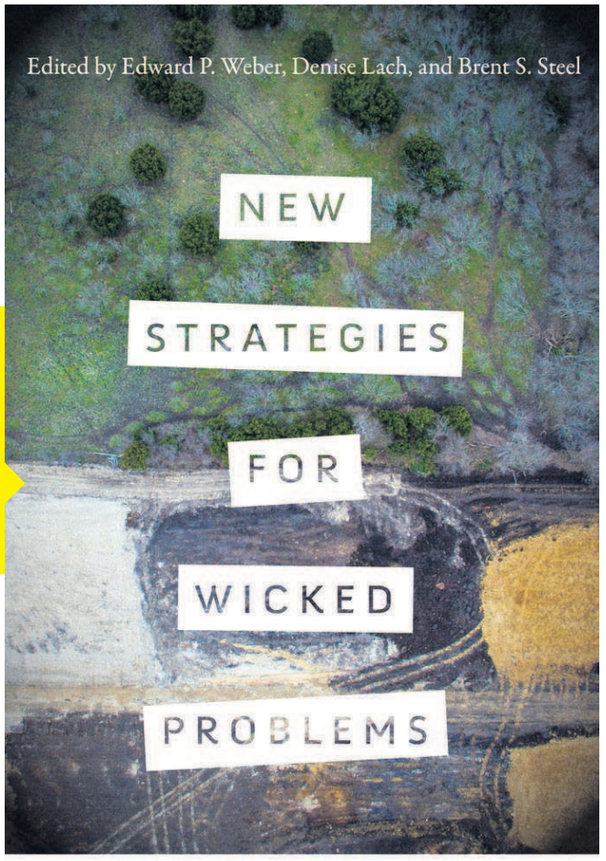
"New Strategies for Wicked Problems" was a collaborative effort edited by OSU professors Edward P. Weber, Denise Lach and Brent S. Steel.

The editors define "wicked' problems as having three primary characteristics. First, they involve such complex causes and effects that it is hard to get a handle on the problem, much less come up with good solutions. Second, they involve overlapping problems that cut across multiple policy domains and involve many different (and often competing) players. And finally, no matter the amount of brainpower and resources thrown their way, wicked problems are "relentless," and any potential solutions will impact a multitude of issues beyond the initial problem.

The wicked dilemmas this book uses as examples include fracking, salmon recovery, forest management and health care. Feel a headache coming on?

The chapter on fracking was particularly thorny, not only in terms of content, but also in its use of academic jargon. To be fair, this is a scholarly book from an academic press, but two-thirds of the way through the chapter, after bushwhacking my way through one small paragraph that fairly bristled with the following terms — "multidimensional scaling," "inductive exercise," "visualizing matrices," "pro-egalitarian values" and "stress value" — I did indeed feel stressed, and gave myself license to skim the rest of the chapter.

"New Strategies for Wicked Problems"
Eds. Edward P. Weber, Denise Lach and Brent S. Steel
OSU Press
248 pp
$24.95



Subsequent chapters on the health of forests and the decline of wild salmon populations were convincingly gloomy in laying out the magnitude and complexity of the problems. As one author puts it, these become collisions "between an unstoppable change and an immovable status quo." And many of this book's contributors reveal that no matter how strong the scientific research may be, conventional policy-making often manipulates it or even outright overrules it with political and economic considerations.

But bear with the book a bit longer. After presenting these complex dilemmas and unsatisfactory solutions in the first section, a follow-up section pitches ideas for new ways of moving forward.

These chapters advocate for replacing exclusive and ultimately unsuccessful top-down delivery of policy edicts with strategies that value and integrate input from local stakeholders and practitioners.

The authors of these chapters offer new approaches including "post-normal" science, place-based social learning and knowledge-to-action networks. These sound like buzzwords at first, but the authors demonstrate how these collaborative approaches encourage more constructive solutions.

Again, this isn't easy reading, but "New Strategies for Wicked Problems" does offer ideas that might help us extract ourselves from the bickering, finger-pointing, ignorance-exalting, polarized quicksand into which we currently seem to be sinking.

Especially if you're a scientist, a citizen activist or a policy-maker, this book provides perspectives that can help you reinvigorate the way you address problem-solving.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com.

Crossword Answer

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