Changes occur constantly in economic, social and biophysical systems. Sometimes these changes are slow and at other times rapid and unpredictable. Often they display significant interdependence, and there is strong evidence that this interdependence has increased substantially with economic growth and development. Furthermore, evolutionary changes in the structure and organization of societies (attributable to the nature of economic growth and development) have arguably made it more difficult for humankind to respond effectively to the growing threats to its well-being and its wishes for a better world. The primary purpose of this book is to explore and analyse the nature of the environmental challenges we now face, bearing in mind that a holistic approach is required. Therefore, while the main focus of this book is on economics, I have also found it essential to take account of social and biophysical factors; grapple with relevant philosophical issues; and pay attention to broad patterns of historical development.

Given the word limit for this book, I have had to be selective in my coverage. I decided to concentrate on fundamental analysis rather than being side-tracked by considering fine technical details. Otherwise, my main perspectives might have been blurred. Also, I do not repeat analyses that are readily available in the existing literature. Although the individual chapters in this book can be read independently, a better appreciation of my point of view is obtained by reading the whole book.

Every chapter of this book focuses on the relationship between economics and environmental change. This is even true (although it might not seem so at first sight) of the chapter on consumers’ sovereignty because as a result of market development (the extension of markets, increased economic specialization and the evolution of longer, wider and more complicated production and distribution chains), consumers’ sovereignty in relation to environmental, human and animal protection seems to have diminished.

The importance is stressed in this book of social embedding as a major factor influencing human values and decision-making. It limits the ability of humankind to respond to and to assess prospective and actual environmental changes. However, the nature of social embedding is not static. It alters in nature with the passage of time, as demonstrated in this text.
The motivation to write this book arose from a series of lectures I gave to postgraduate students in bioscience at Minzu University (the Central University of Nationalities) in Beijing. My lectures took account of the economic and environmental challenges faced by China as a result of its rapid rate of economic growth in recent years. The contents of these lectures are not reported here because I thought it better to adopt a global perspective. Nevertheless, I wish to thank Professor Dayuan Xue for inviting me to give these lectures and the students for their stimulating discussions which eventually enticed me to write this book.

My joint research with Professor Serge Svizzero (of the Université de la Réunion) focusing on the economic development of ancient economies and its implications for their social evolution and economic growth, has convinced me of the importance of considering the history of socio-economic evolution in order to better understand our current situation. Therefore, account is taken of this historical background, albeit quite generally. John Gowdy’s recent publications on ultrasociality also rekindled my earlier interest in social embedding, as for example, evidenced in some of my previous works, for example, Biodiversity, Conservation and Sustainable Development (Ch. 6), Human Values and Biodiversity Conservation, and Economics of Environmental Conservation (Ch. 1). As a result I have given greater attention to this subject than I might have otherwise.

I am grateful to those with whom I have been able to discuss aspects of this work (for example, David Adamson), and to Tooraj Jamasb of Durham University for reading an earlier draft of Chapter 8 and providing me with helpful suggestions. Also, several scholars provided me with suggestions which were useful in preparing Chapter 10 and they are acknowledged at the end of that chapter.

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My wife, Mariel, continued to be patient about my writing activities at varied spots throughout the house, usually not in my office where my desk is strewn with papers. Thanks, Mariel. Sparky, our 14-year-old small dog, accompanied me on my daily walks until this manuscript was nearly finished, but sadly, he departed before it was completed.

I hope you find this book of interest.

Clem Tisdell
Brisbane