

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

### THE ENVIRONMENT

The "invasion of Nature by Trade with its Money, its credit, its Steam, its Railroads, threatens to upset the balance of Man, and establish a new, universal Monarchy more tyrannical than Babylon or Rome."

Ralph Waldo Emerson's *cri de coeur* in his **Journals** (1840) reflected the fear among 19th-century naturalists that the rise of industry was threatening the American wilderness.

By the late 19th century, a new breed of "conservationists," notably George Perkins Marsh, author of **Man and Nature** (1864), was beginning to worry about the practical effects of overfarming, irrigation, and the lumber industry's "clear cutting" of virgin forests. At the same time, as Joseph M. Petulla observes in **An American Environmental History** (Boyd & Fraser, 1977), Emerson's spiritual heirs still looked to nature as "the ultimate restorer and purifier of a humanity corrupted by civilization."

These two traditions merged in the person of America's first great conservationist, John Muir (1838-1914). A Wisconsin farm boy turned inventor, Muir abandoned a career in industry after a factory accident nearly cost him an eye. He founded the Sierra Club in 1892, and penned polemics against, for example, the evil effects of overgrazing by sheep ("hoofed locusts") in the West. An 1876 essay in the Sacramento *Record-Union* asked: "God's First Temples: How Shall We Preserve Our Forests?"

Early triumphs, such as creating the Yosemite and Sequoia national parks in 1890, were largely the results of Muir's campaigns. But the preservation-oriented Muir broke with Theodore Roosevelt and other conservationists who favored some public works in the parks.

Petulla sees conservation as a populist cause, but many scholars disagree.

In **Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency** (Harvard, 1959), Samuel P. Hays argues that the conservation movement "grew out of the political implications of applied science." The leading conservationists came from such new fields as hydrology, forestry, geology, and anthropology. "Loyalty to [their] professional ideals," says Hays, "not close association with the grass-roots public, set the tone of the Theodore Roosevelt conservation movement."

That tone was essentially optimistic. Even as they advocated wise "stewardship" of the nation's waters and forests, the conservationists "emphasized expansion, not retrenchment; possibilities, not limitations . . . They were not Malthusian prophets of despair and gloom."

As chief of the U.S. Forest Service under Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, a Yale-educated Bull Moose Progressive, brought 194 million acres of Western land under the federal umbrella. Both Pinchot and Roosevelt, born to wealth, exemplified the "noblesse oblige tradition," notes Martin L. Fausold in **Gifford Pinchot** (Syracuse Univ., 1961). They were passionate about the Great Outdoors and the "vigorous life." Thanks to their advocacy, conservation for the first time took a top position on Washington's domestic agenda, adds Paul Russell Cutright in **Theodore Roosevelt: The Making of a Conservationist** (Univ. of Ill., 1985).

What prompted the shift in outlook, from optimistic conservationism to the pessimistic environmentalism of the 1970s?

In a sense, argues journalist William Tucker in **Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism** (Anchor/Doubleday, 1982), the shift represents the triumph of a "romantic" strain of conservationism.

Present-day environmentalists, he

says, are America's college-educated "nouveau aristocracy." Having gained upper-middle-class status during America's post-World War II prosperity, they became "far more concerned with preventing others from climbing the ladder behind them, than in making it up a few more rungs themselves." Support for environmental causes, he notes, is greatest among those earning between \$30,000 and \$70,000 a year.

Virtually every environmental measure, from local suburban zoning laws to costly federal pollution controls on factories or automobiles, hits the lower-middle class hardest.

**In Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States 1955-1985** (Cambridge, 1987), Samuel Hays suggests that postwar affluence freed many Americans from the need to scramble for life's necessities, permitting them a certain level of self-indulgence; they could dwell on their "quality of life," their health, and their general sense of well-being. Also, the eradication of many viral diseases (e.g., polio, typhoid) by vaccines, antibiotics, and improved sanitation (all, ironically, the fruits of the modern technological society that some environmentalists deplore) shifted public attention to threats posed to the public health by industrial growth.

The first, and perhaps most significant, of the books sounding the alarm was Rachel Carson's **Silent Spring** (Houghton, 1962). Carson, a biologist, detailed the dangers of DDT and other pesticides to human beings and to the "biosphere." Noting that the U.S. production of synthetic pesticides soared from 124 million pounds to 638 million pounds between 1947 and 1960, she maintained that these "Elixirs of Death" were now stored "in the bodies of the vast majority of human beings, regardless of age. They occur in the mother's

milk, and probably in the tissues of the unborn child."

During the mid-1970s, after Congress had targeted the more obvious forms of pollution, environmentalists again turned their attention to unseen threats, such as radioactivity and toxic chemicals, putative breeders of a new cancer epidemic. A new spate of disaster-on-the-horizon books followed: **The Politics of Cancer** (Sierra Club, 1978) by Samuel Epstein; **Who's Poisoning America?** (Sierra Club, 1981), edited by Ralph Nader, Ronald Brownstein, and John Richard; **America the Poisoned** (Acropolis, 1982) by Lewis Regenstein; and **The Poison Conspiracy** (Permanent, 1983) by Karl Grossman.

**The Apocalypitics** (Simon & Schuster, 1984), and their allies in the scientific community, argues Edith Efron, are guilty of "a complex corruption of science and a prolonged deception of the public." Many scientists and regulators have abandoned objectivity, she asserts, and are rigging their statistical data to suit their political agendas. One of her chief targets: scientists who assume that human exposure to even a single molecule of a carcinogen may trigger a malignancy.

A good case study of one regional struggle over federal resource regulation is William H. MacLeish's **Oil and Water** (Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1985). In 1979, Mobil Oil sought to obtain offshore drilling rights on New England's Georges Bank, a 20,000-square-mile stretch of sea off the coast of Cape Cod. There, in waters Macleish calls "a ship-killer, a man-killer, and one of the richest fisheries in the world," Massachusetts fishermen harvest haddock, flounder, scallops, and lobster. For four years, the Conservation Law Foundation fought Mobil in court—and eventually won.

Europeans are often baffled by Americans' pitched battles over environmental controls, observes David Vogel in **National Styles of Regulation: Envi-**

**ronmental Policy in Great Britain and the United States** (Cornell, 1986). Britain's environmental regulations, he writes, are much less draconian—yet ultimately no less effective—than those in the United States.

One reason, says Vogel, is that scientists from government and business formulate standards together. As a result, the British environmental effort is rarely marred by the drawn-out struggles that afflict the United States.

The British are also far more tolerant of risks. After laboratory tests of the organic pesticides aldrin and dieldrin showed evidence of carcinogenicity in mice, but not in rats, monkeys, or dogs, British authorities decided not to ban the chemicals. Looking at the same evidence, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency did. The inflexible mandate of the 1972 Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act says that "suspension is to be based upon potential or likely injury and need not be based upon demonstrable injury or certainty of future public harm."

The Soviet Union has adopted ambitious pollution control laws. And, as Charles E. Ziegler concludes in **Environmental Policy in the USSR** (Univ. of Mass., 1987), the Kremlin has been no more successful than the United States in making them work.

Noncompliance in the USSR is widespread. Violators "frequently ignore environmental rules, confident that their case will probably not make it to the courts." Moreover, adds Ziegler, because it has ignored "the economics of environmental protection," the Soviet

Union is saddled with many statutes that are "unrealistically strict" and "unenforceable."

The best overall assessment of the War Against Pollution in the United States is **State of the Environment** (Conservation Foundation, 1987), which provides an evenhanded summary and a wealth of data on everything from U.S. production of benzene to duck populations in North America. Walter A. Rosenbaum's **Environmental Policy and Politics** (Congressional Quarterly, 1985) analyzes the political battles over the environment during the early Reagan era.

What next? The inventory of hazards in **An Environmental Agenda for the Future** (Island/Agenda, 1985), a joint effort by the leaders of 10 major U.S. environmental and conservation organizations, suggests no end of environmental threats to human welfare.

Many of the hazards are familiar: the population "explosion," the dangers of genetic engineering, the depletion of the Earth's ozone layer, damage to the world's rain forests. The authors also spy fresh dangers. Even the average American home contains perils. Indoor air pollution, the authors warn, may be even more hazardous than smog, since most Americans spend more than 80 percent of their time indoors.

But, in the broadest sense, the authors argue, America's environmental ills are really world ills that require "global foresight" to overcome.

"As Americans become increasingly aware of the plight of those who live elsewhere . . . moral values will motivate citizens to seek solutions for the problems of others who share the planet."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers may wish to consult titles from the WQ's earlier Background Books essay on the Environment (Summer 1977), as well as its essays on such related subjects as Energy: 1945-1980 (Spring 1981), Agriculture in America (Summer 1981), and Nuclear Power in America (Winter 1985).