
BACKGROUND BOOKS

RETHINKING THE ENVIRONMENT

Two years ago the *New Yorker's* Bill McKibben published a well-publicized book whose title offered a blunt warning: **The End of Nature** (Random, 1989). It was, more precisely, the idea of nature as wild and untouched that McKibben saw vanishing. "The idea of nature will not survive the new global pollution—the carbon dioxide and the [chloro-fluorocarbons] and the like We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us."

The End of Nature caused quite a stir; some suggested that it would have the same galvanic impact on public opinion that Rachel Carson's **Silent Spring** (also first published in the *New Yorker*) had had 27 years before. But while many were titillated by McKibben's violent obituary for nature, few seemed to pay much attention to his rescue plan. Man, he suggested, should submit to nature and do what is best for "the planet." He proposed an "atopia" where "our desires are not the engine." Human happiness, he said, "would be of secondary importance. Perhaps it would be best for the planet if we all lived not in kibbutzes or on Jeffersonian farms, but crammed into a few huge cities like so many ants."

The End of Nature is but one example of a strand of environmental thinking called "deep ecology." When scholars look back at deep ecology years hence, they will doubtless make much of what is probably its only "atopian" novel, Ernest Callenbach's **Ecotopia** (Bantam, 1977). Originally self-published by Callenbach in Berkeley in 1975, *Ecotopia* went on to become a cult classic. It tells of a visitor's adventures in 1999 in the new nation of Ecotopia—carved out of Northern California, Washington, and Oregon—an ecologically correct land of hanging plants and natural fibers from which plastic and all other symbols of the modern consumer society have been banished. Conformity to the new Green ethos is enforced by a

sort of genteel authoritarianism.

But there are also serious works in deep ecology. One of the best is Roderick Frazier Nash's **The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics** (Univ. of Wisc., 1989). The historian from the University of California, Santa Barbara, believes that history can be seen as the gradual widening of the scope of rights from the time of Magna Carta, which applied only to English noblemen, to the American Declaration of Independence, to the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1957 to, most recently, the Endangered Species Act of 1973. What he calls "environmental ethics" are in his view only a logical, though admittedly radical, next step in the development of liberal thought. Wolves and maple trees do not petition for rights, he acknowledges, so "Human beings are the moral agents who have the responsibility to articulate and defend the rights of the other occupants of the planet. Such a conception of rights means that humans have duties or obligations toward nature." Nash likens today's "biocentrists" to the crusading anti-slavery abolitionists of the early 19th century.

As Nash shows, deep ecology is a product of a partly submerged, second strand of American environmental thought. That strand had its origins in John Muir, the founder (in 1892) of the Sierra Club, who broke with Theodore Roosevelt and other late 19th-century conservationists by emphasizing the need for preservation of untouched wilderness. Stephen Fox's **John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement** (Little Brown, 1981) is one of several recent studies. But the biocentrists look to another man, University of Wisconsin forestry professor Aldo Leopold, as the intellectual father of their movement. In **A Sand County Almanac** (1949), Leopold first proposed a "land ethic" that explicitly suggested that humans were just one of many species with rights on Earth, that other species have something like a right to life, "as a matter of biotic right, regardless of the presence or absence of economic advantage to us." At first ignored, *A Sand County Almanac* enjoyed a major vogue beginning in the 1960s.

Leopold, like Muir, was a dissenter from the mainstream conservation movement. As University of Pittsburgh historian Samuel P. Hays writes in **Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency** (1959), the conservationists may have revered nature but they were not about to endow it with rights. In keeping with the Progressive faith in professional management, Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and other founding conservationists advocated wise "stewardship" of natural resources for the benefit of mankind. They were optimists about the environment and "emphasized expansion, not retrenchment; possibilities not gloom."

Perhaps because the conservationist ethic so naturally became America's ethic, it was not greatly elaborated after this early period. That began to change with the work of bacteriologist René Dubos, who, in **A God Within** (Irvington, 1972) and other books, developed the notion of "enlightened anthropocentrism." Dubos accomplished a hybridization of the two major strands of environmental thought, arguing in effect that a holistic attitude toward nature is in man's own best interest.

Even as Dubos wrote, old-fashioned conservationism was in fact being transformed into contemporary environmentalism. In **Beauty, Health, and Permanence** (Cambridge Univ., 1987), Samuel P. Hays attributes the change to a general shift in values growing out of the nation's unprecedented mass affluence after World War II. As Americans satisfied their craving for homes, cars, washing machines, and other material goods, their attention turned to "environmental amenities." In the age of Pinchot and Roosevelt, these had been available only to the wealthy few who were able to travel to national parks and private retreats. But now, since the private market could not satisfy the broader public's desire for clean air and water, "there was increasing demand that public and private nonprofit institutions do so." Hays makes a similar argument in **Government and Environmental Politics** (Wilson Center, 1989), edited by Michael J. Lacey, a thorough history of many areas of envi-

ronmental policy.

Journalist William Tucker offers a far less sympathetic version of the change in **Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism** (Anchor/Doubleday, 1982). Today's environmentalists, he argues, are a "nouveau aristocracy" who are "far more concerned with preventing others from climbing the ladder behind them, than in making it up a few more rungs themselves." Tucker contends that a disproportionate share of the costs of this aristocracy's pet "environmental amenities," from suburban zoning regulations to air pollution controls on factories, are borne by the lower middle class.

Another interesting explanation of the movement is offered by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky in **Risk and Culture** (Univ. of Calif., 1982). They argue that there are three strands of American political culture (the hierarchical, the individualistic, and the sectarian or egalitarian) and that the rise of environmentalism reflects the recent strength of sectarianism. Because sectarianism regards all people as equally valuable and of infinite worth, there is no limit to the price that it demands that society pay for protection from carcinogens and other environmental risks. The result: environmentalism run amuck.

Neither environmentalists nor polluters get much sympathy from biologist Garrett Hardin in his latest book, **Filters Against Folly** (Viking, 1985). A self-described "ecoconservative," Hardin is best known for his "tragedy of the commons" thesis. He believes that environmental harm most often results when the principles of private property are compromised. People who own the resources they use are good stewards; those who shift the costs of their private interests to the public—be they polluters who foul the air, nomadic herdsman who graze common lands, or even, in a sense, environmentalists themselves—have no incentive to be moderate. "The greed of some enterprisers in seeking profits through pollution," Hardin suggests, "is matched by a different sort of greed of some environmentalists in demanding absolute purity regardless of cost."

