

Creating the Countryside: The Politics of Rural and Environmental Discourse

by E. Melanie DuPuis and Peter Vandergeest, editors
346 pp.
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996
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The title of this book is provocative and ambiguous. The provocation is, of course, immediately evident in that most of us don't immediately think of the countryside as being created. Rather, we are inclined to think of the countryside—the rural and natural landscapes as yet unsullied by the harsh imprint of urban industrialism—as being somehow spared, “unspoiled” or “leftover” from some prior, more bucolic, but certainly not “created” state. The book, a collection of 10 papers by different authors, clearly and emphatically rises to the challenge of its provocation and demonstrates how the human hand is universally involved in shaping the countryside: in some instances in non-teleological but still significant ways, in some cases in openly or surreptitiously planned ways, in some cases in perversely unpredictable ways. This issue has, of course, become increasingly important as “conservation” becomes a greater need and, therefore, a more prominent political act. This book provides ample evidence to dispel any residual misunderstanding about human agency in creating the rural, semi-natural and natural landscapes we now wish to protect. Some of the salient examples are considered below.

The ambiguity of the title is a little harder to access. It is this: the title explicitly suggests that the process it describes results in objectively measurable impacts on a tangible world; what the book demonstrates is that (as has been duly noted) the characteristics of landscapes can reside entirely in the eye of the beholder and that creating a landscape may simply be a cultural reconstruction of perceptions and interpretations—generally, of course, in service of some partisan value, sectoral interest or, perhaps, fundamental misconception. The extent to which the countryside we create in our minds may deviate from the empirical evidence of “what it's really like out there” is a matter that becomes more urgent as we use what we believe to shape our environmental impacts. Hence, in this age of ecological activism, conservation planning and environmental alarm, the insights presented in this book are beyond interesting and entertaining. They are import.

The introduction identifies the three aims of the book as (1) showing the extent to which we treat rural as being opposed to (rather than complementary to) urban, and natural as being opposed to cultural phenomena; (2) demonstrating that conceptual categories can be imposed on the landscape and on the inhabitants thereof in arbitrary, counterproductive and in some cases unjust ways; and (3) arguing that disparity in the power

relationships of groups who may hold contradictory conceptualizations can lead to conflict but can also lead to productive alliances (most notably between the urban-based conservation lobby and the rural-based inhabitants of important ecological areas. How well do the essays achieve these goals?

The book is divided into three parts (not corresponding to the three themes outlined above). The first is “*Modernization and Marginalization*” which contains two disparate but nonetheless very informative accounts of transformation of rural landscapes. The first deals with New England and describes (without reference to Robert Frost's mending of fences) how an entire mythology has emerged out of popular misconceptions traceable to a few tendentious reports on (or reporters of) the landscape. “Stone Age New England” is not the paleolithic account one might expect, but an account of how the popular idea of non-productive, hard-scrabble cultivation between the stones of agricultural New England is at variance with the present and historic reality of a highly productive agricultural sector. The one factor I found disconcerting about that account is that the author (Michael M. Bell) concludes with a discussion that is honest enough to admit that “evidence and ideology are not unconnected.” He exposes why he believes the view of a non-productive land base serves the interests of those who witnessed or supported the abandonment of rural farms, and expresses why he is ideologically more comfortable with evidence he has drawn on. This intellectual honesty seems to invite a sort of relativistic view that would acknowledge any interpretation of evidence as valid. Unfortunately, in issues as urgent as conservation vs development, not all are as generous in recognizing differences in opinion, and the instrument of “false necessity” can be used to trump more honest, but less forceful, opinions.

Claims of “false necessity” in fact become a central theme in the next chapter, which describes the marginalization of small farmers in the Basque region under what seems to be almost a Soviet style zealotry in the cooperative movement. Small diversified farmers were seen as “not authentic businesspeople ... [who] ... also lack the ability to reason systematically. The power of the commercial interests was totally able to dominate concerns about social structure and family-based land holdings were dismissed as “hobby” farming! This chapter shows clearly how policy and ideological factors can translate directly into the physical nature of rural landscapes and

also, of course the social structure of human inhabitants of those landscapes. While this general story is not new, it is well told and very well supported with empirical and documentary evidence from the region.

Part 2 of the book is entitled "*People In and Out of Nature*" and contains five chapters dealing with divergent views of "environments" and with issues of the impacts of initiatives to conserve rural landscapes on the lives and economies of rural people. The cases range from the U.S. under the "New Deal" through to Kenya and its prodigious but controversial game parks, Indonesia, the Amazon, India and the Caribbean. It is, of course, not possible to summarize the chapters here, but there is much that is generalizable from each of the case studies: DuPuis (U.S.) and Fisher (Amazon) show how changes in the "social construction" of the environment influence political opportunities, lives and landscapes; Baviskar (India) opens with a quote indicating that the environmental debate is "an argument in the cities about what is happening in the countryside;" Lynch (Caribbean) talks about the vast differences between North and South perspectives and between government and NGO perspectives; and Peluso (Kenya) asks whether conservation initiatives based on these types of disparities in power and value are "sustainable—not to mention ethical—in the medium to long term."

Part 3, "*Constructing Rurality*," contains three papers; the first treats the marketing of rural, idealized, Vermont—the Ben and Jerrification of the image of Vermont that masks the real issues of social and environmental transformation—and the last deals with gender-based differences in perceptions of home villages amongst people in the "transnational migrant circuit" in Mexico and California. Women think much less fondly of the rural homelands than do men, perhaps Goldring

argues, because of fundamental differences in the distribution of workloads—males may recall being looked after, or may expect that they will be looked after, by wives or mothers in home villages. Peter Vandergeest is one of the editors of the book and it is perhaps for that reason that his chapter dealing with the "real" Thailand imbedded in the rural country, seems to best capture the overall thrust of the entire collection. To my mind it should have come last; it describes in some detail two conflicting narratives of the rural landscape, essentially a pro-development (urban) one and a quality-of-life (rural) based one. To me, the most salient conclusion from the book is this: "evidence ... is often ignored because participants in the debate over rural communities ... begin from moral and prescriptive positions ... and then project onto rural people. My final argument is that we ... give narrative knowledge greater legitimacy than it has at present." He goes on to talk of the impact of the "hegemony of science" in the debate over (and policy formulation for) rural landscapes. But, clearly, rural landscapes evolve in conjunction with the human communities that inhabit them, and our science, natural or social, is not so far advanced that we can effectively eliminate the fact of differences in values, perceptions and objectives amongst people. Until we can, "creating the countryside" will be a process with social justice dimensions every bit as complex as the economic and resource-related dimensions that presently drive the process.

This book is valuable in presenting informative detailed case studies and generalizable principles. My concern, as noted above, is that the intellectual honesty of the authors of these studies will not necessarily be matched by those who benefit from the "false necessity" strategy. The readers who enjoy and appreciate this collection of papers may not be the ones who need most to understand them.

Aldo Leopold: A Fierce Green Fire

By Marybeth Lorbiecki
Falcon Publishing, Helena, Montana, 1996

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Some historians emphasize structural explanations of important events and trends, others focus on significant personalities. Would the history of the Roman Empire have been radically different if Caesar had died while trying to subdue Gaul? Would contemporary America look different if Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X had not been assassinated? The contrast between structural and biographical approaches is a reflection of the tension between structure and agency that permeates the social sciences.

In the history of the sciences, it is harder to afford great weight to personalities. Newton was a great genius, but Leibnitz also developed the calculus. Darwin was first to work out evolution through natural selection but Wallace had the same idea soon after. Einstein developed general relativity, but Hilbert was working on very similar ideas. But whether in science or in politics, biographies can serve to help understand key transitions even if one believes that structural forces outweigh biographical ones.

Aldo Leopold is a perfect subject for the attention of human ecologists because he was at the center of both a key scientific transition and a key political transformation. Of course, the two are related. Leopold pioneered the development of wildlife ecology (even though his key text was called *Game Management*). He also was a central figure in arguments to protect wilderness and to consider all species, not just game species, in habitat management. Indeed, with Rachel Carson, he might be considered the inventor of modern environmentalism. (Unfortunately, other key 20th century figures—Barry Commoner, Ding Darling, Bob Marshall, Ralph Nadar—have not been given the same biographical attention as Leopold and Carson.)

I assume that nearly all human ecologists have read *Sand County Almanac* (Leopold 1987 [1949]). *Sand County Almanac* has been discussed by decades of environmental philosophers. It also has proved an inspiration to social psychologists who are interested in environmental concern. In a discussion about Leopold's work, Heberlein (1977) and Dunlap and Van Liere (1977) suggested that there may several psychological bases for environmental concern, an idea since elaborated by Stern, myself and our collaborators (Stern, Dietz, and Kalof 1993; Stern and Dietz 1994).

But many readers of *Sand County Almanac* have only a sketchy idea of Leopold's critical role in the development of wildlife ecology and in twentieth century arguments for the

preservation of wildlife and what we today call landscape ecology and ecosystem management. Lorbiecki's biography provides a very readable overview of Leopold's life. This is not a scholar's or an historian's biography, and that is both its strength and its weakness. The prose is clear, and narrative is driven forward by the events of Leopold's life. Most of the discussion is based on secondary sources, especially Meine's (Meine 1988) more extensive biography. This makes it an easy and entertaining book to read, something that can be the basis for a pleasurable evening.

But if one has read Leopold, and if one stops to think about his pioneering influence, Lorbiecki's text becomes more tantalizing than satisfying. Leopold was raised as a hunter and yet became a leader in what we now consider the fight to preserve biodiversity. The subtitle of Lorbiecki's book comes from one of the most famous quotations from Leopold's work, his reflections on killing a female wolf in his early years as a forester: "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes...I thought then that fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with me." (Leopold, 1987 [1949]:150) What is less well known is that during one stage of his career, Leopold worked for the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, a booster for road building and development. How was he able to make the intellectual transition from his early views to those so widely read today? To many of us it seems a very radical one, yet the history of environmentalism in the U.S. demonstrates that from the start, sport hunters played a key role in preserving biodiversity and wild areas. We would learn much from understanding in more detail how Leopold's thinking evolved.

Leopold was an academic pioneer who virtually founded a discipline. He was involved in several fierce battles over biodiversity preservation in the 1930s and 1940s, nearly a half century before the term was coined. All of his children became environmental scientists; three have been named members of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. We learn of all these remarkable things in Lorbiecki's biography, but we learn little of the context in which they occurred, little of what influenced Leopold, little of Leopold as a scientist or a human being.

This is not damning with faint praise. *Aldo Leopold: A Fierce Green Fire* was well worth reading as an introduction to the life of an important and fascinating figure. Lorbiecki has done an excellent job at the task she set for herself. But

Leopold was such a fascinating and important figure that learning a little about him only raises a desire to know more.

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Briefly Noted

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Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture

by Timothy W. Luke
University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 1997
ISBN 0-8166-2847-5

Ecocriticism, whether coming from "back to nature" conservatives, Nature Conservancy liberals or Earth First! radicals, is familiar enough. But when we listen do we really hear what these groups are saying? In a book that examines the terms of Ecocriticism, Timothy W. Luke exposes how ecological critics, organizations, and movements manipulate our conception of the environment. Turning tables on the ecocritics, Luke demonstrates how Ecocriticism can move beyond its familiar confines to engage larger cultural, economic, and political questions. *Ecocritique* rereads Ecocriticism to reveal how power and economy, society and culture, community and technology compete over what are now widely regarded as the embattled ecosystems of nature. Luke considers in particular how the meanings and values attached to the environment by various groups - from the Worldwatch Institute, the Nature Conservancy, and Earth First! to proponents of green consumerism, social ecology, and sustainable development—articulate new visions of power and subjectivity for a post-Cold War era. This accessibly written work opens with deep ecology and concludes with social ecology, along the way reconsidering thinkers with philosophical leanings, including Hebert Marcuse, Paolo Soleri, and Murray Bookchin. In systematic critiques reexamining the cultural practices and ethical values of contemporary environmentalism, Luke highlights the political dilemmas of biocentrism and anthropocentrism in modern ecological thinking. With its critical analysis of many environmental discourses and organizations, *Ecocritique* makes a major contribution to ongoing debates about the political relationships among nature, culture, and economics in the current global system.

A Geography of Time

by Robert Levine
New York: BasicBooks (HarperCollins Publishers), 1997
ISBN 0-465-02892-6

This is a highly informative and entertaining book which has the title extended as, *The Temporal Misadventures of a*

Social Psychologist, or How Every Culture Keeps Time Just a Little Bit Differently, which sums up nicely the essence of the book. Robert Levine asks us to explore a dimension of our experience that we take for granted—our perception of time. When we travel to a different country, or even a different city in the United States, we assume that a certain amount of cultural adjustment will be required, whether it's getting used to new food or negotiating a foreign language, adapting to a different standard of living or another currency. In fact, what contributes to our sense of disorientation is having to adapt to another culture's *sense of time*. Levine, who has devoted his career to studying time and the pace of life, takes the reader on an enchanting tour of time through the ages and around the world. Levine raises some fascinating questions. How do we use our time? Are we being ruled by the clock? What is this doing to our cities? To our relationships? To our decisions we have made without conscious choice? Alternative tempos we might prefer? Levine proposes that our goal should be to try to live in a "multitemporal" society, one in which we learn to move back and forth among nature time, event time, and clock time. Please set aside *time* to read this book!

Wrongness, Wisdom, and Wilderness: Toward a Libertarian Theory of Ethics and the Environment

by Tal Scriven
Albany, New York:
State University of New York Press, 1997
ISBN 0-7914-3371-4

An interesting mix of scholarly writing on the basis for libertarian thought as it applies to a variety of topics. Part III of the book deals with our relationships, as individuals and societies, to nature. Scriven argues that nothing logically prevents a well-constructed libertarianism from supporting environmental-ethics positions at least as radical as biocentrism, although he finds deep problems with going as far as ecocentrism and postmodern variants. Scriven offers a challenging viewpoint, but also examines the philosophical landscape of "ecology" with a critical eye and thus the book serves as a catalyst for future discussion.

Environmental Program Evaluation: A Primer

Edited by Gerrit J. Knapp and Tschangho John Kim
University of Illinois Press (Urbana and Chicago), 1998
ISBN 0-252-02334-X

This book represents a collaboration among scholars in many disciplines and among policy analysts from academic and public agencies. The intent of this book is to break through the language and conceptual barriers of environmental program evaluation and to provide the most relevant information needed to understand environmental program indicators and related issues from a practical viewpoint. This book critically examines "pocketbook environmentalism", and offers a wide-range of topics that help to bridge the gap between the established field of program evaluation and the burgeoning field of environmental policy.

Downstream and Upstream Ecologists: The People, Organizations, and Ideas Behind the Movement

By Jean Mercier
Westport Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997
ISBN 0-275-95927-9

This book is about ecologists, not about ecology. Mercier attempts to understand those who talk for the environment and to understand who they are, and so is interested in the context in which ecology emerges. As for the title of this book, Mercier proposes that, "...downstream ecologists' refer to those who are intent on cleaning up the environmental mess, on working on the water, the air, and the soil; the 'upstream ecologists' are more interested in looking at the causes - often unrelated to the physical environment-that got us here." Chapter 1 is a presentation of conversations with ten important North American ecologist leaders, nine of them American, one Canadian. Chapter 2 is about environmentalist and ecologist organizations. Chapter 3 focuses on the relations between ecologists and government and public policy. Chapter 4 examines the

complex questions, "Why are we preoccupied with the environment now?" Chapter 5 tries to show that there are common patterns between Deep Ecologists and other contemporary currents such as postmaterialism, postindustrialism, and postmodernism. The conclusion identifies the opportunities, and also the dangers, that are tied to our "protoplasmic era."

Kerala's Demographic Transition: Determinants and Consequences

Edited by K.C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998
ISBN 0-8039-9393-7

The state of Kerala has been the focus of considerable international attention for its success in several key areas of the social sector including literacy, education, health and family planning. An area in which Kerala has done remarkably well is in demographic transition - namely, changes in the birth and death rates and in the age structure of the population. At the same time, Kerala has a relatively poor record in industrial production and agricultural growth. This would appear to be an anomaly since the widely held belief is that declines in fertility and mortality rates are primarily a consequence of high economic growth rates. The purpose of this volume is to understand the reasons why Kerala was able to achieve its demographic transition even in the absence of corresponding buoyancy in the economic sectors in order to draw lessons for both other Indian states and other developing nations. The contributors conclude that the Kerala experience demonstrates the effectiveness of well thought out social policies and programs, especially relating to fertility and mortality control. Equally important for successful campaigns relating to family planning and maternal and child health is the catalytic role of female education and general literacy. Overall, the volume demonstrates that it is not necessary to wait for major changes in the productive sectors of the economy in order to usher in demographic changes.

Special Review: The Changing American West

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Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region

Edited by William E. Ribesame and James J. Robb
New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997
ISBN 0-393-04550-1

Americans hold dearly to old ideas of the region as a wild place of majestic space, mountains, and deserts, hard-working cowboys and stoic Indians. We think of a ranching, mining, and logging economy, enlivened here and there with urban centers and outback resorts, but still a bastion of small-town life, individualism, and opportunity. And so it is sometimes - but rarely. The West's most telling reality nowadays is its new social layers: a thriving recreation and tourism industry, an amenity region attracting migrants faster than anywhere else in America, and a postindustrial, high-tech economy creating new jobs in records numbers. The West is America's most rapidly growing area, replete with pop-up shopping malls, office parks, and cookie-cutter subdivisions. Rodeos, dude ranches, national parks, and wilderness areas now abide with sprawling cities, ritzy ski resorts, and meccas of world-class climbing, mountain biking, and fly fishing. *Atlas of the New West* makes sense of this transformation with forty-six full-color, three dimensional maps, offering a portrait of the region's cosmopolitan cities, nuclear waste sites, gold-metal trout streams, espresso bars, and working ranches. Illustrations and informative sidebars show old West battles taking new forms—who owns the land? Who controls what water rights? And how much development is too much? The *Atlas of the New West* explores what the region's rapid postindustrial evolution means for its future and the future of America. This book does an outstanding job of capturing the essence of what the New West is like and will be; I live in Salt Lake City (essentially in the middle of the New West boundaries) and I have found that the *Atlas* is an lively portrayal of the dynamics of the ongoing debate, controversies, and dialogue of growth, conservation, land-use, politics, and of a place where past and future meet at once.

The Next West: Public Lands, Community, and Economy in the American West

Edited by John A. Baden and Donald Snow
Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997
ISBN 1-55963-460-X

In *The Next West*, nearly a dozen leading thinkers and writers including Karl Hess, Jr., Mark Sagoff, Thomas Michael

Power, and Stephen Bodio, offer an insightful vision of the future of the American West. Their essays comprise a cogent matrix of reflections on what has gone wrong in the region, and, as Donald Snow explains in his lively introduction, point the way not to a "New West" of cappuccino cowboys, fiber optics, and some ambient, simpering sense of the 'the public's willingness to embrace environmental issues', but to a *Next West* based on the renewal of Jeffersonian democracy, experiments in local and supra-local control of public lands, and the use of markets to replace the political allocation of natural resources." The first half of the book presents an enlightening view of what it is to live in the West and practice environmental awareness. In the second half of the book, contributors address the mythologies that have set the tone for life in the West for more than a century, challenging "the demons that command center stage in the politics and economy of the region." They dissect and debunk much of the West's gospel: that environmentally damaging extractive economics are essential for economic survival; that conservation is best handled by the government; that some day soon a great leader will arrive to once and for all solve their most pressing problems. The *Next West* is spirited and compelling work that presents a fresh and thought-provoking approach to Western issues. It is essential reading for anyone who lives in or cares about the vast complex region known as the West.

Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: The Search for a Value of Place

by Thomas Michael Power
Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1996
ISBN 1-559-63368-9

Over the past two decades, a growing consensus has emerged among Americans as to the importance of environmental quality. Yet at the same time, conflict over environmental issues has built to a point where rational discussion is often impossible. Efforts to protect unique ecosystems and endangered wildlife are portrayed as threatening entire regions and ways of life, and anti-environmental groups such as the Wise Use Movement employ economic insecurity as a weapon in an ongoing attempt to rescind environmental protection measures. In *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies*, economist Thomas Michael Power argues that the quality of the natural landscape is an essential part of a community's permanent economic base and should not be sacrificed in short-term efforts to maintain employment levels in industries that are ultimately not unsustainable. He provides numerous case stud-

ies of the ranching, mining, and timber industries in a critical analysis of the role played by extractive industry in our communities. He also looks at areas where environmental protection measures have been enacted and examines the impact of protected landscapes on local economies. Power exposes the fundamental flaws in the widely accepted view of the local economy built around the extractive model, he lays to rest the fear that environmental protection will cause an imminent collapse of the community, and puts economic tools in the hands of those working to protect their communities.

Other Books Related to This Special Section (not reviewed)

Reopening the American West

Edited by Hal K. Rothman

Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1998

ISBN 0-8165-1600

The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the American West

by Carl Abbott

Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1995

ISBN-8165-1129-2