"MAN IS EVERYWHERE A DISTURBING AGENT"


We have now felled trees enough everywhere, in many districts far too much," George Perkins Marsh asserted in Man and Nature (1864). "Let us restore this one element of material life to its normal proportions, and devise means for maintaining the permanence of its relations to the fields, the meadows, and the pastures..." Doing so would not come easily to Americans, he knew, for it would require a "certain persistence of character in all branches of industry, all occupations and habits of life."

Yet by becoming devoted conservationists we would help ourselves "become, most emphatically, a well-ordered and stable commonwealth, and not less conspicuously, a people of progress."

Arguing that there is an ineluctable connection between landscape restoration and social regeneration, Marsh laid the groundwork for an environmentalism that still defines academic scholarship and activist politics. Progressive-Era conservationists made Marsh’s arguments their own through the establishment of the national forests and parks, as did their successors who later advocated for the Wilderness Act (1964). Even contemporary environmentalists who have never read Marsh give voice to his ideas when they argue that by preserving open space Americans will save themselves.

Although Howard Wilshire, Jane Nielson, and Richard Hazlett do not cite Marsh in The American West at Risk, a comprehensive analysis of the environmental dilemmas peculiar to the modern west, Marsh influenced their fine book. Like him, they lay out the present dangers embedded in our furious assault on our natural resources; like him, they are convinced that a conscientious shift in our behavior will produce a healthier people and planet.

First the bad news: the west is in serious trouble, a narrative structure that frames the volume’s chapter-by-chapter analysis of the history and current state of the region’s forest, farmlands, and range; mines, roadways, military bases and test sites; its habitats, water, effluent, and recreational sites. The authors find, for instance, that forests are splintering under a set of human-derived burdens: as sources of recreation and timber production; wilderness, biodiversity, and water quality; economic growth and community development. These competing uses have compromised their health. Vulnerable too is arable land that long has fed the nation and world. With the demise of the family farm and the concomitant growth of agribusiness, as well as the technologies and chemicals that have extended its market share, the authors conclude that those agricultural methods that “use more energy per calorie of food produced, and expand soil depletion degradation, cannot be sustained much longer” (page 76).

For many of the same reasons, achieving rangeland health has proved just as elusive. This well-terraced terrain, like the riparian systems that flow through it, are too frequently judged in fair or poor condition to make a conservationist glad-hearted. Despair seems an apt response to the ubiquitous strip-mining and quarrying, slant oil drilling and coal-methane gas production that is puncturing the earth’s surface; ditto with the innumerable freeways, state highways, and county roads that crisscross the west. Together, these resources and transportation grids, binding urban, suburban, and rural environments and economies, have been responsible for the west’s explosive commercial growth, surge in population, and boom in recreation, from skiing and rafting to off-road joyriding. Oh, and tons of garbage, whose problematic disposal is swelling to nightmarish proportions. All these developments have intensified pressures on the region’s air, soil, and water quality, creating an “urban roulette” (page 229) that seems to be spinning out of control.

This is not an upbeat book, as its title warns. But the greater risk lies in not reading it. For no single volume yet has probed as wide or interrelated range of issues or has done so with such a sharp eye on the historical, scientific, and social implications of Americans’ resource consumption. The book is discomforting in another critical respect. It bluntly unmasks our (often unconscious) complicity in this catalog of damage and woe: we want to protect old-growth forests but eagerly purchase wood products; we denounce smog and the automobiles that emit it, yet have a pronounced aversion to mass transit; we love low-density suburbs and shun high-density cities; although we may cluck over foul-smelling poultry farms we also hunger for cheap meat and eggs.

Proposals for how to break these dysfunctional behavioral patterns emerge in the final two chapters. Arguing that “[n]atural processes obey physical laws of motion and energy” and that “human changes add to nature’s effect” (page 347), and assuming that top-down change will not occur, the authors call on the citizenry to lead the charge for a more habitable future. As they detail the types of individual initiatives that will mend this much-battered land (some practical, others fanciful); and prophezise that should we fail to “live better with nature . . . our proud nation could go the way of many civilizations that preceded ours,” they sound an alarm first raised by George Perkins Marsh.

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