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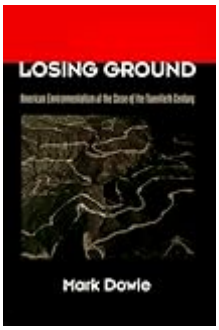

Mark Dowie. *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996. xii + 317 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-04147-8.

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What is the State of the Environmental Movement at the End of the Twentieth Century?

The movement is without question tremendously popular: more than 80 percent of Americans describe themselves as environmentalists. Yet we now have an anti-environmental Congress that says, "Economy first, ecology later," and those self-described "environmentalists" are buying gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles more than ever before, thanks to low gas prices and a legislative unwillingness to force automakers to improve fuel economy.

In *Losing Ground*, Dowie argues that the environmental movement is "courting irrelevance"; unable to meet its stated goals, it lost ground during the conservative and corporate 1980s and can now choose to evolve or die. It is a "respectable, safe, and polite" movement (p. 3), more consumed with expensive litigation and direct-mail marketing than with grassroots action. The *modus operandi* has become compromise, not the tougher stance that, Dowie argues, is essential. Mainstream environmental organizations garnered millions of dollars of contributions in the 1980s, but now have falling memberships. The size and wealth of environmental organizations have helped some causes, despite a rather narrow environmental agenda that favors furry mammals and clean air for backpackers over non-white humans and clean air in the workplace.

Dowie begins with the historical antecedents of the environmental movement in America, arguing that the movement is based in the "environmental imagination" of a harmonious and pristine environment. He cites influences from the Bible to Henry David Thoreau to Gifford Pinchot and John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Environmentalism rose as an ex-urban phenomenon out of aesthetic influences and early promotion of scenic values, primarily by the privileged white protecting their scenic treasures like the Yosemite Valley and the majestic forests. He cites Robert Gottlieb's *Forcing the Spring* (1993), which shows how the environmental movement shied away from urban issues even though they developed as Progressive issues.

Most of the book focuses on the movement after 1970. By the 1970s, environmentalism was a robust and popular movement. In keeping with its polite, middle-class, legacy, it moved into an agenda that focused on litigation and legislation. This was effective for a time; it did estab-

lish the rights of nature, flora, and fauna and their standing that entitled them to similar protections as corporations. Environmental organizations assumed that they would file lawsuits against violating industries and be backed by U.S. law.

Instead, they found themselves suing the government to enforce and abide by its own laws. In addition, litigate-legislate strategy requires enormous amounts of money to support its hired experts, direct-mail marketing and corporate structure. In addition, 7 percent of environmental organizations' support comes from foundation philanthropy–which depends, in turn, on not offending any key personnel in that organization. Those foundations depend on large corporations–and often have leaders from polluting industries on their boards of directors. This mix, Dowie contends, is a sign of the constant compromises that environmental organizations make.

Compromise, Dowie asserts, is the worst strategy for environmentalists. Meeting violators half-way only produces half-results: "[environmentalists] will only gain results if one party is willing to do something more drastic than cut a deal" (p. 77). The civil rights movement, he contends, was won not by laws, but by direct, non-violent confrontation.

Environmentalism has also bred strong antagonists that fight against any perceived attack on the sacred American institution of private property, and environmentalists have been blamed for nearly all U.S. social problems. The "wise use" movement terms environmentalists "nature fascists" and draws support from RV clubs, the right wing, and the natural resource industry. Creation of adversaries is a sign of health, but environmentalists have failed to confront their challengers directly.

Dowie paints a gloomy picture of environmentalism's failures, but also offers much hope for reform and a brighter future. Environmentalism must embrace the ideal of environmental justice: "In a nation built on notions of equal opportunity and equal rights, the environmental imagination must include the premise that the environment belongs to us all; that we share equally its life-sustaining attributes and whatever degradation we impose upon it" (p. 125). Environmentalists must move their concerns beyond nests for bluebirds and protection for whales to homes for people and jobs for the unemployed–the loss of both animal and human habitat. The picture must include not only wilderness, but "the place you live, the place you work, the place you play" (p. 174). Focus on human habitat needs to go beyond the habitats of the white and middle-class. Without this broader focus, environmentalism is but half a movement.

The hopeful future is in the "fourth wave" of environmentalism, that includes deep ecology, social ecology, feminist ecology, bioregionalism, spiritual ecology, and native ecology, with room for input from radical groups like Earth First!. It must be a multiracial, multiclass, multicultural effort with input from many corners. It will include a roster of new players like the Greens, true Democrats, human rights advocates, ecological economists, and madeover mainstreamers. Dowie is optimistic–and presents predictions based on some well-known current trends.

Once again, Dowie cites the importance of the "environmental imagination" to make these changes. Yet his initial examination of that imagination is perhaps the least satisfactory portion of the book. It seems essential to "imagination" to examine more of the output of that imagination–including literature and art. The work could benefit from more focus on the burgeoning field of environmental literature and some of the critiques it has produced of both classic and less well-known writers. Additionally, the narrative jumps fairly abruptly from Progressivism to Rachel Carson, largely skipping important changes in American culture that might complement his argument.

Although Dowie is a journalist and not an academic historian, I was somewhat frustrated by his endnotes, which cite most–but not all–of the works he mentions. This impedes anyone attempting to trace his sources.

Dowie has produced a compelling and important work that will be of interest to those interested in contemporary environmentalism, economics, public policy, natural resources, and social movements. This is environmental history in its most classic sense–a history and critique of the movement itself–and has important messages for that movement and beyond. Although Dowie's solutions are radical, particularly his endorsement of Earth First!'s tactics, his focus on local, grassroots solutions is well-taken.

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