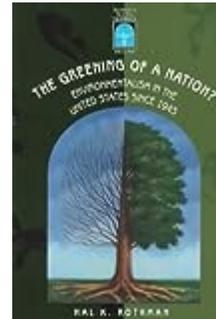




Hal K. Rothman. *The Greening of a Nation? Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945.* Orlando, Fla. and London, England: Harcourt Brace, 1998. x + 210 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-15-502855-5.



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Seeking Quality of Life Through Environmentalism

The end of the Second World War brought enormous change to life in the United States. People moved to urban areas and they moved west. In part due to the benefits extended to military veterans, most participated fully in the prosperity that came with the physical, technological and economic build-up of the nation.

Optimism and progress characterized society, but so did air and water pollution, industrial and nuclear accidents. As Americans looked at their new-found lives based on consumption and individualism, they began to desire something else: quality of life. Quality of life was a new idea and required changing values and mores throughout most institutions of society.

In *The Greening of a Nation?* Hal Rothman utilizes a multitude of short case studies to show how the people of the United States used the evolving concept of environmentalism to capture the quality of life they sought. He also illustrates how people sought a painless, easy way to achieve this quality of life and merely gave lip service to meaningful environmental actions. This movement had individual philosophical and political leaders, strong yet evolving national organizations, and agencies of the fed-

eral government which redesigned themselves.

The battle over Echo Park Dam on the Colorado River in California first shed light on the pitting of a powerful state and its resource needs against those of less powerful areas. The proposed dam also focused the public and political attentions on the rapid growth of the west and the sacrifice of beautiful and valuable places to fuel this growth. A political agenda and underlying philosophy, which became known as environmentalism, grew out of this experience. Rothman's case studies show how this evolving cultural acceptance of environmentalism challenged the underlying assumptions of the National Park Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Reclamation and their roles in conservation. These federal agencies abdicated missions, faltered in the winds of public opinion, gave up their mission-based planning and decision-making and instead answered to the constituency making the loudest noise.

The 1960's found Americans obsessed with individual rights and entitlements, abandoning the more traditional views of collective rights and personal obligations. This was the era of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*

and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*. Both raised the spectre that America was on a course of self destruction, not progress. Society was fragmented as the back-to-nature proponents came up against the individual rights advocates. Self destruction was not limited to the United States. The agricultural Green Revolution was bringing progress accompanied by pollution and massive changes in economies to third world nations.

The compromise was environmentalism, illustrated by the national, cross-class outcry over the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969. Rothman describes the formation of the NEPA and the EPA, the beginning of Earth Day. These were the 1970's when the environmental movement had to face new economic realities and a declining confidence in federal government. Federal agencies were caught between powerful special interests who rallied support with tales of the threats to local workers. Would jobs be lost to save endangered species? In the mid-1970's, all industries in the United States were facing changes and dislocations. How America made its living was being challenged and environmentalism became the scapegoat. Americans still looked for that elusive quality of life and even within the disruptions of the changing job markets felt threatened by nuclear testing and hazardous waste.

Three Mile Island confirmed the worst fears of the public; Love Canal brought questions about environmental justice. The toxic environment and the responsibility of corporations became important topics of conversation. At this point Rothman discusses the EPA and the effect of the Reagan administration and its Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. Mr. Watt's activism to dismantle the federal government's power over the environment spawned more grassroots actions. Among them, the Sagebrush Rebellion in Nevada, sought to strengthen local and state controls. Secretary Watt's activities also resulted in massive growth in the membership of the mainline national environmental organizations as well as the emergence of new approaches, demonstrated by

Earth First!

While organized environmentalism grew during this period, it also became fragmented. By the 1990's, studies showed that American's placed their economic objectives over their environmental concerns. They supported sacrifice for the environment, but wanted someone else to do it. Environmentalism has become the nation's popular culture, with symbols permeating society. However people want a kind of environmentalism that requires very little effort or thought, and certainly no sacrifice. Rothman concludes that although the greening of our nation is given a great deal of attention, it has failed in two distinct ways: it never entirely shed its privileged-class origins; and, by becoming a mass movement it has provided a way for Americans to pay lip service to environmentalism without implementing the principles in their lives.

This book moves quickly through case studies, across time and between public and private actions. Rothman's short case studies effectively illustrate his themes of shifting paradigms and the ensuing political and social responses. The reader with some existing knowledge of the history of conservationism and environmentalism, and some knowledge of political economy theories of sociology will read with highlighter in hand, repeatedly saying "YES!" However this is essentially a review of the literature with no source documentation. He draws entirely upon secondary sources. There is a two and a half page bibliography which shows that the sources are quite current, drawing primarily from books published in the 1990's. My personal preference would have been for a more in depth development of some of the case studies and the use of primary sources to provide insight into how the changes he described actually were brought about.

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