

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Diane Barthel-Bouchier. *Cultural Heritage and the Challenge of Sustainability.* Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013. 235 pp. \$94.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61132-237-8; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61132-238-5; \$32.95 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-61132-678-9.



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Published on H-Environment (June, 2014)

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Due to the critical role that public opinion plays in environmental policies, particularly in the United States, the issue of sustainability has become an important and intriguing topic in both environmental and public history. Over twenty years ago, scholars in these respective fields began talking about the areas in which these subdisciplines intersect. They laid the foundation for research and practice, but left questions about how environmental issues, such as climate change and finite energy sources, affect our disciplines and professionals, and about how our disciplines can have an impact on climate change through education, communication, and understanding.

A sociologist has offered a place to begin to explore all that. Diane Barthel-Bouchier has long focused her research on issues of cultural preservation and her 1996 book *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historic Identity* offered a too rare international comparison on how societies institutionally manage, interpret, and protect their histories. As a sociologist, Barthel-Bouchier again enlists an institutional approach, examining how different associations around the globe have approached the challenges of sustainability, which has risen in importance when considering their respective missions of protection and recognition of historic resources. She ar-

gues that this rising prominence in how organizations frame and justify their activities results not only from very real environmental threats, but also from professional response to the general public and governments who viewed historic structures as inherently wasteful of resources and energy inefficient. No one has considered the keepers of cultural heritage, also known as conservationists and preservationists, to be pragmatic experts who could contribute scientific solutions to global environmental problems (p. 8).

One reason Barthel-Bouchier's book will be a valuable addition to the shelves of environmental historians is because it contributes a review of the sociological literature around the issue of sustainability. In chapters 2 and 3, she examines cultural attitudes toward cultural heritage and reviews how various organizations have incorporated and in some cases reconciled ideas about human rights, and now environmental threats, into their mission statements. The middle chapters provide an overview of familiar issues, but they also offer various examples from around the world where environmental concerns and solutions threaten cultural resources, historic cultural practices, and even conservation/preservation practices with erosion or destruction. For example, we can no longer assume that physical boundaries will ac-

tually protect a property, that protection can rely on government funding, or that the same (often subjective) standards about integrity of setting continue unmodified. Barthel-Bouchier recognizes the intangible lifeways behind the physical resources affected by climate change. Chapters 4-5 examine the impact of rising sea levels, desertification, deforestation, and polar melting, and unsustainable social practices on selected urban centers, historic villages, and cultural landscapes, while in chapter 6 she dissects the tensions between energy conservation and sociopolitical values of privacy and preservation, as in the case of Nantucket Sound in Massachusetts and the Lake District National Park in Great Britain.

Throughout the volume, Barthel-Bouchier wrestles with defining sustainability. For her, sustainability is not just about diminishing limited natural and cultural resources, but also about the social equity questions of resource distribution. Furthermore, she identifies various issues of tension and contradiction inherent in the decisions to make sustainability a central part of the mission of many of these organizations.

The most prominent conundrum that people often raise and that Barthel-Bouchier addresses fairly directly is the stalemate between site protection and cultural tourism. For decades, the heritage community has stressed the connection between history and economic opportunity. When public agencies identify places with world heritage status, it becomes a site for tourism. But additional foot traffic means further damage for many environmentally imperiled sites. Moreover, global tourism in general contributes to pollution and harmful emissions at the same time that it promotes awareness and sensitivity supporting the survival of these sites. She explores this problem in the context of protecting and recognizing sites as places for preservation.

Beyond synthesizing often isolated or parallel conversations into a concise introduction to the issues of sustainability and cultural heritage, Barthel-Bouchier's conclusions offer support for the most typical work for public and environmental historians. Twenty years ago, Hal Rothman pointed out that environmental history, with its global aspirations of raising awareness of the human relationship to the natural environment is actually grounded in the bedrock of local context as any historical field can be.... Environmental historians are fundamentally historians of place.... The cultural fabric of any region is a result of interaction of culture and environment. [1] Thus Barthel-Bouchier argues that while heritage organizations worldwide have incorporated climate change and sustainability into their mission and activities, reaching the grassroots organizations at the local level will likely make the most important long-term impact. She sees primarily local action as the most effective tool for spreading more universal values about heritage.

Bottom-up change begins with education and challenging the way the public has historically understood its environments. Effectively incorporating environmental sustainability into public historical work and communicating the key messages will require considerable interdisciplinary cooperation and understanding. This book, by providing a global foundation for how heritage professionals all over the world have dealt with the matter, should serve as a starting block for addressing global concerns about the impact of climate change on our environmental and cultural heritage. Let's go.

Note

[1]. Hal Rothman, "Environmental History and Local History," *History News* (November/December 1993): 8-9.

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Citation: Leah S. Glaser. Review of Barthel-Bouchier, Diane, *Cultural Heritage and the Challenge of Sustainability*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

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