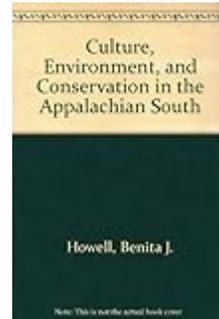




Benita J. Howell, ed. *Culture, Environment, and Conservation in the Appalachian South*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002. ix + 203 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07022-8; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02705-5.



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The Cultures of the Appalachian Environment

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Although never entirely ignored, the southern Appalachian Mountains are drawing increasing attention these days from historians, anthropologists, biologists, writers, environmental activists, and, of course, mining and timber companies and their politician allies. Long portrayed as a region of “backwardness” with stagnant economies, strange religious practices, primitive housing, and odd culinary tastes, the Appalachian region from West Virginia to northern Alabama is finally being appreciated for its cultural diversity and environmental history. The unique landscape of mountains, rivers, valleys, fields, streams, and hollows has supported a wide range of flora, fauna, and human populations for thousands of years, while in more recent times the rich timber and coal resources in the area have attracted individuals and companies intent on extracting a profit.[1] Anyone who has visited two of the National Park Service’s most frequented parks in the Great Smoky Mountains and along the Blue Ridge parkway in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia knows of the outstanding natural beauty to be found in the southern Appalachians, but few know the

intricate history of how humans have interacted with and altered that environment beyond the obvious destruction of clear-cut logging and mountaintop removal caused by surface mining for coal.

In her recent novel, *Prodigal Summer*, best-selling author Barbara Kingsolver highlighted the intimate and longstanding, though sometimes contradictory, relationship between southern Appalachian people and their land. She suggested that there was much environmental knowledge to be learned from folks native to the area, while scientific expertise also had a role to play in preserving and enhancing both the environment and Appalachian cultures.[2] This new collection of essays edited by Benita Howell makes a similar argument. Howell, a professor of anthropology at the University of Tennessee and the author of *Folklife along the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River* (2003), insists that “culture is crucially important in environmental studies” (p. 1) and that the “dynamic interplay between nature and culture has been central to the experiences whereby Appalachian people have transformed physical space and resources into place and lifeways” (p. 5). Howell’s in-

troductory essay and most of the ten other chapters explicitly challenge the stereotype of southern Appalachia as full of “hillbilly” despoilers of the environment. While acknowledging that some Appalachian natives have contributed significantly to environmental alteration, Howell points out that “many of them have behaved and continue to behave as ‘ecosystem people.’ They often possess, hand down, and regularly use detailed, localized knowledge of their surroundings. They value self-sufficiency and resist capitalist values and consumerism to a remarkable degree. Many Appalachians of all social classes express a place attachment that encompasses historical and spiritual connections to family land, to ancestors who have occupied that land, and to the heirs who will follow” (p. 10). The important, and accurate, notion that culture matters when trying to understand why groups of people interact with nature the way that they do permeates the ten case studies in this collection that Howell labels a work of “environmental anthropology” (p. 4).

In the book’s first of three sections, “Cultural History and Environmental Change,” three chapters take a more or less traditional environmental history approach to explore how humans utilized and impacted three specific areas of southern Appalachia. In “Early Holocene Ecological Adaptations in North Alabama,” Renee B. Walker analyzes faunal remains from Dust Cave to illustrate human consumption of animal resources from 10,500 to 5,200 years ago. Claire Jantz describes Cherokee utilization of the Cades Cove area in the Great Smoky Mountains before Euro-American settlement. Michael M. Gregory relates the Euro-American environmental history of the Denmark community in Rockbridge County, Virginia. The next part of the book, “Sense of Place,” examines the relationship between twentieth-century residents of southern Appalachia and the land that supports them economically and spiritually, and serves as a source of family history. Michael Ann Williams compellingly deciphers anti-environmental feelings among families displaced by the formation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the early-twentieth century. In “Reclaiming the Commons: Narratives of Progress, Preservation, and Ginseng” Mary Hufford laments the loss of “common” land that, though owned and increasingly placed off limits by mining and timber corporations, has long supported the collection of ginseng for sale by local people. Melinda Bollar Wagner completes this section with an enumeration of the ways that folks in western Virginia define their attachment to land as a “genealogical landscape.” The book’s final segment, “Con-

servation for the Future,” provides case studies of ongoing action to preserve Appalachian environments and cultures. In “Defending the Community: Citizen Involvement in Impact Assessment and Cultural Heritage Conservation,” Doris Lucas Link, David Brady, and Nancy Kate Givens take up the material discussed by Wagner as residents of southwestern Virginia were interviewed to determine their attachment to place as a new high voltage electrical power line was being considered for the area. Gerald F. Schroedl details the cooperation of the U.S. Forest Service, academia, and public foundations to analyze and preserve Chattooga, an important Cherokee village archeological site. Benita J. Howell and Susan E. Neff expose the unique history of the nineteenth-century town of Rugby, Tennessee by lauding its forward-looking concern for environmental preservation. In the book’s last essay, Annette Anderson reveals the efforts of Pittman Center, Tennessee to retain its environmental quality along the border of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, through sustainable development.

Like most essay collections, this book is uneven in topical coverage and in the depth and quality of the material presented. In some of the essays, for example, greater use of applicable secondary published sources could have resulted in more historiographically significant interpretations. In part, this unevenness is because the contributors range from environmental activists, native to southern Appalachia, to anthropologists, folklorists, geographers, and landscape architects. But from that diversity of backgrounds and experiences emerges a truly interdisciplinary work that will inspire further study of the southern Appalachian environment and its people. The conscious effort to build bridges between academia, activists, and the general public is a model worthy of emulation. *Culture, Environment, and Conservation in the Appalachian South* provides both a quality introduction into Appalachian cultural and environmental studies, and a significant step towards the maturation of southern Appalachia as a field within environmental history. It will be equally well received in college classrooms and among the interested public.

Notes

[1]. Recent works that incorporate an environmental history focus on this region include Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Wilma A. Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (Chapel

Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Margaret Lynn Brown, *The Wild East: A Biography of the Great Smoky Mountains* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); Donald Edward Davis, *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); and Timothy Silver, *Mount Mitchell and the Black Mountains: An Environmental History of the Highest Peaks in Eastern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[2]. Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

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