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ESSAY

Again the Backward Region?

Environmental History in and of the American South

by **Otis L. Graham**

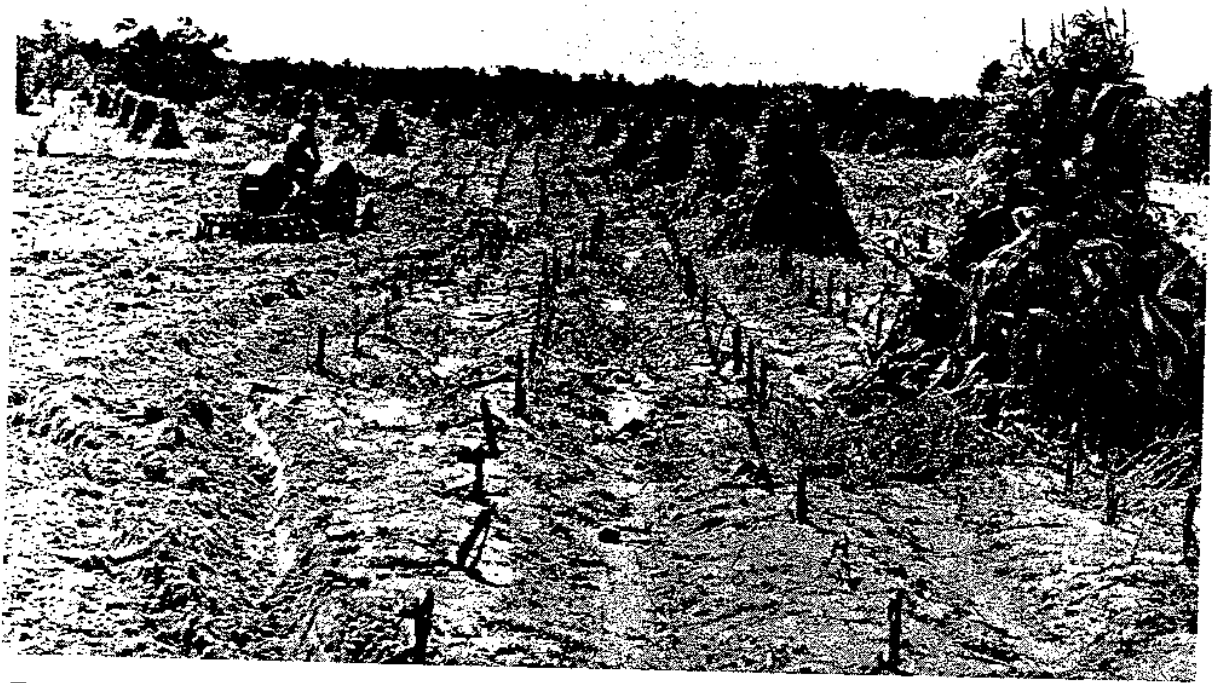


Where northern hardwoods and the oak-pine forests meet. Recreation and watershed forests in the southern Appalachian Mountains, 1938, courtesy of the U. S. Forest Service.

Whe end of the century proved a poor time to sound the warnings of ecological crisis. That message, called Ecopessimism by the media—despite the fact that people who warn others are optimistic that their listeners can change course—shared the air with the same flock of strange birds that take flight at every century's close. There were the expected predictions of Jesus's return and global economic collapse, along with forecasts of terrorist exploits, global computer crashes, and other very bad events of the Book of Revelations sort. But more than end-of-century and -millennium jitters burdened the message of a large environmental crisis ahead.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, predictions of huge famines heralded environmental disaster. These forecasts have turned out to be, depending on your point of view, overstated or flatly wrong. This good news at the turn of the century imposes a heavy cost. Today's more soundly based ecopessimistic warnings sometimes have been dismissed as more of the same doomsterism. But this time, a generation later, a broad and deep consensus has formed among those who study the health of ecosystems and the dynamics of the human-nature relationship. While not predicting "Doom" or specific global famines as writers in the 1960s sometimes did, the emerging vision of what lies ahead is laced with pessimism and conveyed as an urgent alarm. This message appears repeatedly in the writings of individual scientists and collectively more than once, most notably in the "Warning to Humanity" issued in 1992 by a group of seventeen hundred scientists, including ninety-nine Nobel Laureates. "Human beings and the natural world," they wrote, "are on a collision course" marked by atmospheric problems including global warming and ozone depletion, pollution and depletion of water resources, buildup of hazardous wastes, erosion and salinization of soil, and rapid species extinction due to habitat destruction. Driving all this is the unprecedented acceleration of global population growth, which surged beyond the first billion humans in 1830 to two billion in 1930 and four billion in 1960, with nine to twelve billion humans projected by 2100.¹

The consensus that ecological problems menace the human future allows for wide disagreement on the mixture of worry and hope appropriate in view of the trends at work. A recent issue of *Daedalus*, for example, describes as an encouraging historic trend the "dematerialization" and "decarbonization" of industrial economies, in which industry (in the developed world) is developing technologies that allow production with less waste and steadily reduce per-unit demands for fossil fuels.² But this is to argue only that the descent into ecotroubles may have somewhat slowed. The conviction that we are moving into an era of dismaying ecological hazard has intellectually overwhelmed its ideological critics, the Eco-optimists, whose leading voice was stilled when Julian Simon died in 1998. In his place are marginal voices with no scientific standing, like radio host Rush Lim-



Farming and the growth of industry in the South have had unintended effects: habitat destruction. Courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, the Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

baugh and the Free Market religion sect in charge of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, allied with a small, well-financed band of “brownlashers,” who insist that environmental crisis is a myth and ecological problems are exaggerated by statisticians and environmental organizations eager for members.

Accorded some respect in the 1980s, their argument ended the century in retreat before the strong consensus among natural scientists that the twenty-first century is loaded up with ecological breakdowns. Journalist Robert Kaplan captured President Clinton’s attention with a 1996 article on the arc of countries from Africa through the Middle East, where cascading ecological collapse has intensified tribal and civil wars and several “failed states” have lost control over national borders. In a sophisticated look forward to 2020, Hamish McRae foresees water shortages, a tightening of oil supplies, relentless habitat destruction, and unavoidable international conflict as China moves ahead of the United States as the world’s chief air polluter and thus cause of global warming. Even that Texas optimist Walt Rostow sees 1990 to 2025 as “a period of maximum strain on resources and the environment when global population is still expanding” with the potential in some regions for “a global crisis of Malthusian consequences.”³

The full impact and implications of this realization are muted within the United States because the nation is now in Indian summer. The Cold War is over, and the stock market is giddily high. The American economy is so strong and inflation-free that some savants claim that the old curse of a business cycle has been lifted by Alan Greenspan’s genius. Underlying global demographic and

ecological trends, however, cannot be steered by the Federal Reserve. Indian summer will give way to a long season of planetary troubles, troubles in bunches. The maladies ahead may often take the form of civil, military, and political conflict, or of Samuel Huntington's "clash of cultures," but they will be driven and intensified by the environmental harm we humans both inflict and suffer from.

.....
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.....

ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Early this century, social scientist Howard Odum characterized the South as "that magic area which measures more than forty inches average annual precipitation," a region of "superabundance and variety" in game and fish. When he lived, the South was a frustrated region on the margins of the nation's economic development. The rural South, for example, was without electricity; "All over Alabama the lamps are out," a line from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) reminds us.⁴ Odum, and virtually all southerners except the Nashville Agrarians, wanted the South inside the national developmental dynamic. This has happened. The region after World War II moved toward national norms in per capita income and economic structure. Our history positions this as long-sought good news, and this is part of the truth. But we southerners have something else to learn as we catch up in economics and forge ahead in population expansion. Growth comes at a high price because we have not, in the words of the Southern Growth Policies Board, found a way to have "southern growth without northern mistakes." And most of the costs lie ahead, to be paid by future generations.

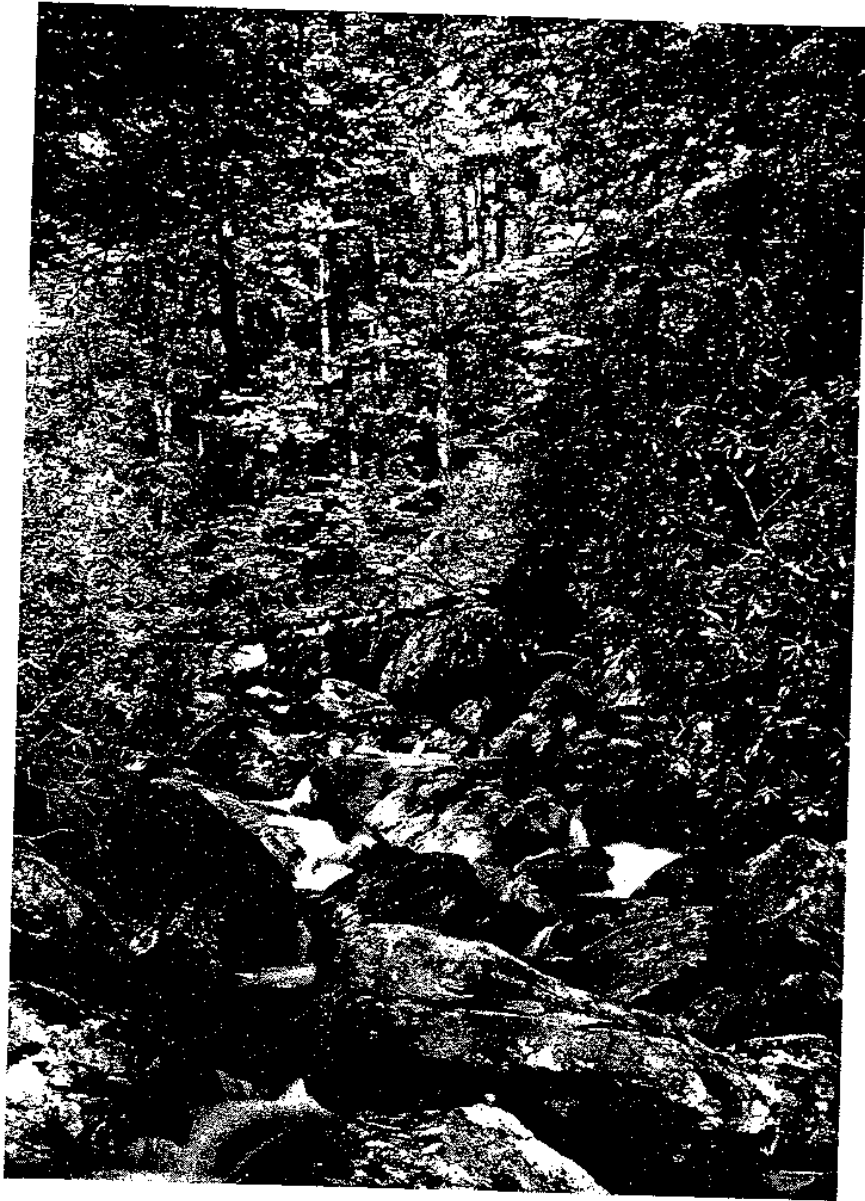
One trusty motto is exactly wrong in this case. We cannot this time say, "Yes, but not in the South." On the environmental front, we are better advised to say, "Yes, and especially in the South." The region continues to grow rapidly, drawing black expatriates back home and Connecticut Yankees and fugitive Californians to a world with Jim Crow gone, air-conditioning in the malls, the *New York Times* and bagels and unsweetened tea within reach. The South hums with growth in the mountains and Piedmont and especially in the coastal regions, growth that paves over the wetlands and lines the creeks, bays, and beaches with resorts, tract homes, and trailers, multiplying the garbage and sewage and the chemical runoff from farm, factory, and suburb. Three southern states are among the ten fastest growing in population in the U.S., and the region's growth rate from 1990 to 1995 was 7.5 percent, six times that of the Northeast and twice that of the Midwest; although a shade behind the West's growth rate, the South's exceeded all regions in actual numbers.⁵



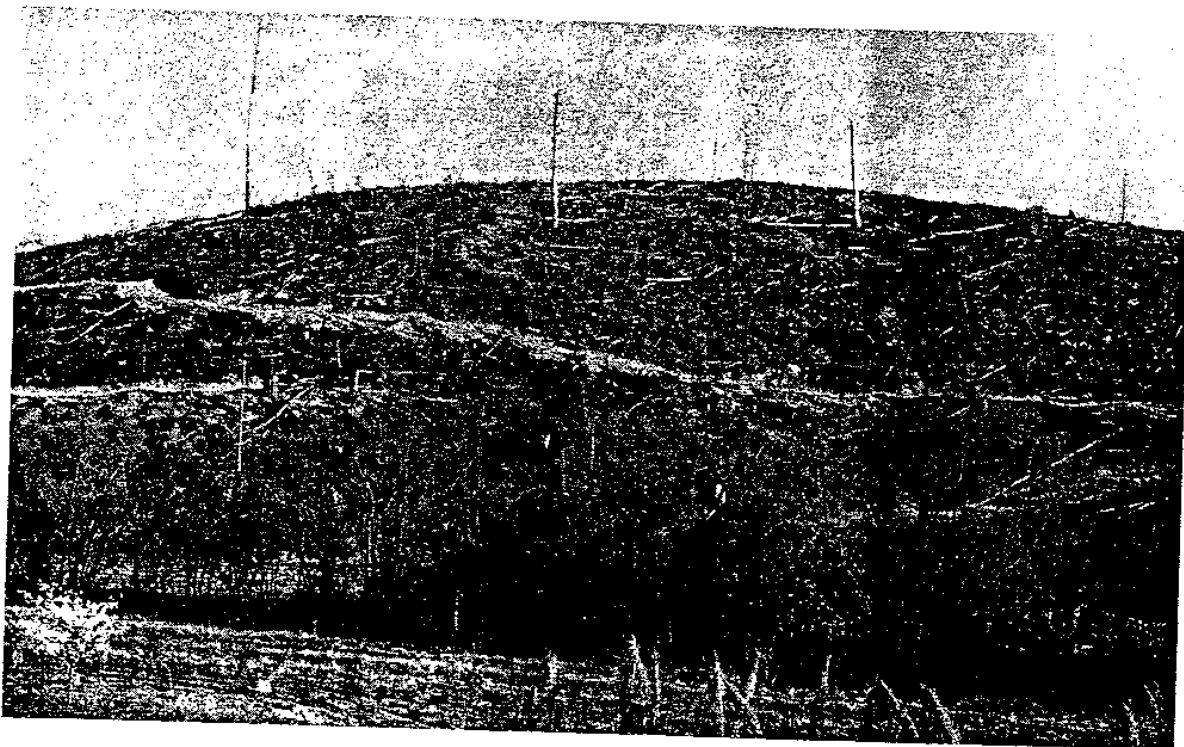
Before electricity came to the rural South. From the Kester Papers, Southern Historical Collection, the Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

This increase surges on without any end in sight. Census Bureau population growth projections for the U.S. as a whole now anticipate more than 571 million Americans by 2100. Generated increasingly by immigration, population growth is an option we have chosen, though it is widely assumed to be inexorable and beyond public policy. This expansion drives a drama in the South of ecological degradation from mountain ridges to offshore fisheries.

Covering the story of environmental assault in fits and starts, the media bring to general attention some of the key battlegrounds in the southern U.S. that compose what forester and author Aldo Leopold called "a world of wounds." In a recent mapping of U.S. and Canadian ecoregions by the World Wildlife Fund, four of North America's eleven most imperiled ecoregions with high but development-threatened biodiversity were found to be in the American Southeast. The Everglades, that unique "river of grass" (in Marjorie Stoneman Douglas's phrase), shrinks and parches in a slow strangulation by urban and agricultural encroachments on an entire ecosystem from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf shrimp nurseries. Chesapeake Bay has been a crisis zone for at least two decades, where oyster, fish, aquatic grasses, crab, and osprey struggle to survive in a waterway in which oxygen levels are under assault from nitrogen and phosphorous generated by human and animal pollution. The celebrated 1987 multistate Chesapeake Bay pact has not met its pollution reduction goals for 2000, and an expansion of the poultry industry in the Potomac River watershed from seven million to a hundred



As the Appalachians are clear-cut, tranquil mountain brooks are increasingly endangered. The top photo is nearly sixty-years old, courtesy of the U. S. Forest Service; and the bottom photo, courtesy of Walker Golder, National Audubon Society, was taken last year.



.....
*North Carolina's
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population.*
.....

million birds in less than a decade has polluted that river back onto the list of the nation's ten most endangered.⁶

A new front recently opened when the State of Maryland closed several Eastern Shore rivers because of infestations of "the cell from hell," *Pfiesteria piscicida*. Maryland learned about this new, headline-grabbing poison that Man has somehow called forth into East Coast waterways by observing huge fish kills first in the Neuse, then in the Cape Fear rivers. It is no coincidence that the discovery of *Pfiesteria* came as North Carolinians were learning that the state had without general notice or warning become the

unhappy home of forty percent of the hog industry in America. Housed in miserable industrial warehouses, North Carolina's ten million hogs now surpass the state's human population but generate four times the fecal matter, or thirty-two million daily human fecal equivalents. This waste is dumped into what are essentially latrines with waterways nearby and ground water beneath. This explosion across the South of huge hog and poultry factories is especially good news to marine life-choking algae blooms and to *Pfiesteria*, the cell that, given enough nutrients from animal wastes, urban sewage, and storm sewer runoff, capriciously becomes toxic to fish, fishermen, and swimmers.⁷

These are only the leading environmental wounds in the South that have lately been in the news. There are a few encouraging stories on the other side of the ledger. The rockfish in the Chesapeake and the striped bass in the Gulf of Mexico have apparently recovered. Populations of deer and wild turkey have increased while the snow goose population expands "out of control," in the words of our green Secretary of the Interior. But these are isolated pulses of wildlife health. Ecosystem news is overwhelmingly negative. Congratulatory accounts of the remarkable reforestation of the South that began after World War II appear



The fishing and crabbing industries have taken their toll on species who rely on aquatic habitats. A Northern Gannet (left) and a Common Tern (right) succumb to fishing line and crab pots. Courtesy of Walker Golder, National Audubon Society.

occasionally without telling the other side—that the expansion of huge tracts of industrial timber factories represents not forests but monocultures without the rich understory and biodiversity that came with the old-growth forests logged off so relentlessly. The South's great long-leaf pine forests, including around sixty to ninety million acres of rich ecosystem that spread in a two hundred mile wide belt from Virginia to Texas, are now a handful of remnants, perhaps 3 percent of the original acreage, and disappearing at a rate of about a hundred thousand acres a year. Not much in the news, either, was the announce-

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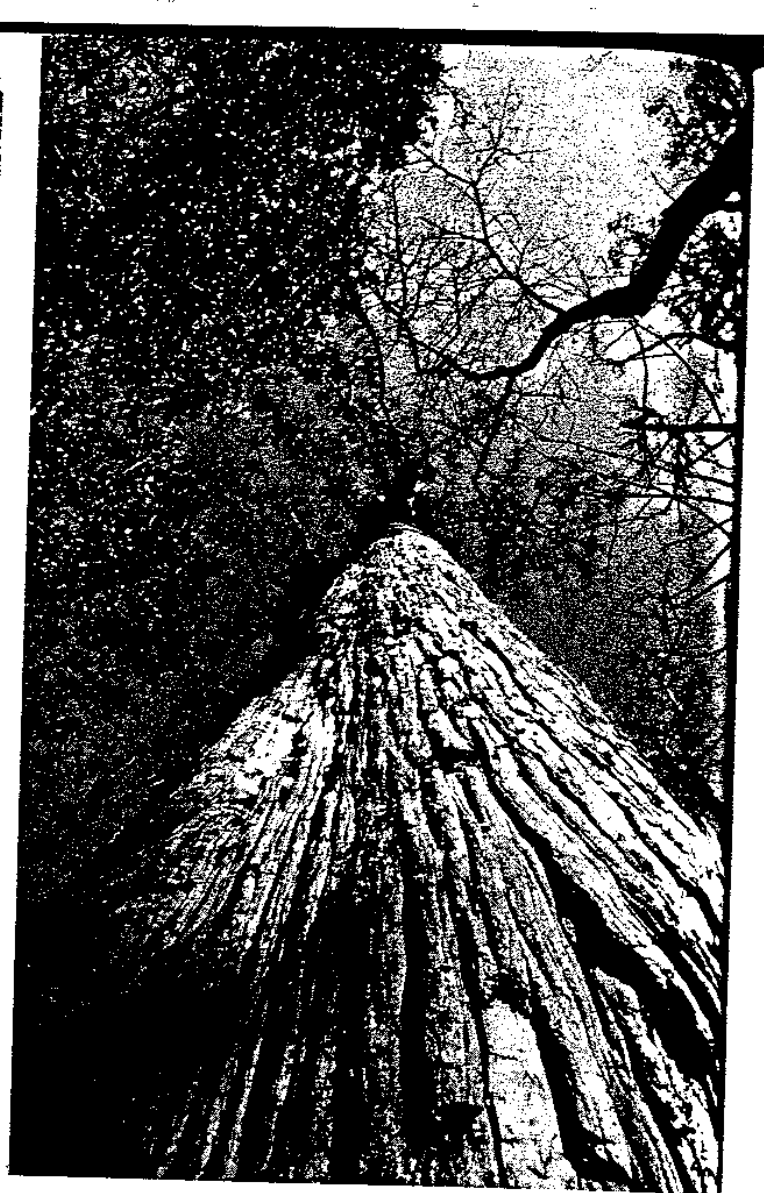
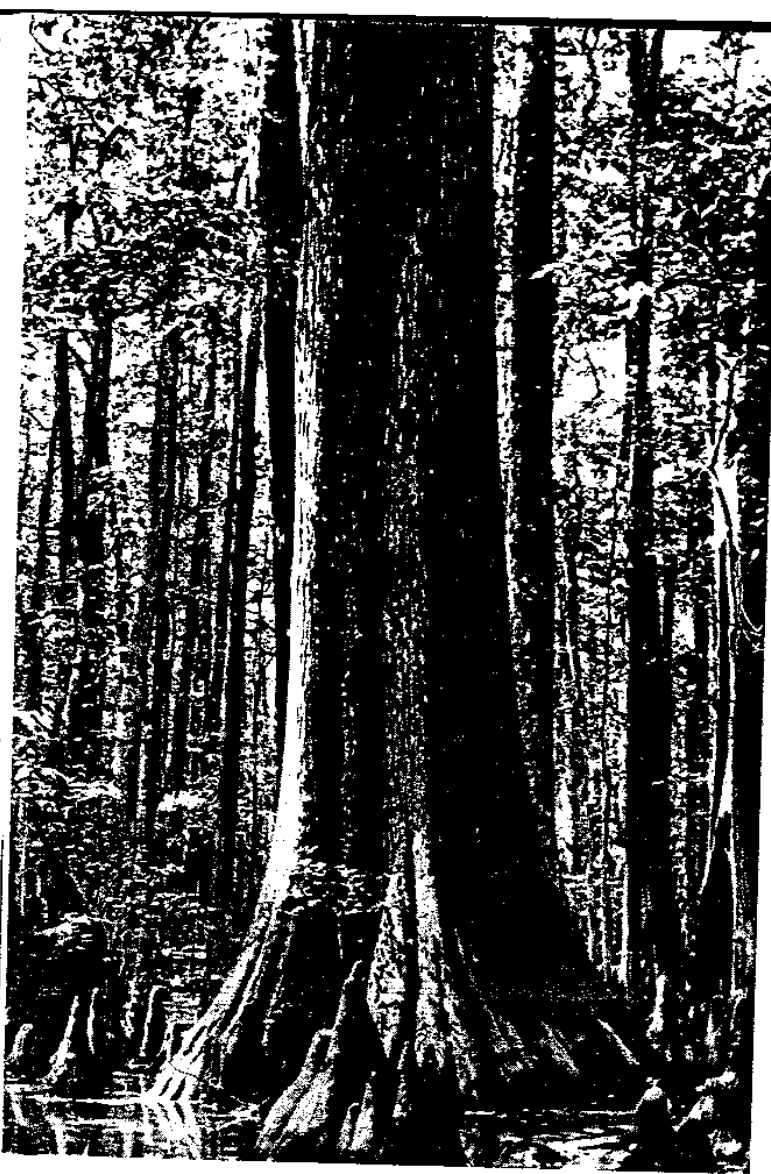
ment by the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham, North Carolina, that the South among all U.S. regions "ranks worst" in industrial emissions of toxic chemicals on a per capita basis, in total regional volume of hazardous waste, and in being home to 108 of the 179 waste dumps in America posing the greatest risk of cancer to people living near them. This bad news is torqued into something worse by those scholars and activists who argue that poor folks, especially non-white poor folks, live closer to the hazards of toxic effluvia than those more affluent and influential.⁸

The media sometimes cover such stories of sick humans downstream from something noxious. But ecosystem and habitat degradation should be the central story line. Degraded habitats produce less of familiar fish or wildlife yields, easily understood as a cost to fishermen and hunters. More important vectors, however, are the thinning out of ecosystems and wealth of species, increasing vulnerability to invasive and harmful exotic species from other regions or overseas, and the loss of unappreciated "ecosystem services," such as cleaning of air and water, pollination, pest control, restoration of aquifers, and aesthetic beauty. We must learn to count costs that are not denominated simply in human cancer risks.⁹

This is only to offer a sample from the swelling number of ecological upsets in the South. The future contains not only more of the same but, by general scientific agreement, a warming of the earth's climate, with unpredictable consequences that very likely include rising ocean levels and more violent hurricanes and tornadoes. Every state of the original Confederacy but Arkansas and Tennessee offers an extended coastline to what promises to be a more angry, larger ocean. Ecotrouble is ahead for the United States, and perhaps especially in the South.

ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND SOUTHERN STUDIES

If planetary ecocrisis, fully felt in the American South, will play a growing, troublesome role in human affairs, scholars will be increasingly expected to know something about how this all came about. A start has been made. Environmental



Is the end of the Old Growth imminent? Baldcypress (left) in Edenborn Brake in Louisiana, 1916, courtesy of the U. S. Forest Service, and Cypress (right) in South Carolina's Beidler Forest, 1998, courtesy of Walker Golder, National Audubon Society.

history emerged in the 1960s, along with several other new fields, and now has a national association and journal. But environmental history has grown only modestly compared to the other social-movement topics of the 1960s, such as race and gender studies.

The slow growth of environmental history has also been regionally uneven. Consider the literature. A core reading list of environmental histories might begin with George Perkins Marsh, then Frederick Jackson Turner, Walter Prescott Webb, and James C. Malin, followed by the builders of the field from the 1960s who are still alive and active—Rod Nash, Don Worster, Sam Hays, Richard White, William Cronon, and Carolyn Merchant, to mention a few. Your list might be a bit different and could easily be longer, but the larger point is that all the writers on that bibliography wrote about, and mostly lived in, the West, with the exception of Hays, who took a national view from Pittsburgh. Cronon started in the East but has moved westward both in his domicile and focus.

Assume that a student reads this West-dominated core and wants to specialize in environmental history. Where can this be done? Now that Sam Hays has retired at Pittsburgh and Rod Nash has retired at Santa Barbara, that might (to arbitrarily make a list) be with Worster at Kansas, Cronon and Arthur McEvoy at Madison, White at Stanford, or Merchant at Berkeley. Once there, the student is told to begin reading the above authors, along with Norris Hundley, Martin Melosi, Donald Pisani, Alfred Runte, Robert Gottlieb, and Linda Lear—extend the list as you wish. Note that these writers overwhelmingly write about, and are also located in, the West.

And the environmental theme in southern studies? It was a persistent interest of the beginning cadre of professional historians. Ulrich B. Phillips opened his *Life and Labor in the Old South* with this invitation: "Let us begin by discussing the weather." Climate, soil, and growing seasons naturally drew the attention of students of southern rural life writing in the first half of the twentieth century, like Avery Craven, Louis Gray, Frank Tannenbaum, and that historian of soil and its abuse, Hugh Hammond Bennett. But later students of the South followed other interests. In the flowering of professional history after World War II, the study of the South generated a stream of innovative work on regional and national race relations, politics, and culture. Southern history in the second half of the twentieth century has been robust, keyed to the racial theme, demonstrating—if anyone doubted it—that regional histories are a critical component of understanding national history. But southern history has been losing its environmental instincts. The core list of books in U.S. environmental history that we recommend to our students will typically cite only one work on the South, Albert Cowdrey's *This Land, This South*, and not always even that one.

In general, the South lags far behind the West in writing and graduate training in environmental history today. One exception is Raymond Arsenault, author of an influential article on how air-conditioning changed southern climate and attitudes toward place, who teaches environmental history at the University of South Florida.¹⁰ Although Cowdrey is in New Orleans, at the university of that name, he does not teach environmental history. No southern history departments come to mind that one would recommend to a student determined to study with the senior, towering figures in the field. Nelson Blake and Tom Clark made contributions to environmental history, but that generation is gone. Jack Temple Kirby has written an impressive amount of southern environmental history—most notably *Rural Worlds Lost* and *Poquosin*. His base is Miami University, which has a southern sound but is located in Ohio. Judging by my search of departmental web sites, there is no historian of the environmental U.S. in the history departments at any of the flagship public universities of the South, nor at Duke, Tulane, or Emory, just to scan the surrounding educational peaks.

The weak intellectual connection between the written history of humans in the



In the 1930s, the timbered watersheds in National Forests conserved tremendous water resources by regulating run-off, reducing erosion and flood damage. White Oak Creek at Wisban's Mill, Nantabala National Forest, North Carolina, 1931. Photographed by E. M. Shipp, courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service.

American South and their environmental settings may be seen in other ways. A survey of the programs of the Southern Historical Association's annual meeting from 1983 to 1995 shows 606 sessions, of which 3, a shade less than half of a percent, could loosely be defined as focused on environmental themes. In the decade 1988 to 1998, the *Journal of Southern History* published 140 research articles on politics and race and culture, among them one on climate. (Somewhat greener in the 1980s, they published two articles on agriculture, one on the forestry industry, one on cattle diseases, one on malaria, and one on the impact of air conditioning.) Although Ben Wall once argued that southern historians write on only five topics—the arrival of the Europeans, slavery, Civil War and Reconstruction, the revolt of the agrarians, and southern progressivism—the marks of the 1960s are now vividly and deeply etched on the agenda of scholars of the South.¹¹ The Civil Rights and women's movements have radically refocused the questions and answers, in research and in the classroom. But one of the leading social passions stirred by the sixties, the ecological connection as a central dynamic and also a problem, has made little mark on the telling of our regional story.



Ecology as a central connection has made little mark on the telling of our region's history. Brown Pelicans mid-flight at Cape Point, 1995. Courtesy of Walker Golder, National Audubon Society.

Consider this brief list of some of the best syntheses of modern southern history published in the past two decades: Numan V. Bartley's *The New South 1945–1980* and *The Creation of Modern Georgia*, Gavin Wright's *Old South, New South*, Pete Daniel's *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century*, Elizabeth Jacoway et al.'s *The Adaptable South*, John B. Boles's *The South through Time*. This short list of superior work is understandably focused on what is taken to be the central twentieth-century regional story, which has two main components. One is the persistence of southern socioeconomic and political backwardness until a great transformation finally gathered steam in the 1940s, accelerated by war and Cold War and air-conditioning and agricultural technology until the South closed the century without much cotton or any farm tenancy, overwhelmingly suburban and two-party at last. The other part of the main story is throwing off racial apartheid. By the time Ronald Reagan replaced Jimmy Carter, as Jack Kirby has noted, "a new world was in place" in the South.¹² That transformation, with its causes and consequences, is understandably the focus of modern southern scholarship and the channel of the narrative.

This literature makes my point by what it leaves out entirely as somehow not a part of the region's profound transformation. What, in these accounts, is the cost of the great regional convergence that brought the South out of its poverty and isolation? Most would say the slowness and incompleteness of it all, with pockets of poverty and residual racism remaining; some would add the loss of a more rooted culture and the dilution of southern distinctiveness. But there is virtually no sign in these otherwise exemplary books of the mounting ecological deficits and consequences piled up during the South's great economic and social catching-up.

Alfred Crosby once observed that the generation of historians who professionalized the discipline in the late 1900s lived through a century of epochal migrations, population growth, the establishment of immense urban centers, and sweeping deforestation, but their work almost entirely lacks a sense of these powerful themes.¹³ So also with scholars of the modern South, if we are to judge by the syntheses in widest circulation. The indexes of these books contain almost no entries for soil, water, atmosphere, climate, fisheries, wildlife, forests, wetlands, disease, garbage and wastes, ecology, environment, or human population numbers and rates of increase. These topics are not exotics at the far edges of the main channel of southern (or any other) history; they are not the preoccupations of a specialty field and thus excludable from our writings and presentations. They have always deserved and once had a place near the center of the human story in the South. Can it be that somewhere in the twentieth century the tradition of keeping the human-nature relationship at the center of the South's story, a legacy stretching from Phillips through Craven to Tom Clark and including the Chapel Hill sociologists, has atrophied—ironically, just as the human rearrangement of the environment has accelerated?

But writing on the human-nature relationship in the South is not negligible and appears to be on the increase. If we look to studies of the post-Civil War era, there is Jack Temple Kirby's work on rural life and the Poquosin wetlands, the impressive treatments of agriculture by Gilbert Fite and Pete Daniel, Jeffrey Stine's skillful account of that expensive environmental rearrangement, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, and John M. Barry's riveting drama of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. David Goldfield's *The South Since 1945* contains a knowledgeable chapter on land-use and other environmental issues, and James C. Cobb's *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984* pays considerable attention to strip-mining, the forestry industry, Gulf Coast industrial pollution, and the lunar landscape around the Great Copper Basin near Polk City, Tennessee.¹⁴

Environmentally focused studies of earlier periods in southern history easily add up to an impressive list that ought to be better known. Just to mention a few, there are Tim Breen's *Tobacco Culture*, a fine weaving together of political and agricultural histories; Peter Coclanis's study of the links between agriculture and so-



The human rearrangement of the environment has accelerated. Beachfront Development in North Carolina, 1999, courtesy of Walker Golder, National Audubon Society.

ciety in the South Carolina low country; Mart Stewart's work on life on the Georgia coast from 1680 to 1920; Timothy Silver's history of Indians and colonists in the southeastern forests; Carville Earle's work on southern soil mining; Harvey H. Jackson's history of human life on the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Cahaba rivers; and two fine environmental histories of Florida by Mark Derr and James J. Miller.¹⁵

Thus the first impression that American environmental history is a small but vigorous industry based in the West gives way to a more complicated picture. The South imports more than it exports, but the balance of trade in scholarly monographs seems to be improving. The South is still peripheral where graduate study is concerned, but the central problem is the same in the South as nationally. Environmental history is being produced, but the field is isolated and marginalized within professional history—including southern history, where it once had a place.

For example, when scheduled to present a paper at a meeting of the Southern Historical Association, I thought it prudent to reread the books of the respondents—Albert Cowdrey, Jack Temple Kirby, and Mart Stewart. In the library of the University of Texas at Austin, on one small shelf of books and literally within inches of each other, I found three books virtually embodying the panel's professional achievements: Cowdrey's *This Land, This South*, Kirby's *Poquosin*, and Stewart's *What Nature Suffers to Groe*. But I did not find them shelved under E, where we find southern history. The library designation was GF504, a human-ecology

.....
*Whether people are
there to interpret it
or not, nature plays
by certain rules.*
.....

section under the general heading of geography. Three key books about southern environmental history weren't shelved with southern history at all. This is not separation, this is divorce. Or a better metaphor might be segregation.

In another example, the isolation that can come from conceiving of history as involving more than the study of people was felt by then graduate student in colonial American history Timothy Silver, who reports that his work on the dissertation that became *A New Face on the Countryside*

led him to read books on trees and wildlife, prompting this skeptical question from his peers: "We like the woods too, but how does all this help us understand colonial America?"¹⁶

And the tent under which much of this recent work has been done has often not been the history tent. Scholars working in environmental history are frequently housed in environmental policy centers or are even farther removed from the world of professional history. Consider the list of recent books cited as a sign of scholarly health: *Rising Tide's* John Barry is a New Orleans journalist, the author of *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* is a professional writer, and James Miller of *An Environmental History of Northeast Florida* is an archaeologist.

Multidisciplinary sites for environmental scholarship are a strength, but they

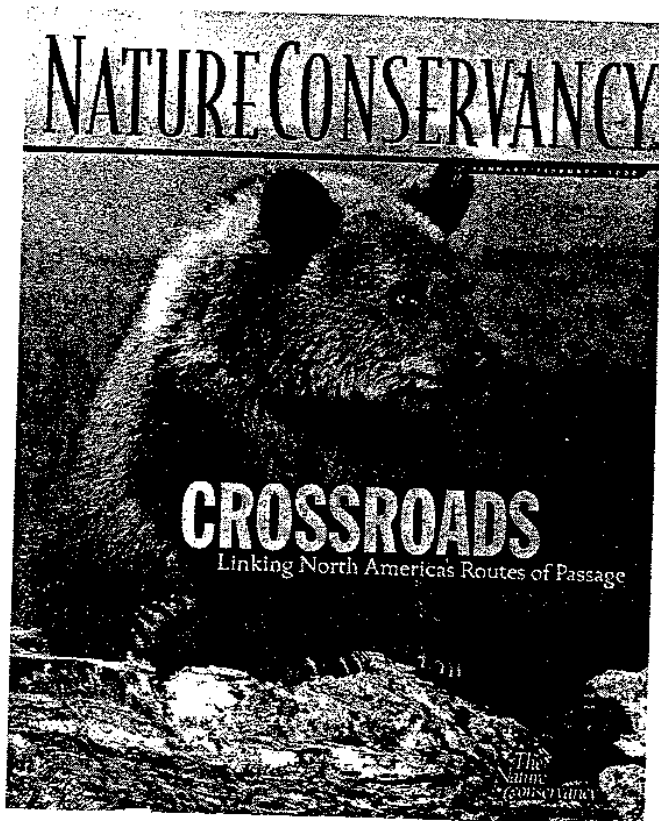


"We like the woods, too, but how does all this help us understand colonial America?" asked skeptical historians. An Appalachian mountain stream, courtesy of Walker Golder, National Audubon Society.

leave professional history even more thinly provisioned. And apart from numbers, we need more than just history with the environment in it. Environmental history must break out of the confinements that limit the influence of its small band of scattered practitioners and collaborate with other fields in mutual and transforming conversations. Consider, for example, what William Cronon has done to and for urban history with his *Nature's Metropolis*. That book can be seen as an example in history of "ecological footprint" studies appearing in the environmental literature, in which the resource demands of growing urban metropolises, along with their damaging ecological effects, are traced to the periphery.¹⁷ Urban history, one hopes, will never be the same.

Other boundary crossings may be underway. Among historians of foreign relations there is a growing interest in the importance of natural resources and in climatic and demographic elements in international conflict. Barry's *Rising Tide* is an artful weaving together of political history with an account of a moment of nature's revenge. Why, asks Don Worster, should the division of academic labor give "water cycles, deforestation, animal populations, soil nutrient gains and losses" to science, while history gets "tariffs, diplomatic negotiation, union-management conflict, race and gender"? To expand and enrich history's domain as he wishes

.....
*Water freezes at
 0 degrees Celsius,
 whatever your race,
 class, or gender.*



Though once thinly populated by local chapters, the South's environmental groups now approach national norms. Cover photo from the January/February 2000 Nature Conservancy magazine, reprinted by permission of the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Chapter of the Nature Conservancy.

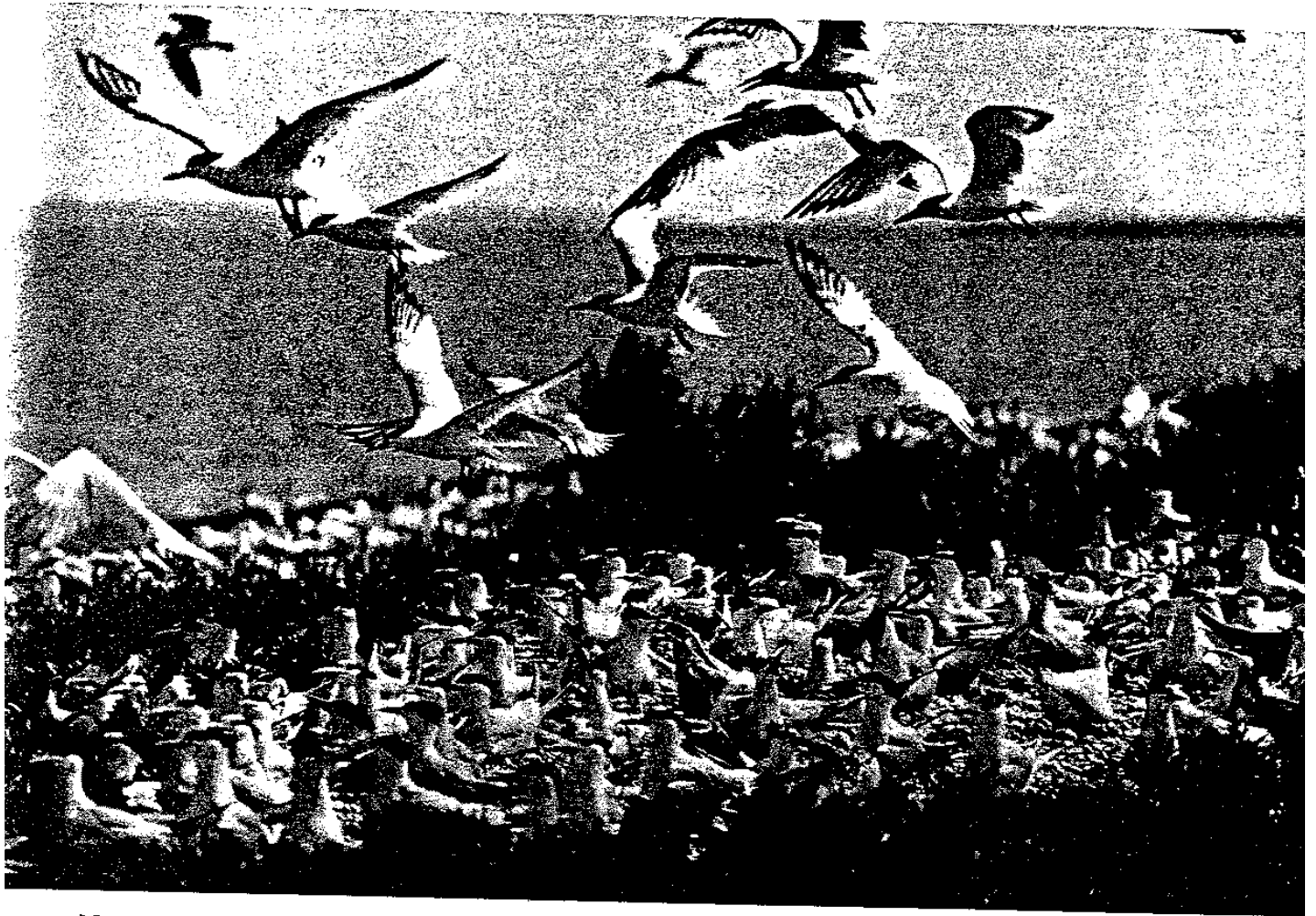
will require more “gifted amateurs,” to borrow Alfred Crosby’s phrase, who can master the scientific disciplines required to study and to reconstruct for their audiences the roles in and around human life of habitat, climate, pathogens, and plants and animals and their parallel and intersecting stories.¹⁸

Intensifying ecocrisis may be counted upon to strengthen these trends and to enlarge our attention to the environmental connection to all things human. This has already been the case for environmental political activism, where the South was once only thinly populated with activist groups, but by some measures—Sierra Club local chapters, for example—now approaches national norms.¹⁹

One factor limiting the growth of southern environmental history may exert less force in the years ahead: the understandable preoccupation with race relations since the Civil Rights movement forced the region to confront its past and to realign its future. One does not have to share the full optimism expressed by University of California regent Ward Connerly, who predicts that by 2010 intermarriage will essentially have ended what Du Bois called “the problem of the color line” in America. But a case is being made by a growing number of scholars that more than three decades after the March on Washington the racial problem within American society is slowly shrinking before multiple social pressures and trends.²⁰ In, after, and because of the 1960s, historians have invested heavily in research and teaching about race, gender, and war. Without questioning that investment, it seems now possible to realign our scholarly energies to recognize that some social problems are smaller now and some are growing larger.

If environmental history has not spread so robustly as other sixties-launched fields of study, the discipline seems to have certain long-run advantages. It is likely to provide somewhat firmer epistemological ground for writers who feel embattled by the corrosive claims of the postmodernists, who declare that there are no real events or things to be described but only describers contesting for power. This current running so strongly in the humanities makes only limited headway among historians of the human-nature connection. Of course meanings are constructed and reconstructed, present and past, and often the stakes are power over things or people. Once seen as an unchanging and harmonious entity to be preserved or restored, nature is now seen by many ecologists and environmentalists as less a regime of climaxed and timeless systems than patches of constantly disturbed change, especially now that humanity alters everything from the ionosphere to ocean bottoms. The implications of this relativism about the concept of “wild Nature” are explored by William Cronon and other writers in *Uncommon Ground* (1996), a book in which environmental historians seem to be telling any environmentalists who might be listening that nature does not exist as a timeless ideal to serve as spiritual medicine or restoration goal.

Postmodernism has pushed this far, but likely will push no farther. The place to draw the line has been nicely suggested in a recent quip by writer Robin Fox:



Nature is more "than a social creation." Photograph by Walker Golder, National Audubon Society.

“If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and looks like a duck, it is a social construct of a duck.” Here, cultural theory has gone too far. With its close connection to the natural sciences, environmental history is a stronghold of realism within the humanities awash in epistemological angst. Nature is tangible, and is more, in the words of Mart Stewart, “than a social creation.”²¹ Whether people are there to interpret it or not, nature plays by certain rules. Environmental studies can welcome and accommodate the idea of social construction for whatever it can contribute on the human side. On the nature side, there are still the realities that water seeks low places and, when free of impurities, has an unfailing tendency to freeze at 0 degrees Celsius. You can count on it, whatever your race, class, or gender. ✓

ECOLOGY'S GIFT, SEEING THINGS WHOLE

Is environmental history held back from a wider readership and writership by an intractable internal flaw—that, like environmentalism itself, it tends toward a ✓

somber and pessimistic tone, telling a tale of decline that is not only unpleasant but almost un-American? If this is occasionally true, the discipline's stress upon social learning, behavior modification, and human agency in the direction of adaptation is a counterbalance. Such observations take us back to the founding decade of the 1960s, as does the charge that environmentalism itself—and thus surely also its scholarly battalions on campus—are in some sense on a “radical” mission, like the watermelon: green on the outside and red on the inside. The linking of the social movements galvanized by the sixties as siblings protesting war, racism, sexual inequality, and nature-abuse rests on more than propinquity and timing. All began in scathing criticism of the past and present in America, while expressing universalistic, inclusive aspirations. But our habit of bundling all the great causes of that decade together as “The Movement” seems now an important error. Environmentalism is a different creature, with a different future.

The sixties, more than thirty years later, take on a pivotal character, increasingly seen as a time when things went startlingly wrong in America. In a caustic recent essay on the decade, Hugh Heclo points out that this “Fourth Great Awakening” did not turn out to have the “payoff of earlier upheavals.” Unlike preceding periods of national self-criticism and soul-searching, the sixties “seemed to add up to greater public distress and cultural confusion rather than catharsis and revitalization.” The basic problem was that “allegiances to cultural and political traditions were being dissolved with no replacement in sight.” A “plurality of authenticities” was offered by the movements of the sixties, but “there was to be no broadly accepted, culturally-centering worldview connecting religion, politics and social change.” Americans were a religious people still, but the nation's elite were secular. A sharp disconnect has taken place between the public and ironically named “opinion-makers.” One result, says Heclo, was postmodern policymaking—radically pluralistic, focused on rights-based group conflict, adding its dissolving acids to a national culture now widely seen as “disuniting.”²²

While Heclo generalizes across the entire range of sixties impulses, others perceive that environmentalism stands apart. A witness to and scholar of that decade, Todd Gitlin, observes that by the 1970s “left-wing universalism was profoundly demoralized.” Feminists, Chicanos, gays, lesbians, and Native Americans followed the model of black separatism. “Only environmentalists, who had taken a different route out of the 1960s, still thought about a common human condition—endangered, like the earth.” To David Hollinger “the physical health of the planet” alone stands as a “specieswide interest” capable of overriding the loudly proclaimed divisions of the holy trinity—race, class, gender.²³

That is the silver lining of ecocrisis and ecological studies, the possibility of a common-ground vision of a sustainable human relationship to the nonhuman world, what Franklin Roosevelt in thinking of the United States liked to call “a



*"Only environmentalists . . . still thought about a common human condition—endangered, like the earth."
Photograph by Walker Golder, National Audubon Society.*

permanent country." Studies of our history of ecosystem abuse that strike some readers as gloomy portraits of decline seem a small price to pay for the benefit of a conception of what we really ought to be building here on this continent, we post-Cold War, projectless Americans.

So, tell about the South, as Faulkner urged. "What is it like there? What do they do there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?" Part of the answer comes from one of the frontlines of today's environmental defacement, Shelltown, Maryland, on the banks of the *Pfiesteria*-infested Pocomoke River where the watermen one recent September finally acknowledged that "their river is sick and that they are, too."²⁴ Bad news, with a silver lining: our thoughts turn to connections, not disconnections; we discover ecology's gift, seeing things whole.

NOTES

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