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Victor B. Scheffer

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# THE SHAPING OF ENVIRONMENTALISM IN AMERICA

VICTOR B. SCHEFFER

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Pp. 249. Hard cover. \$19.95

This book takes a mainstream view of environmentalism, the view that the environment is getting worse and that government intervention is needed to correct the situation. It repeats many of the views that Dixy Lee Ray attacks in *Trashing the Planet*. Scheffer explores the roots of the environmental movement and covers most of the areas that have been of concern to environmentalists since the 1960s. It is anecdotal and easy to read, and presents an overview of the formative years of the environmental movement—1960 to 1980. He takes the position that the Reagan years were a setback to the movement (although federal involvement and spending were vastly increased during the Reagan years) and has a few words to say about post-1980 environmental events.

The first chapter explores the roots of environmentalism, from the mid-nineteenth century to Teddy Roosevelt to the burning of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland. He discusses early opposition to environmentalism, which came from hard scientists and religious bigots (which seems to include anyone who attends church regularly). He defends Rachel Carson's flawed *Silent Spring* and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, although he does make an attempt at presenting the other side at times.

The second chapter explores the societal background of the environmental movement and how it blended in with the other movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. He refers to Herbert Marcuse, the California philosopher, as visionary, which is amusing in light of the fact that Marcuse's ideas have proven to be a massive failure in Eastern Europe in recent years. But anyone who lived through the 1960s will have a feeling of nostalgia reading this chapter, which devotes sections to the civil rights, feminist and animal rights movements.

The next 11 chapters review areas of environmental concern, ranging from croplands, rangelands and forests to natural lands, the ocean, fresh water, air quality, minerals, energy, the atom, society's wastes and poisons, endangered species and the human population. He correctly points out that the federal government's grazing policies have led to erosion, animal starvation and general environmental degradation and waste of resources, but neglects to mention that there are a number of promising solutions to these problems, such as privatization. He seems to take the position that these problems could be better managed (why not solved?) if the federal government would only do its job more efficiently.

The chapters on fresh and salt water review some of the abuses that have taken place over the past few decades, ranging from the Atomic Energy Commission's dumping of radioactive sodium waste into the ocean, to the general dumping that takes place in rivers and lakes everywhere. His chapter on air quality takes the popular view that modern technology is responsible for acid rain. He correctly points out that the concentration of carbon dioxide in the air has risen in recent years, but ignores the fact that carbon dioxide levels were even higher in several periods before the industrial revolution, which would cast doubt on the cause and effect relationship between industrial growth and the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. He repeats the view that rising temperatures will cause polar ice to melt, thus causing sea levels to rise, which will result in the flooding of coastal cities and croplands. Yet anyone who has ever filled a glass with ice knows that the glass does not overflow as the ice melts. Scientists have pointed out this fact for years, yet this view that global warming (if it exists—the evidence is not conclusive) will result in flooding persists, and Scheffer does nothing to dispel it. But then it should be pointed out that this section of the book is primarily intended as a review of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s, and is not necessarily intended to correct faulty theories.

There are a few disturbing points about this book. For example, Scheffer tends to cite studies that have been discredited. And he sometimes tends to give half the story rather than all of it. For example, he presents a chart showing that the annual production of carbon dioxide by humans has increased dramatically, from about one billion tons in 1872 to 20 billion tons in 1980. Yet he fails to point out that this production is literally a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of carbon dioxide produced by the oceans, forests, animal and plant life each year due to organic decay and other natural causes. The digestive systems of termites, for example, account for the release of about 50 billion tons of carbon dioxide and methane each year. Scheffer's presentation also seemingly leads to the conclusion that having less carbon dioxide is preferable to having more of it, which may or may not be true. Vegetation needs carbon dioxide to survive, so having more of it might actually be beneficial to plant life. Arguably, if plants have more carbon dioxide to breathe, they will thrive and will expel more oxygen, which has a balancing effect on the ratio of oxygen to carbon dioxide.

The last section of the book discusses the environmental revolution that took place starting about 1961. People became organized, formed conservation groups, and tried to do something about some aspect of the environment. Writers began cranking out article after article about the environment and the articles found their way into magazines that were read by the general public. Colleges and universities began to offer courses

on environmental management and education and other courses introduced material on environmentalism. Some groups and individuals took their case to the courts, which resulted in the development of a new body of law—environmental law. The right of citizens to bring class action suits against corporations and the government became firmly established. The fight moved on to Congress, which passed numerous laws to protect various parts of the environment. Regulatory agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, were created to help in the battle. The last few chapters present an overview of the Reagan years and urge increased involvement and a continuation of the fight to save the environment.

The main value of this book is the historical overview it provides of the evolution of the environmental movement over the last century, especially since 1960. The main flaw is that there is no critical analysis of the theories that were espoused by the environmentalists of the time. But then, it should be remembered that the main purpose of the author in writing this book was to provide the historical background of the environmental movement in America, not to critique the views of some of its early advocates.

ROBERT W. MCGEE  
Seton Hall University