

## *Review Essay*

# **Beyond Nature's Nation: The Emergence of a Global Environmental Policy**

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Which best represents contemporary environmentalism: the Earth Day celebration at my university, which brought students and faculty from the sciences out of their labs and into the daylight to sit at booths informing passersby of various forms of environmental degradation; the “nature artifact,” otherwise known as a plastic pink flamingo, on your neighbor’s front yard to accentuate the lush green turf connecting her front door with the street; or the explosion of masked youths rampaging the streets and ransacking buildings in Seattle and Washington, D.C., to protest meetings of global economic organizations, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO)? In fact, scholars must group each of these within the rubric of environmental thought.<sup>1</sup> In an era when nearly seventy percent of Americans polled believe that they are “environmentalists,” one must proceed cautiously to locate definitions among disparate beliefs and forms of expression. The keys to understanding the complexity of this social and cultural movement fall well within the traditional concerns of American and cultural studies.

The thirtieth anniversary of the first Earth Day on April 22, 2000, presented ample opportunity to evaluate how far environmental or green thought had come. The figurative expression of environmental sensibilities on the first Earth Day focused energy and public relations that helped to galvanize support and interest behind revolutionary policy initiatives. Many of these policies grew out of the

grass roots concerns of American homeowners, which created one of the first social and political movements to mobilize the broadening middle class, particularly women.

April 22, 2000, celebrated the reality that with each passing year the event seems more and more trite. The era of gloom and doom has passed, replaced by another of activism led by scientists and policy makers. While the grass roots concerns remain, sophisticated policy mechanisms are in place at every level of government and in every community to assert an environmental ethic over aspects of American life. The battle may be ongoing, but the last thirty years have brought such marked change in the maturity of scientific and political understanding surrounding environmentalism that the "fight" proceeds at an entirely different level of awareness in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

The actual events of Earth Day, of course, may have changed little since 1970; it is the overall human consciousness that has been altered in a revolutionary manner. In his seminal work *A Sand County Almanac*, the conservationist Aldo Leopold offered a new paradigm for Americans in their interaction with the natural world. Known as the "land ethic," Leopold's guidance instructed readers to guide their lives with an ethic that ". . . enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." In short, he continues, "A land ethic changes the role of homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."<sup>3</sup> Leopold's call went largely unheeded when first published in 1949. The American consciousness returned to such a perspective when in 1962 Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* demonstrated the interconnectedness of natural systems.

Such a perspective should have immediately led Americans to see new levels of contact within global relations (and in fact scientists Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin produced theoretical models for such ideas in the late 1960s); however, global relations remained mired in the limitations of the Cold War for two more decades.<sup>4</sup> During this time, the American environmental movement flourished with a connection between concerned grassroots activists and new federal policy, beginning with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Earth Day 1970 and those afterward actually presented one of the first expressions of global interconnectedness, mobilizing 20 million humans worldwide around a similar group of concerns.

From 1970 to the present the loosening of global political boundaries fostered the scientific argument of Earth as a dynamic, organic unit. Empowered by the view of Earth from space (sent back from Apollo flights in the late 1960s) and advancements in scientific understanding of dynamics such as air and water pollution, a new view of humans' place in the world evolved along the lines of Leopold's "land ethic." Following the cessation of the Cold War and the emergence of a more global economy in the 1990s, such a view of Earth literally cohered with a new worldview of many diverse, independent, and interdependent

nations—inexorably linked by the biosphere, Earth. Also, such a perspective dovetailed nicely with the emerging role of the United Nations, which would help to foster global connections based more on shared issues than on politics, including the establishment of the United Nation's Environmental Program (UNEP) in 1972.

As old borders collapse, new connections emerge. Clearly, a new, international discourse has emerged around this transnational environmental priority to redefine international diplomacy and national security (in fact, the United States created an Under Secretary of State for the Environment in 1996). In recent years, American studies scholars have generally found familiar concerns penetrating to new levels of theoretical complexity and organizing new approaches to the study of culture. As new paradigms emerge with which to organize cultural discourse in a global forum, an environmental agenda emerges as one of the most clearly universal ethos unifying humans from many nations.

This essay seeks to investigate the evolution of the language of the environment in an international context, but to organize this information in a practical manner. By discussing a selection of recent literature, the essay hopes to demonstrate a selection of approaches with which scholars of American and cultural studies may bring environmental thought into their research and classrooms. This essay will consider this global environmental mandate from two broad categories of organization: definitions of "natural" in American life and history and how these impact cultural constructions, including landscapes and consumer culture; and international social and political issues as they frame cultural exchange and interaction.

### **Is Shamu on a Stick "Nature"?**

The most complex portion of this new environmental paradigm may also be its most dynamic. At the base of environmental consciousness is the recognition of the value of the non-human world—the acceptance of the reality of the natural world, complete with limitations and unpredictability. Basic definitions such as nature and wilderness as well as humans' relationship to such icons have formed cultural ideas for all of human history. Postmodern theorists began breaking down such perceptions for human culture in general, and now "green" thinkers have offered a variety of alternative ideas to the mythic constructions of ideas such as nature and wilderness.<sup>5</sup> In short, nature can now include a variety of objects ranging from a blade of grass to the chemical composition of a wisp of wind, and, of course, to the pink flamingo—genuine or plastic. Nature, agree most green thinkers, is perceptual and based on individual ideas and experiences.<sup>6</sup>

American studies, of course, bears a responsibility for organizing such ideas of nature in the study of the American past. Perry Miller, Henry Nash Smith, Barbara Novak, and Roderick Nash long ago established that nature has played a crucial role in the definition of American identity.<sup>7</sup> "Nature's Nation," in the writing of Perry Miller, came to mean both a trust in human reason and a unique

reliance on the natural environment for more than necessary resources.<sup>8</sup> Henry Nash Smith linked such ideas to the American West by connecting conceptions of nature to the myth of Edenic perfection—the garden.<sup>9</sup> Leo Marx then established an enduring paradigm that could be applied to diverse locations and instances by framing stages in the American identity within variations in ideals of civilization and nature.<sup>10</sup> Historians of environmentalism use this concept to suggest that the modern environmental movement embodies Marx's quest for a "middle landscape," a reconciled balance.<sup>11</sup> Donald Worster, a pioneer in environmental history with roots in American studies, refers to environmentalism as "that peculiar search for national atonement."<sup>12</sup>

In her book *Spectacular Nature*, Susan G. Davis attempts to find the nature in what seems to be a terribly unnatural site: the Sea World theme park. Davis includes Sea World in the general tradition of nature appreciation in America, while admitting that the park will never be confused with trails through the Sierras. Yet her disclaimer need go one step further. More precisely, Sea World operates within a branch of environmentalism that has always placed humans firmly in control of nature. Davis' book aids readers in connecting the legacy of American studies to help make sense of nature in contemporary American life. But this new vision of nature is not simple artifactual reading such as the effort to preserve a redwood forest or to save a keystone species. Just as Sea World serves as an example of the continued presence of nature in American life, it also represents the commercial and exploitative tendencies of contemporary culture.

The difficulties in reading Sea World are instructive for trying to find the logic in any contemporary representation of nature. While Sea World and its representative "Shamu on a Stick" (a popsicle shaped like the performing whale) are thoroughly unnatural, the stress for a connection with nature instead of a death-defying thrill ride suggests a Leo Marxian-view of the American quest to reconnect itself to natural roots.

Of course, nature presentation has been a component of American environmentalism since the late 1700s. This vein of American thought can be traced to Charles Wilson Peale's Natural History Museum (founded 1784), the excavation and exhibition of a North American mastodon skeleton by Peale in 1801, and Thomas Jefferson's Natural Bridge attraction (one of the nation's first tourist sites).<sup>13</sup> The artistic/ornithological work of Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon then connects the early-nineteenth century to the origins of the conservation movement and hunter/outdoorsmen such as George Bird Grinnell, who founded the Audubon Society in 1883. The created landscape itself also became a representation of this sensibility after 1820 when Andrew Jackson Downing, Frederick Law Olmsted, and others connected the carefully-sculpted rural cemetery form to both suburban homes and urban parks.

Such public interest in having an organic park or a sculpted natural setting surrounding one's rural or suburban home easily connects to purchasing popsicles or souvenirs resembling a natural form such as Shamu. Nineteenth-century landscape design, which galvanized the postbellum drive for national parks,

allows us to categorize the phenomena of Sea World within nature presentation or viewing the unknown. Sea World can be viewed as part of the *Wild Kingdom* or *Jacque Cousteau* genre of nature loving. American studies has a long history of inquiry into the relationship between Americans and nature, and Davis' work offers to bring in the postmodern era.<sup>14</sup>

The work of Davis grows out of that of observers such as William Cronon and Michael Pollan who have instructed viewers to see visions of nature as a cultural dynamic. Such a perspective opens up immense possibilities of perception and cognition. Jennifer Price's *Flight Maps* offers a highly readable, albeit selective, exploration of nature in modern America. In wide ranging essays, Price explores the "natural" content of green consumerism, including the plastic pink flamingo lawn ornament, the Nature Company stores, and the genre of television that has followed the general model of Marlon Perkins' *Wild Kingdom*. Extremely useful as a classroom text, *Flight Maps* fails to explore any of these topics with scholarly rigor. Such a reading, however, offers students a great opportunity to look around them for hidden signifiers of green culture and to ponder how such an ethic has become part of American mass culture.

The rhetoric of green culture is ripe for deconstruction in order to clarify authorial intent as well as the artifacts' role in larger cultural discourses. Davis and Price begin scholars on this interpretive path, but books that may be more helpful to instruct students on techniques and patterns of reading include Robert M. Torrance's *Encompassing Nature* and its accompanying sourcebook. This collection of nature writing since ancient times is one of the first efforts to trace ideas of nature throughout human culture. The concept becomes a way of linking diverse people around a single idea.

### Searching for "Truth" in the Wilderness

The marketing of objectified nature, of course, has led to contestation over essential meanings of nature as well as interpretations of the human landscape created out of nature. In the realm of landscape analysis and design, Anne Whiston Spirn creates a lovely model for understanding the entirety around us in *Language of Landscape*. "A person literate in landscapes," Spirn writes,

sees significance where an illiterate person notes nothing. . . . To know landscape poetics is to see, smell, taste, hear, and feel landscape as a symphony of complex harmonies. Natural processes establish the base rhythm that is expressed in the initial form of the land, to which culture, in turn, responds with new and changing themes that weave an intricate pattern, punctuated here and there by high points of nature and art. (22)

Such a user manual allows the physical landscape to become a profound instrument for the study of any landscape, creating a language without borders.

Methods for reading the landscape can also be found in the work of John R. Stilgoe and Yi-fu Tuan. Each of these landscape/geographer voices has written extensively to provide methodologies and practices that can be used to interpret almost any landscape. Most recently, Stilgoe published *Outside Lies the Magic* (1998), which offers ways for viewers to perceive meaning and significance in the everyday world and Tuan published *Escapism* (1998) in order to explore a basic urge that links humans of nearly any cultural background. Such a view of landscape provides excellent footing for interpreting the human-inhabited landscape; but what of the non-human and meanings of nature?

A good starting point in such consideration may be Peter A. Coates' *Nature*, which traces western attitudes since ancient times. Concentrating on ecological history and the ethical values that events reveal, Coates makes bold connections across national borders and time periods. His efforts come nearer than any other source to revealing the ideological and material factors that have influenced human perceptions of nature. Coates' text could function as an outstanding core text for a humanities approach to international environmental studies or as a good introduction for scholarly inquiry.

Similar in their transnational dimensions, yet much more complex in their effort to discuss perceptual models in a postmodern era of multiple realities, are a series of titles that literally explore the philosophical underpinnings of humans' changing place in the natural world. Whereas such exploration in the past would often be geographically based or limited, at least two contemporary titles present theoretical models applicable to almost any landscape. Paul Shepherd's *The Cultivated Wilderness* is a thoughtful effort to broaden one's concept of wilderness to be less exclusive of human change and more inclusive of all that exists around us. It can be an overwhelming idea, yet it produces a wonderful exercise in cognition and understanding.

By searching Shaman ways of life and beliefs to find the balanced connection between the human and nature, David Abram produces a similar opportunity for readers in *The Spell of the Sensuous*. The problem in solving this fissure in western ways of life, writes Abram is that ". . . the source of stress lies in the relation between the human community and the natural landscape." (21) Western society, he instructs, can hardly be seen in relation to any particular landscape or ecosystem. Places have become devoid of special meaning, and our visions of and connections to nature have been lost as well. Abram's book becomes an instruction manual to enable readers to forge a new connection with the world around them by following ancient patterns of Eastern philosophy and faith.

Readings from such texts could compose a wonderful experience for scholars to view changing perceptions of nature and human relations with it. Using American studies authors such as Miller, Henry Nash Smith, along with Native American authors such as Chief Seattle, and then adding Alexis de Toqueville, Susan Cooper, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass, Frederick Law Olmsted, Alan Trachtenberg, Gifford Pinchot, William Faulkner, Rachel

Carson, William Cronon, Michael Pollan, and others, one can trace a chronology of cultural visions of nature that relates a coherent pattern in American cultural history. Such reading, of course, could then be built upon with reading on the current trends of perception, bringing scholars of various levels of experience into coherent contact with theoretically-complex texts. Such recent literature represents a maturing of scholars' perceptions of the world around them; similarly, American studies instructors might offer a bit of that to students as well.

### **Issues, Economics, and El Niño**

While this perceptual approach to nature and the environment would enable many American studies scholars to forge a coherent paradigm around environmental thought and philosophy, the most straight-forward application may be to emphasize the same dynamic that has overcome political borders in the first place: trans-border environmental issues. While this essay will not create a laundry list of environmental issues that could be employed in such a manner, it will list a few that could serve as case studies. At the root of the ability of mass culture to comprehend the global-quality of such issues is the basic concept of Earth as a dynamic organism of interconnected parts. This is a biological concept that found its way to common understanding through the writings of individuals such as Garrett Hardin, Rachel Carson, and, more recently, Steven Jay Gould and E.O. Wilson.

In 1968, Hardin produced the crucial statement of this paradigm, titled the "Tragedy of the Commons." The suggestion, which Carson later demonstrated, is that the natural environment is a common resource that humans use in proportionately. In other words, modern humans compromise their "land ethic" by construing themselves the dominant member of any ecosystem. At the core of Hardin's condemnation of modern society, though, is the crucial suggestion of interconnectedness—the concept of a global commons.

The idea of a global ecological commons allows one to better understand as well as potentially cope with major issues, including global warming, air and ocean use, and cultural connectors such as petroleum usage. Interdisciplinary topics such as these lend themselves to American studies inquiry; however, the emphasis could be a borderless study of human reaction to specific environmental issues. This allows an emphasis on policy and sociology while escaping U.S.-centered studies. Many books are available on each of these topics, but some of the most useful are: Ross Gelbspan's *The Heat is On*; Gale E. Christianson's *Greenhouse*; and Michael H. Glantz's *Currents of Change*, which concerns El Niño and climatic variations.

Such an issues-centered curriculum can also allow American studies courses to achieve the outside-inside view of American culture that is difficult to establish without traveling abroad. In other words, contemporary American culture can be placed in its international context. Such a critical viewing of the United States allows American studies to truly regain its composure from what many view as

the awestruck patriotism of the myth-and-symbol school. It also allows American studies scholars to move to the forefront of the contemporary environmental movement. *Divided Planet: The Ecology of Rich and Poor*, by Tom Athanasiou, emphasizes this issue and achieves a superb analysis of cultural construction in the postmodern era. Stressing that the old environmentalism “has hit its limits,” Athanasiou equates the evolution of an international environmental discourse with a maturing adolescent. “Greenwashing” is regarded as an effort by wealthier nations and corporate entities to define this discourse and move concerns away from human-centered issues. Athanasiou studies the political roots of such a sensibility in the American environmental movement and in green political parties throughout the world. The core of his discussion, however, concerns an American ideal that is absent from most American studies courses but is critical to a globalist environmental sensibility: consumption and consumerism. “Facing the facts,” he writes, “will be extremely painful. In consumption cultures, success, contentment, and celebration are all expressed in acquisition.”

The issue of consumption is a flashpoint of recent anti-WTO demonstrations in the United States. Such protests against international financiers such as the World Bank as well as policies such as GATT and NAFTA link conservative thinkers about isolationism with some of the farthest-left thinking young radicals. The environment is often the locus for discourse by these groups and others. Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown’s edited collection *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America* offers a series of essays on American environmental topics, each of which analyze cultural discourse regarding specific media or rhetorical styles dealing with the coverage of environmental issues. Brian Tokar’s *Earth for Sale* tells the political history of global environmental concerns by unraveling the complexities into fairly basic patterns. Of particular importance, Tokar’s book considers the global repercussions of the environmental justice movement, which is one of the most controversial developments in recent years. American studies has a great opportunity to aid international scholars to similarly deconstruct the cultural discourse of transnational environmentalism. Such an analysis likely ends with contemporary visions of strategies and tactics for international development and cooperation.

Most scholars of globalization agree that contrasting visions of development will center on the degree to which western powers such as Europe and the United States exert their wills to influence global patterns and strategies as well as to what degree developing nations accept it. This new age of insecurity is the topic of Michael Renner’s *Fighting For Survival*, in which he contends that military expansion no longer must be the primary concern of global security. Renner argues that resource loss and management will create an entirely new set of global priorities for diplomats from all nations. Such rhetoric has fueled the recent conflicts in Seattle over the World Bank and in Washington, D.C., over the WTO. Scholars have clearly identified this as an opportunity for self-reflection on American values and ethics, while also evaluating consumptive lifestyles with

more careful scrutiny. Alan Durning's *How Much is Enough?* considers the concept of consumption within the limits of global resources, while Thomas F. Homer-Dixon connects such ideas to potential social uprisings in *Environment, Scarcity and Violence* and in *Ecoviolence*.

Students could certainly be led to explore these same concepts by considering issues themselves in specific texts, such as those listed above, or in collections of relevant literature. Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhoades Mott have edited *The Environmental Debate* to bring together diverse documentary sources to reconstruct this debate itself as it has changed throughout American history. The latter portions of this collection expand to international issues, but other sources, such as the Annual Editions volume on ENVIRONMENT, achieve more of an international scope. Re-published annually, the collection often includes a few articles that students or graduate students are likely to be reading elsewhere (from popular magazines such as *Outside* and *Audubon*). To study such articles after reading an American studies core text such as David Potter's *People of Plenty* allows students and scholars the opportunity to think critically of contemporary patterns of consumption and the ethics that motivate and undergird them.

Such contextualization of American capitalism can not help but also accentuate the ways that globalization has also wrought new patterns of environmental degradation. For instance, many critics speculate that the environmentally conscious policies within the United States and European nations has not necessarily altered methods of production. Instead, critics argue that "green" policies have altered demographic patterns of production: specifically, the movement of production to accessible nations without such stringent laws and regulations. While these shifts stimulate global economic growth, they merely displace production to a "frontier of degradation" of nations hungry for economic development that are difficult to police and monitor.

### **The Green Frontier of American Studies Scholarship**

Many environmental studies and science programs throughout the nation are entering their second decade of existence. As the curriculum expands, there exist more and more opportunities to bring humanities and social science scholars and ideas into a traditionally natural science-dominated discourse. With its background in interdisciplinary work, American studies is a prime candidate for creating such bridges to the humanities and social sciences; in actuality, Americans' relationship to nature has been part of American and cultural studies since its inception. The next phases of environmental or green thought offer wide open terrain for intellectuals to embrace a paradigm that links human and environmental concerns to actively alter living patterns throughout the world.

With American studies participating in this expansion, the field has a tremendous opportunity to make its consideration become truly global in scope. Many writers have speculated about environmentalism's next phase. A selection of authors on the subject contains a bit of the diversity of opinions: Gregg

Easterbrook's *A Moment on the Earth*; Leslie Paul Thiele's *Environmentalism for a New Millennium*; Carol J. Verburg's *The Environmental Predicament*; and Michael E. Zimmerman's *Contesting Earth's Future*. Thiele's book seems particularly powerful in its stress on the integration of policy-making within the confines of this environmental paradigm. Weaving in a general history of contemporary environmentalism, Thiele also stresses the integrative concepts that will allow general global, transitional participation in the environmental priorities of the new millennium.

An emphasis on the transnational dimensions of environmental thought and movements can invigorate American studies scholarship by connecting the field's past with concerns for the global future of humanity. By doing so, scholars in American studies will be building on familiar roots while simultaneously reaching out to new fields and ideas. The emerging literature on global environmentalism could prove an enormously fertile frontier for American and cultural studies scholarship.

## Notes

1. The most useful sources for the general history of modern environmentalism would include: Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring* (Covello, Cal., 1994); Hal Rothman, *Saving The Planet* (New York, 2000); and Philip Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire* (New York, 1994).
2. Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 105.
3. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York, 1966).
4. Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York, 1968); Garrett Hardin, *Science*, vol. 162, no. 3859 (1968). See Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 257.
5. See for instance, William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground* (New York, 1996); Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York, 1990) and Michael Pollan, *Second Nature* (New York, 1991).
6. See for instance, Yi-fu Tuan, *Topophilia* (New York, 1990).
7. Perry Miller's conceptualization of early America has been the genesis for many scholars' pursuits. On the relationship of nature to the national identity, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Boston, 1961). Roderick Nash's work is generally included as cultural history, but it also marks the first book published in environmental history. See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1982). Barbara Novak, an art historian, is the author of *Nature and Culture* (New York: 1980).
8. To illuminate this double meaning of "natural," it may be helpful to consult Charles A. Miller, *Jefferson and Nature* (Baltimore, 1993).
9. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).
10. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York, 1964).
11. *Ibid.*, 226.
12. Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature* (New York, 1993) 9.
13. Peter Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America* (New York, 1987) 112-4 and Miller, *Jefferson and Nature*.
14. Formally established in the 1970s, the field of environmental history remains in its infancy. The most effective environmental history on the subject of nature's cultural construction is the collection edited by Cronon. Davis and Price each have essays in the collection.

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