

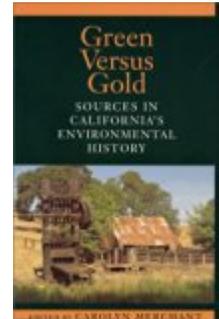
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carolyn Merchant, ed. *Green Versus Gold: Sources in California's Environmental History*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998. xxii + 489 pp. \$50.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55963-580-6; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55963-579-0.

Reviewed by Kenneth Worthy

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*Green Versus Gold* presents a broad, sweeping record of the environmental history of the California region for the past 250 years. Its vast scope and rich material make it an excellent book for anyone interested in how people have interacted with the natural environment in California—from the pre-European communities who flourished successfully in the region for millennia to today's nature-isolated society. The primary source material and bibliography and the relevance of the essays make it an invaluable resource for any formal study in the environmental history of California or the U.S.

This new book complements Merchant's previous collection on environmental history, *Major Problems in American Environmental History* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1993) (only seven of the 105 entries in the new book are taken from *Major Problems*). By pulling together a wealth of material from disparate published and unpublished sources, it provides perhaps the most comprehensive overview of the environmental history of California available. It speaks to audiences interested in California history, environmental history, environmentalism and the progression of the environmental crisis as it has played out in California. Its diverse readings appeal to a wide-ranging audience, including both academic and casual readers.

Merchant uses a selection of primary texts and related essays to describe and analyze the history of the human-environment relationship in California. The primary sources are extremely diverse and include origin stories and compelling firsthand accounts of Native American groups and excerpts of various documents such as old diaries, legal notices, historic academic writings, novels, contemporary journal articles, maps, and antique pho-

tographs. The essays represent a wide range of writings by historians, environmentalists, ethnographers, ecologists, activists, philosophers, etc.—from Mark Twain, Mary Austin and John Steinbeck to contemporary environmentalists Judi Bari and Gary Snyder. The essays generally do not directly refer to the primary sources, but rather discuss the general topics of the chapters and provide context and analysis on the subject of the sources. A few of the topics covered are “Native Californian Cultivators”, “Dredging for Gold”, “Sea Otters Encounter Russians”, “Aboriginal Fishers”, “Hydraulic Society Triumphant”, “Chaos and California”, “The Battle for Bodega Bay”, and Deep Ecology.

One disadvantage of all of this variety of material is that it sometimes diffuses the book's focus. Indeed, a cover-to-cover reading can be challenging because of the kaleidoscopic effect of its assemblage of topics. On the other hand, this does not detract from its usefulness as an occasional reader, a complement to other books in a course, or as a resource for additional research in the field, as its subtitle suggests. Also, considering its scope, the coherence afforded by its organization is remarkable.

The documents and essays together cover topics spanning the days of prehistory in the California region to the present day. Descriptions of pre-European inhabitants of the region are followed by discussion of European settlement and use of the area and interaction with the land, with attention paid to the relationship between immigration and the natural wealth of the region—particularly gold, the concept of which drew a frenzied influx 150 years ago. The book follows the early transformation of the idea of nature into commodity and the exploitation and large-scale transformation of ecosystems

by the European settlers; some contemporary philosophical thought on that exploitation and its dramatic results is also included.

Throughout, the work illustrates human perceptions of and reactions to environmental destruction, such as that wrought by hydraulic mining, the flooding of large valleys and the transformation of grasslands by overgrazing, including the preservation efforts of the twentieth century by such people as John Muir and Huey Johnson; competing preservation rationales are presented. Particularly interesting is the surprising concern by Europeans in previous era for the human impact on the environment, such as the despair expressed by a mid-nineteenth-century author about the already-extreme non-local ownership of California land; those concerns lend new perspective to our current environmental concerns. The theme of the human response to environmental destruction intensifies in later chapters (reflecting actual chronology), culminating in chapters on the evolution of environmental science, environmental movements and the editor's own vision for a rejoined green (nature) and gold (economy) in California.

The sources presented in *Green Versus Gold* are exten-

sive and impressively varied (this is typical of Merchant's work, such as the foundational *The Death of Nature*). It would be hard to imagine a more diverse and comprehensive collection of material about the environmental history of California in a single volume. The breadth of the material gives the reader unique insight into the state of the environment and the human-environment relationship across a variety of landscapes and social structures, from the intense management of ecosystems by Indian groups in pre-European times to the high degree of alienation from the land in modern Los Angeles. Through these selections, the central theme of the book—the developing tension between the green of nature and the gold representing the human use of nature in California—is brought to light. The discussion of human efforts for nature and the editor's ideas about a partnership ethic in the closing chapters provide relief from the overwhelming evidence of the human domination and destruction of nature.

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