H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kelly Enright. *The Maximum of Wilderness: The Jungle in the American Imagination.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. 200 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3228-6.

Reviewed by Megan Raby (University of Wisconsin-Madison)
Published on H-Environment (May, 2012)
Commissioned by Dolly Jørgensen

From Jungle to Rainforest

In the twentieth century, Americans increasingly encountered tropical forests through popular culture–in print and film–and through the consumption of tropical plant commodities–like bananas and rubber. Most Americans rarely experienced these forests face-to-face, but those who did played a key role in shaping broader American conceptions of the so-called jungle. In *The Maximum of Wilderness*, a revised version of her Rutgers dissertation (2009), Kelly Enright explores the shifting meanings of the jungle in the American imagination from the 1910s through the 1950s by examining the writings of numerous naturalist-popularizers.

Enright argues that American travelers approached the jungle through the lens of "wilderness," a concept with deep roots in American environmental thinking, not to mention its foundational status within the historiography of environmental history. The jungle, Enright contends, acted as a wilderness beyond American shores, a more wild and untouched nature than those remnants preserved in U.S. National Parks. While the jungle had long been imagined as a haunt of danger and adventure, Enright argues that antimodernist Americans began to project onto the jungle their hopes of escaping from and healing the ills of an overcivilized society. Ultimately, Enright posits a shift in American discourse from "the jungle" to "the rainforest" by the latter half of the twentieth century, connoting a new emphasis on biological diversity and natural balance. Tropical forests thus transformed from "a place that endangered human lives" to "an endangered place invested with the power to save human lives" (p. 7).

The first chapter begins by following the eminent American wilderness advocates John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt on their respective end-of-career journeys to the Amazon. For Enright, Roosevelt stands as a quintessential conservationist, seeing the jungle as a site of recreation, a strenuous test of masculinity, and a new frontier awaiting development. Conversely, Muir represents a preservationist approach to the jungle, envisioning it as one of the last refuges of true, untouched wilderness and a place for spiritual renewal. Throughout the book, Enright periodically returns to these contrasting understandings of the jungle as wilderness to frame the diverse personalities she includes in the narrative.

Chapter 2 shifts to the African expeditions of the wildlife filmmakers Martin and Osa Johnson, about whom Enright has previously written a biography (*Osa and Martin: For the Love of Adventure* [2011]). Analyzing films like *Congorilla* (1932), in which tropical wildlife was portrayed as peaceful and familial, Enright describes how the Johnsons domesticated the jungle for American audiences. Likewise, the zoologist William Beebe, subject of the third chapter, made jungle wildlife accessible though his exhibits at the Bronx Zoo and extensive popular and scientific writings. Beebe is the keystone of Enright's argument about a transition to a rainforest ideal, because his experiences in British Guiana (present-day Guyana) encouraged him to buck the trend toward scientific specialization and instead explore the breadth of the forest's diversity of wildlife. Finally, in chapter 4, Enright uses the plant explorer David Fairchild and the ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes as examples of how the jungle became an object of (literal) consumption. By bringing, respectively, tropical fruits and medicines into the American mainstream, Enright argues that Fairchild and Schultes helped to transform the market for rainforest products into a way to "consume conservation" (p. 146).

Enright's accounts of these fascinating characters are entertaining and highly readable. Given the short length of the book (154 pages), however, deeper, archive-based analyses of her subjects' field experiences and environmental thought are often too brief. In fact, these portrayals rely rather heavily on the actors' own autobiographies

and recent biographies, including Wade Davis's treatment of Schultes in *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest* (1996) and Carol Grant Gould's *The Remarkable Life of William Beebe: Explorer and Naturalist* (2004). Enright's use of the preservationist/conservationist distinction, embodied by Muir and Roosevelt, helps to knit together a loosely connected set of historical actors. Unfortunately, this dichotomy is not seriously problematized, in spite of longstanding criticism. After all, Richard White argued that this dichotomy had "come under attack and begun to crumble" over two decades ago.[1] Using preservation/conservation as the primary analytical touchstone tends to have a flattening effect on these historical actors' complex intellectual positions.

All seven subjects, whether they were considered professional scientists or not, had significant involvement in both scientific and popular culture, and often worked consciously to blur the lines between these realms. It should be noted that Enright's focus is on situating these figures within American popular culture, not within the intellectual history of tropical ecology. Therefore, there are only a few general connections with the secondary literature of the history of biology. For example, Beebe's article "Fauna of Four Square Feet of Jungle Debris" (1916) is approached as a celebration of "the jungle as a place of mystery" (p. 97). Enright does not specifically discuss the paper's relationship with the development of ecological practices or the emergence of conceptions of species richness. This emphasis is understandable, but the relationship between popular and scientific conceptions of tropical forests, including how they may have differed through time, is not closely examined. In fact, she does not explain the origins of the term "rainforest" within ecology, and the particular circumstances surrounding its emergence onto the broader American scene as a replacement for "jungle" remain unclear. That the narrative ends well before the true explosion of rainforest discourse in the 1980s also makes the book's argument about the transition to a rainforest ideal less strong than it could have been.

Nevertheless, Enright's foray into twentieth-century American cultural conceptions of tropical landscapes is an extremely welcome one, since the existing historiography on tropicality has had a strong focus on the European empires, and especially on the nineteenth century. If she had more explicitly used this previous work, she could have made some interesting comparisons with the American case. Enright's identification of wilderness as a major frame of reference for U.S. visitors to the world's tropical forests is convincing, but one suspects that Western culture's broader and enduring discourse about the tropics was equally relevant to the construction of the idea of the jungle within American thought. As it stands, the book does not engage deeply with the large literature on European encounters with the tropics. How American ideas about the jungle were or were not distinct is still an open question.

If Americans did fashion new conceptions of tropical forests through the course of the twentieth century, we might expect these to be strongly affected by the rapidly growing U.S. political and economic presence in tropical Latin America, Africa, and Asia. *The Maximum of Wilderness* contains tantalizing hints as to how expanding efforts to develop the resources of tropical forests shaped Americans' abilities to access the tropics in the first place: Muir's travels in Brazil were largely made possible by timber and railroad men; Beebe's jungle trails were cleared by colonial convicts and gold miners and his research station was built on the edge of the rubber plantation that would ultimately engulf his beloved forest. Enright occasionally notes such contradictions, but does not situate these historical actors within the social and economic networks that would have helped to explain them. This problem could also have been remedied by more serious engagement with recent work on U.S.-Latin American environmental history. There, reciprocal relationships between economically driven changes in tropical landscapes and cultural perceptions of tropical nature are beginning to be revealed.[2]

In spite of these omissions, Enright's overall argument is persuasive. Deeply held American conceptions of "wilderness" shaped how Americans encountered "the jungle." Over the twentieth century, tropical forests transitioned from dangerous to endangered, a shift signaled by the emergence of "the rainforest." Enright has identified broad cultural trends in American thinking about tropical forests, and this is an important first step toward extending the environmental history of American wilderness ideas outside of the borders of the United States. Future work in this area should seek to tie the cultural strands Enright identifies to the broader historical intellectual, political, and economic fabric.

Notes

[1]. Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Field," *The Pacific Historical Review* 54, no. 1 (1985): 309-310.

[2]. See, for example, John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Megan Raby. Review of Enright, Kelly, *The Maximum of Wilderness: The Jungle in the American Imagination.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35629

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.