

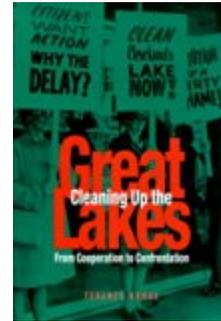
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Terence Kehoe. *Cleaning Up the Great Lakes: From Cooperation to Confrontation*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997. 250 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-225-1.

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Dirty Lakes, Shattered Consensus

By the late 1960s thirty million North Americans had pushed the Great Lakes to the edge. After a century of service as fishing ground, water supply, transportation route and convenient site for waste disposal, the lakes tended to stink, Lake Erie was said to be dying, and one river (the Cuyahoga, draining Cleveland) had entertained onlookers by catching fire. Today, the lakes are back from the edge, by most measures healthier for humans and fish alike (although some problems, like toxic contaminants, resist solution).

The lakes are still here, but the regulatory system that oversaw their decline is gone. As Terence Kehoe describes, concern about the Great Lakes grew into impatience with the accepted approach to environmental problems, of relying on pragmatic cooperation between industries and regulators. Instead, cleaning up the lakes came to be seen as requiring a new strategy, involving a wider range of interests, and even confrontation with polluters. This new perspective was typical of a broader evolution in American regulatory politics during the 1960s and early 1970s.

For much of the twentieth century, American environmental regulation was based on cooperation between industry managers and state regulators. These individuals, often with similar professional backgrounds, also shared a view of environmental problems as requiring cooperative, voluntary action. They also tended to trust themselves as the experts best able to define, and solve, these problems.

In the Great Lakes region this approach was perpetuated in state water pollution control legislation enacted between the mid-1940s and the early 1950s. However, it also reflected an older idea, of disinterested professional expertise as the basis for government-business relations, that had emerged during the progressive era conservation movement. Engineers and other experts within administrative agencies could, it was assumed, work with similarly disinterested, rational experts in the private sector to define the public interest, balancing the needs of interest groups, local priorities, and other uses of the receiving environment. The emphasis was on making “reasonable” demands on polluters, by specifying only as high a standard of pollution control as was economically feasible, and that could be justified in terms of the preferred uses of the water.

By the late 1960s this arrangement was under pressure. Economic growth, expanding cities and industrialized agriculture were imposing more stress on the lakes, even as public standards for environmental quality were rising. Obvious signs of degradation—oil slicks, closed beaches, masses of rotting algae—accumulated, as did scientific evidence indicating new hazards, particularly to human health. Many people now rejected the notion of “reasonable use” of waters for waste discharge, demanding instead uniform standards: that water everywhere should be as clean as technically possible, not just as clean as was reasonable in relation to other economic priorities. The regulatory system was squeezed from all sides: by higher environmental standards, by ev-

ident failure to meet these standards, and by distrust of the closed processes many considered responsible for this failure.

Within a few years, cooperative pragmatism had been replaced by a more legalistic, adversarial approach to regulation. A wider range of interest groups now participated in forming policy, in the courts and in other arenas. Activists demanded that the federal government take the initiative away from the states, viewing it as less likely to be influenced by local economic interests. The contradictory impulses of the Public Interest Era – demands for a more active role for government, but also distrust of it as susceptible to capture by the interests it regulates – resulted in federal agencies gaining more authority, but less discretion. New legislation, such as the 1972 Water Pollution Control Act amendments, gave authority to federal regulators; firm compliance timetables and standards took away their autonomy. A new generation of officials, such as William Ruckelshaus, first administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, confronted polluters with lawsuits and other legal action. Scientific uncertainties regarding the risks of toxic chemicals, waste heat, and phosphates provoked further controversy and conflict between interest groups. By the early 1970s, “the system of cooperative pragmatism that had framed the ground rules for pollution control in the Great Lakes Basin for decades lay shattered” (p. 10).

Kehoe’s purpose is to show how the system shattered, and, in doing so, to help explain why the American system of environmental regulation was transformed during the 1960s and early 1970s. He succeeds in doing so partly because of his evident mastery of the relevant state and federal archives, government reports and the published literature. Equally important, he places this transformation within the context of broader developments in American politics, including growing distrust of author-

ity, demands for wider participation in governance, and the interest in amenity issues that emerged in the affluent society of post-war America. His work supplements well other accounts of the evolving politics of regulation, such as Samuel Hays’s survey in *Beauty, Health and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (1987), Joel Tarr’s accounts of the regulation of industrial pollution in *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective* (1996), and Brian Balogh’s portrayal of regulation within the atomic program, *Chain Reaction: Expert Debate and Public Participation in American Commercial Nuclear Power, 1945-1975* (1991).

Kehoe also chose well in using the Great Lakes to describe a regulatory transformation of national dimensions. As the scene of intense environmental conflicts, and often the focus of national controversies, the Great Lakes serve effectively as a case study of this transformation. Kehoe’s purpose should be kept in view: he has not written a history of environmental regulation of the Great Lakes, but a history of American environmental regulation, using the Great Lakes as a case study. As a result, there is little discussion of Canadian issues, although the United States shares four of the five lakes with Canada. Nor is there extensive consideration of the International Joint Commission and its efforts to foster cross-border cooperation. In general, features of the Great Lakes that make it atypical within the American context are de-emphasized. This may be appropriate, considering Kehoe’s purpose; but readers will still look forward to a full account of the recent history of Great Lakes environmental politics.

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