H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bill Finch, Beth Maynor Young, Rhett Johnson, John C. Hall. *Longleaf, Far as the Eye Can See: A New Vision of North America's Richest Forest.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. x + 176 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3575-3.

Reviewed by Mark Hersey
Published on H-Environment (October, 2013)
Commissioned by David T. Benac

There is much to admire in *Longleaf, Far as the Eye Can See*, a beautifully illustrated coffee-table book that takes up the subject of what was once the American South's quintessential landscape. A paean to a tree (and forest) now found only in scattered remnants, the book seeks to situate longleaf pine in its broader ecological, economic, and cultural contexts. In so doing, it lays out a plan of sorts for its restoration, one the authors, Bill Finch, Beth Maynor Young, Rhett Johnson, and John C. Hall, hope will resonate both among a general audience and in the South's forest industry. Indeed, while the authors contend that "if you're not angry, you haven't been paying attention to what has happened, and is happening still, to longleaf," they remain optimistic about the forest's future (p. 129). Since only 3 percent now remains of what was once some ninety million acres of longleaf forest stretching from Virginia to Texas, the authors' optimism is perhaps surprising; their reverent affection for longleaf is less so, given that the remaining 3 percent represents the most biologically diverse forest system in North America.

Conceptualizing longleaf as a "forest turned upside down," the authors point out that in marked contrast to most forests, "the ground layer is what the longleaf forest is all about" (p. 71). Dominated by a single species of tree, a healthy longleaf forest fosters diversity in its understory rather than its canopy. Because a great deal of sunlight filters through longleaf's thin shade, adaptability to fire proves the single most important requirement for a species' survival on the forest floor. The result has been a dual identity: it is one of the few ecosystems in the world that has as much claim to being a prairie as a forest, and the overlapping biota has produced a strikingly rich array of life. As the authors note, at least thirty distinct genera (*not species*) are unique to longleaf, and the volume is replete with similarly surprising figures. By way of comparison, for instance, the authors point out that scientists have documented nearly twice as many species of native grasses on the healthy longleaf stand of a single military base in North Carolina as in the entirety of Kansas's Flint Hills. If on occasion such comparisons strike an unnecessarily defensive tone, the authors nevertheless rightly underscore the degree to which longleaf played an enormously important role in maintaining the South's biodiversity–both in the longleaf forest proper and by facilitating the spread of fire into neighboring ecosystems, such as the limestone prairies of Alabama's Black Belt.

Although the book is aimed at a popular audience, the authors do an admirable job of wrestling with the complexities and ambiguities of longleaf ecology. They acknowledge, for instance, that because longleaf ecology might be roughly broken down along an east and west divide (at the Apalachicola River), along a north and south divide (at the Savannah River), and at numerous other junctures, it quickly becomes difficult to talk about a single forest and to identify what, apart from the predominance of longleaf pine and an adaptability to fire, characterized that forest. Species that have come to be popularly identified as indicators of a healthy sweep of longleaf–gopher tortoises, indigo snakes, and wiregrass to name but three examples–were, in fact, indigenous only to portions of longleaf's Gulf Coast range. This, as the authors acknowledge, raises salient questions for environmentalists working toward longleaf restoration. If longleaf "is not one, but thousands of forests," then any endeavor to "save a forest that is so big and diverse" faces inevitable value judgments about which aspects of that forest are worth saving and why (p. 104).

Given the tenuous situation of longleaf, the fact that very little of its historic range is in public hands, and the political bent of the South, debates about the relative merits of one aspect of the forest over another have proven largely theoretical thus far. Those concerned about longleaf have understandably sought to preserve

as much as they can, wherever they can, and under whatever conditions might be necessary; they have, in short, adopted the politics of the possible. The authors follow suit, joining groups like the Longleaf Alliance in endorsing the notion that "a working longleaf forest can still be a whole forest" (p. 139). Pointing to a number of anecdotal successes, the authors center their hopes for a healthy, working forest on Bob Farrar's multiaged longleaf forest management model. The model is proven and the potential economic value of longleaf timber (as well as the wildlife and recreational values of the forest) is real. Even so, environmental historians might wonder if the conviction that a healthy forest and strong economy might go hand in hand amounts to anything more than an article of faith, given the broader capitalist framework of alienated commodities and maximized profits.

In part, such doubts might arise because the book situates longleaf more successfully in its ecological and economic contexts than its cultural one. *Longleaf, Far as the Eye Can See*, in short, offers a superb introduction to the ecology of its subject, capturing the nuances of longleaf ecosystems and engaging debates about that ecology with far more subtlety than might be expected in a book aimed at a popular audience. It proves less successful in connecting that ecology to the human societies that lived with, depended on, and ultimately exploited longleaf. To be sure, the four authors posses a deep knowledge of longleaf and a compelling passion for the subject, and Finch, the lead author, is a first-rate prose stylist, who writes with an uncommon grace and a rare knack for rendering conceptually difficult subjects accessible. But none are historians, and despite the incorporation of some spectacular historical photographs, historical concerns are essentially tangential to their efforts.

This is not to say that the authors neglect the forest's human history. In addition to the primary text, there are ten insets set off by differently colored backgrounds that run several pages each. Five of these take up the relationship between longleaf and fire, while the remaining five detail "life under longleaf." One of those about fire traces the efforts to suppress fire in the region, efforts that peaked in the early twentieth century but linger today. Another weighs in on the debate about the degree to which the fire necessary for longleaf's existence was "natural" rather than anthropogenic, offering enough evidence to all but scuttle the latter. Several of the "life under longleaf" insets similarly place people in the forest, taking up the perceived health benefits offered by longleaf in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the connection of longleaf forests to the urban South (principally through garden nurseries); and the military's role in preserving the most impressive remaining stands of longleaf. The last of these would make a particularly useful reading in a class on the modern environmental movement, as for that matter so would the chapter on the future of longleaf. But the authors' efforts to incorporate longleaf's human past often flirt with environmental determinism on the one hand and antiquarianism on the other, and on balance prove more useful as exercises in historical imagination than as historical analysis.

From a certain angle, this is a patently unfair criticism for a historian to make. But the environmental history of the region matters–both because it affected the narrative of longleaf's trajectory, and because it is likely to have a significant bearing on efforts to restore the forest. The clear cutting of longleaf that marked the first decades of the twentieth century offers a case in point. There is probably some truth in the authors' suggestion that longleaf's demise was facilitated because it "was so much a part of our lives, so wound up with everything it meant to be southern, that it was as impossible to discern its influence as it was to imagine a world without it" (p. 15). However, the deforestation of longleaf across virtually its entire range cannot be explained by the fact that it was taken for granted any more than it can be explained by a fixation on its parts–grass for "cattle-driving crackers," bobwhite quail for affluent hunters, or trees that "graded out higher than any other pine" for lumbermen–rather than the whole (p. 83).

On the contrary, it was made possible by profoundly contingent events, rooted in particular cultures at particular times. The privatization of longleaf that permitted its wholesale harvesting was made possible by the rise of new economic order in the South in the wake of the Civil War. Hotly contested, this new order saw clear winners and losers in wide-ranging power struggles, with the winners often successfully pushing for the legal sanction of their victories. Predictably, these contests brought unintended consequences. Thus, the gradual closing of the southern commons, which was largely set in motion by landlords seeking to reinforce the dependency of black tenant farmers, facilitated the acquisition of lands by timber companies headquartered outside the region (hardly an aim of a closed range's early proponents). Moreover, the fact that industry had gained considerable leverage over agriculture in much of the South by the early twentieth century meant that timber companies could operate under a legal system substantially more favorable to industry than ever before. Not only did this make it easier to fend off legal challenges, but it also allowed the companies to take advantage of a steady, but cheap and malleable labor force that was in part a prod-

uct of the region's commitment to white supremacy. And if contingencies bound up in the broader fabric of southern culture–race, identity, ideology, and politics, among others–mattered in shaping the period of longleaf's peak exploitation, it seems likely that similar contingencies will factor into efforts to restore the forest, and advocates of that restoration would do well to understand and account for them.

To be fair, few environmental histories to date focus on longleaf. Robert Outland's award-winning *Tapping the Pines: The Naval Stores Industry in the American South* (2004); Albert G. Way's excellent study of Herbert Stoddard, *Conserving Southern Longleaf: Herbert Stoddard and the Rise of Ecological Land Management* (2011); Tycho de Boer's provocative look at the lumber industry in North Carolina's Green Swamp, *Nature, Business, and Community in North Carolina's Green Swamp* (2008); and Jack Temple Kirby's classic *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society* (1995) represent nuanced looks at aspects of longleaf's past, but much of longleaf's environmental history awaits adequate exploration. Indeed, *Longleaf, Far as the Eye Can See* offers a telling reminder of how wide open the burgeoning field of southern environmental history remains. And if the authors' emphasis on science and economics hints at the fact that the work of environmental historians often remains tangential to debates over environmental policy (and to a lesser degree historical ecology), their nods to culture (however perfunctory) might well indicate that some progress has been made.

In any case, focusing on the shortcomings of the book's historical analysis would undersell its tremendous virtues. It makes a compelling case for the significance of saving longleaf and has probably surpassed Lawrence S. Earley's *Looking for Longleaf : The Fall and Rise of an American Forest* (2006) as the primary introduction North America's most diverse forest. It deserves a place on the shelves of environmental historians and on the coffee tables of all those who care about the future of longleaf.

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: Mark Hersey. Review of Finch, Bill; Young, Beth Maynor; Johnson, Rhett; Hall, John C., *Longleaf, Far as the Eye Can See: A New Vision of North America's Richest Forest.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38023

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