H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Char Miller, ed.. *American Forests, Nature, Culture, and Politics. Development of Western Resources.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997. x + 289 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-0848-5.

Reviewed by Jay Brigham

Published on H-Environment (April, 2000)

Char Miller brings together previously published works from some of the top scholars of environmental and forest history in this impressive collection of essays. In doing so, the book challenges many long held assumptions about American forests while offering a reinterpretation of American forest history. As the title indicates, the emphasis is on nature, culture, and politics: most often national politics and the United States Forest Service. None of these three elements existed independently. Instead, nature, culture, and politics interacted and influenced the course of forest policy in the United States. As Miller states in the Preface, "the volume assesses the shifting intersection of public policy and the environment, detailing changes in the assumptions that have defined and challenged the management of our nation's forested habitats" (p. ix).

Miller organized the essays into four chronological sections. Following Miller's introduction, "On Rewriting Forest History," Donald Pisani, John Reiger, and Harold Steen examine the "Roots of Forestry." In this section the authors clearly acknowledge the importance of Gifford Pinchot and other turn-of-the-century foresters and conservationists. The focus of this section, however, is on forestry in the United States from the Civil War to the beginning of the progressive era. Pisani, for example, notes the importance of George Perkins Marsh and Marsh's 1864 book, ***Man and Nature: The Earth as Modified by Human Action***. Reiger discusses the significance of not only individuals such as George Bird Grinnell, but also early conservationist publications like ***Forest and Stream*** and organizations such as the Boone and Crockett Club. The influence of the Boone and Crockett Club was so great that Reiger identifies it, not the Sierra Club, as "the first private organization to deal effectively with conservation issues of a national scope" (p. 40). Harold Steen rounds out this section by discussing the late-nineteenth-century political history that culminated with the passage of the Forest Management Act (the Organic Act) in 1897.

Contributors to the second section of the book, "First Cuts," continue to challenge long held views. Richmond Clow debunks the notion that industry represented the antithesis of conservation.

In examining the Homestake Timber Case Number 1, the first sale of timber on public lands, Clow describes the evolution of the Homestake Mining Company as it gradually accepted the Forest Service's conservation policies. After a period of forest destruction the company engaged in fraudulent activity to maintain timber supplies for its mining activities. Realizing the futility of continuing fraudulent conduct, Homestake embraced forest conservation. Instead of opposition to forest management, Homestake ultimately worked with Pinchot and the Forest Service to insure a supply of timber.

Robert Wolf's contribution takes a longer look at the Forest Service's near century long attempt to make the national forests pay. Between the Transfer Act of 1905 and 1920, the period in which Pinchot and Henry Graves headed the Forest Service, an "optimism powerful enough to obscure mounting evidence of widespread unprofitably" characterized timber sales (p. 92). >From 1920 to 1950, the Forest Service continued to claim profitability of timber sales while also arguing that other "unquantified, nonmonetary benefits" characterized timber sales and grazing (p. 93). Profit remained elusive even during the economic boom years of the 1950s when the timber industry adopted extensive forest management. Optimism stayed high through the 1950s and 1960s despite strong evidence that the Forest Service still could not turn a profit. Nothing changed in the 1980s leading Wolf to conclude that "Gifford Pinchot's unmet challenge-to manage the national forests and make them pay-still haunts the agency" (p. 100).

Four essays comprise the book's third section, "At Loggerheads." Hal Rothman examines the conflict between the Forest Service and the National Park Service in the 1920s and 1930s. During those years the Forest Service remained true to Pinchot's idea of a scientifically trained forester dedicated to forest management and use with an eye always on local concerns. The Park Service, under the marketing genius of Stephen Mather, "sought a national constituency" nearly from its inception (p. 112). While the Forest Service stressed management, the Park Service tapped into the developing idea of leisure time and the emerging auto age in promoting park usage. Although interagency bickering continued into the 1930s, and remains to the present day, Rothman concludes that an equilibrium has developed that prevents either agency from gaining too much power.

Whereas Rothman saw conflict give way to acceptance, Susan Schrepfer identifies an opposite trend in her examination of the relationship between the Forest Service and the Sierra Club. Most often viewed in contemporary accounts as adversaries, historically the two organization's efforts most often were complementary. The association remained strong in the 1940s and did not even show strain until the early 1950s when controversy emerged over timber cuts in the Sierra Nevada. Despite that, the Forest Service used the Sierra Club "as a friendly lobby" in its dealing with Congress, forest users, states, and local concerns until the 1960s (p. 127).

Conflict characterizes the final two selections in "Loggerheads." Stephen Haycox examines the legislative debate that preceded passage of the Tongass Timber Act of 1947, which opened vast tracts of Indian land in Alaska to timber cutting to supply proposed wood pulp plants. The battle pitted the forces of Indian rights against those favoring economic development. In the end, the later group prevailed, although the economic benefits never matched pre-approval projections. Although concerned with the Tongass Act the core debate that Haycox identifies, "modern capitalist development" versus forest usage lacking a market imperative, has characterized much of the nation's forest history.

An agency under attack rounds out the third section of the book. Arnold Bolle recounts the research, publication, and reaction to the 1970 report, A University View of the Forest Service. The

report, co-authored by Bolle and several other faculty members at the University of Montana, called into question Forest Service timber cutting policies in the Bitterroot Mountains of western Montana. Following World War II, the Forest Service dramatically increased timber cutting in the region, which led to local concern and criticism by the late 1960s. As Bolle notes "At the center of all local criticism was a genuine feeling that the rate of timber harvest was too high, that forests were being overcut" (p. 166). When local residents found the Forest Service unresponsive to their concerns they turned to newspapers and then to the state's U.S. Senators, Mike Mansfield and Lee Metcalf. In time, Senator Metcalf turned to the University of Montana. The resulting report gained national and even international attention. Although opposition to clear cuts became the new battle cry, Bolle stresses that a change in Forest Service policy after World War II from multi-use to timber primacy prompted the Bitterroot controversy.

Section four of the book, titled simply "Multiple Uses," contains four essays that examine the emergence of multiple use and the policy's associated pitfalls. Thomas Alexander studies the development of "scientific range management" between 1910 and 1930 in the intermountain region. During those years a scientific background became essential for employment. Although a scientifically trained Forest Service was in place by the 1920s a delay resulted in the implementation of science based range policy. Alexander blames this delay on too great of belief in natural regeneration and to opposition from stock owners and their allies. Implementation of effective range management occurred after World War II.

William Robbins examines the timber economy and culture of the Pacific Northwest that he believes differed little from the timber cultures of the Great Lakes and the Northeast in previous years. Unfortunately, foresters learned few lessons from the "cut and run" experience of earlier timber regions that left communities dependent on logging and wood products industries economically devastated. Driven by twentieth century resource capitalism, the timber areas of western Washington already showed signs of over cutting by the 1920s. Western Washington timber cutting peaked in 1929, by which time timber companies already had started to look south to Oregon. In the greater Coos Bay region of southwest Oregon the cycle of over cutting soon began again. By the time of the boom years of the 1950s some people already began to ask if timber companies were cutting too much timber. In the 1980s economic despair characterized the Coos Bay timber region. Significantly, the roots of that despair went back at least forty years. Too little timber in the 1980s resulted from timber company decisions in the 1940s and 1950s, not from activist groups in the 1970s and later.

The over cutting and its consequent economic disaster did not go over looked entirely. Even in the 1940s people, including many in Congress, recognized that "cutting and running" had ruined many communities. In response, Congress passed the Sustained-Yield Act in 1944, which is the topic of David Clary's essay. Despite Congress's best intentions few positives followed the passage of the Act. The Forest Service had misgivings about the act. Others charged that the Act created timber monopolies. Regardless of the law's final success or failure, its passage does show governmental concern even before the end of World War II.

Dennis Roth concludes section four by examining the events, personalities, and debates leading to the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964. As nearly all the essays in the book show in examining their particular topic, the history of the Wilderness Act also was long and complicated. Roth identifies Aldo Leopold, Arthur Carhart, and Robert Marshall as the primary supporters of a Forest Service wilderness policy between 1900 and 1950. After World War II increased timber cutting aroused suspicions and led to calls for

wilderness area legislation. The Echo Park damming controversy resulted in more support. Finally, in 1956 the first wilderness bill was introduced into the Senate. Passage was slow, and did not occur until 1964.

Nancy Langston's extensive Epilogue draws on her work on the Blue Mountains of Oregon. After discussing the typicality of the Blue Mountains to further the historical understanding of pine forests throughout the West, Langston concentrates on the Forest Service's activities in the "Blues." The departure point is the Forest Service's "unusual admission of guilt and confusion" in 1991 that placed the blame for the environmental crisis in the Blue Mountains squarely at its doorstep (p. 248). Attempts to manage the forest since the 1920s resulted in its near destruction. Although the early foresters failed to realize it, the timber land of the Blue Mountains fundamentally differed from forests in the Midwest and east. "Water and Fire" characterized the Blue Mountains. Once dominated by pine, few pine stands now remain. Despite the best intentions of foresters to scientifically manage the area to reduce old growth stands and replace them with manageable, even-aged, forests nothing of the sort happened. Instead, logging and wildfires resulted in a tremendous change in tree type. Just as William Robbins identified the collapse of the Coos Bay region being set in motion in the 1940s, Langston argues that the collapse of the Blue Mountains in the 1990s began seventy years earlier in the 1920s.

The authors of each essay in this book offer perceptive analysis of their topics. Whether professionally characterized as a "rewriting of history" or a "revisionist history" the conclusions put forth in every essay are compelling. Each essay addresses old assumptions and in most instances the history reveals that many of today's headline crises developed from policies adopted many years earlier. The present problems in the nation's forests did not suddenly develop. They resulted from the historical interaction of the environment, public policy, and culture. Nearly all the authors "turn back the clock." This became apparent in the examination of the post-Civil War origins of conservation and continues through the remainder of the book.

For all that American Forests offers, several areas remain largely untouched. Perhaps the most important is the reconsideration of the importance of fire in timberland management. Many people now openly question the Forest Service's long obsession with fire suppression. Large infernos such at the Yellowstone fire in 1988 might be avoided by letting smaller fires periodically clear the forest floor. The book's emphasis is on the federal government and the Forest Service. This represents both strength and weakness. Such an emphasis results in coherence. However, great amounts of forest land in the United States remain in either private hands or under state control. These timberlands are examined only peripherally. The emphasis on federal lands also means little attention is paid to southern forests where increasing amounts of wood products now originate.

Regardless of these omissions American Forests is definitive. Nearly every essay is extremely readable and extensively cited. A bibliography references major titles in forest history. This book will be of enduring value not only to environmental and forest historians and their students, but to anyone attempting to understand the present crisis that encompasses America's forests.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment

Citation: Jay Brigham. Review of Miller, Char, ed. *American Forests, Nature, Culture, and Politics. Development of Western Resources.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3975