



Hal K. Rothman. *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2000. x + 215 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-288-1.

Reviewed by Gregory J. Dehler (Front Range Community College)

Published on H-Environment (April, 2002)

From Conservation to Environmentalism

>From Conservation to Environmentalism

Finding a text for a twentieth-century environmental history class can be a real trial. One has to string together several different books since most texts, such as John Opie's *Nature's Nation*, begin with pre-Columbian times. With *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century*, Hal Rothman has filled this void in the historical literature with a concise and coherent account. This is primarily an overview that ties together familiar interpretations from Samuel Hayes, Robert Gottlieb, Michael Cohen, Stephen Fox, Martin Melosi, and David Helvar, among many others. Of course Rothman covers much material from his *The Greening of a Nation? Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945*.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Rothman picks up the story in chapter one with a discussion of the 1890s and the origins of the conservation movement. He argues that this crucial decade marked a point when the closing of the frontier and the rude emergence of industrialization created the conservation movement. The next three chapters follow in a chronological order. The second covers the progressive era, with most emphasis placed on Theodore Roosevelt and the Antiquities Act of 1906. Chapter three concentrates on the 1920s and 1930s, when big business hijacked the conservation movement for its own ends under the approving eyes of friendly presidents. Rothman draws little distinction between the big business emphasis of the 1920s and the big government actions of the 1930s because both were top down approaches to conservation and natural resource usage where decisions were made by a tiny elite without popular input. The fourth chapter dwells on the 1950s and the emergence of a new environmentalism propelled less by the efficient management of resources, and more by concerns relating to aesthet-

ics and the quality of life. He spends most of the chapter concentrating on the Echo Park Dam controversy and how it began the process of forming a grass-roots, democratic movement to protect nature from over-development. The next chapter "The Rise of Aesthetical Environmentalism" covers the turbulent decade of the 1960s when the social upheavals had a pronounced effect on the way Americans came to view the environment. As where conservation focused on the needs of the community over the individual under the philosophy of the greatest good for the greatest number, Rothman argues that the emerging post-World War II environmental movement returned the emphasis to the individual under the assumption that what was good for one was good for all.

The next three chapters move away from a chronological order and are treated in topical fashion. Chapter six examines aspects of racism and environmental degradation and the not in my backyard movements (NIMBY) movements. The following chapter provides coverage of the Sagebrush Rebellion and the Wise Use movement. Unfortunately, this is the only time that Rothman mentions how the environmental movement was challenged in the twentieth century. He associates much violence with the Wise Use movement which he ties to Timothy MacVeigh, but nothing is mentioned of eco-terrorist acts or the anti-technological actions of Ted Kaczinski. In the concluding chapter, Rothman uses the history of the past as a guide for mapping out a more egalitarian and effective environmental movement. He believes that broad-based public support for environmental policies is greatest when quality of life and public health concerns come together. He cites the Santa Barbara Oil Spill, Three Mile Island, the crusade against lead paint, and Love Canal as examples of how and when environmentalism cut successfully across class and racial lines. This, he contends, is the path to the

future.

The main strength of this book—a brief and coherent account of the environmental movement in the twentieth century—is also its main weakness. As part of the Ivan Dee American Ways Series, *Saving the Planet* text comprises of 205 pages. The brevity of this book has clearly forced Rothman to leave much out. First and foremost, he makes no mention of the science of ecology, an important component in the post-World War II environmental movement. Ecologists focusing on the interaction of species clearly expanded what Americans considered to be part of the natural world and deepened the understanding of the cause and effects of both human and non-human actions on ecosystems. Wildlife concerns in general are excluded. The Endangered Species Act is mentioned in passing only, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which dramatically expanded the federal government’s managerial responsibility for wildlife, is not mentioned at all. The Clean Water Acts, parks, zoos, urban renewal, roads, the In-

terstate Highway Act, and automobiles are all topics either not mentioned or given slight treatment in passing. Finally, Rothman’s book makes it seem as though the conservation-environmental movement of the twentieth century was a monolithic, coherent, and cohesive force. In fact, there is, and always has been, significant diversity, competition, and disagreement within the movement. Conservationists, preservationists, third wave environmentalists, recreational outdoors men, anti-technologists, deep ecologists, and eco-terrorists, among many others have had frequent, and at times, crippling disagreements.

Copyright 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

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: Gregory J. Dehler. Review of Rothman, Hal K., *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6157>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.