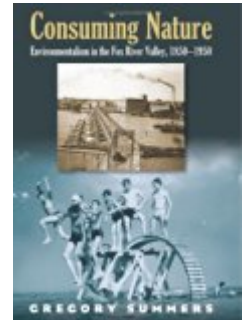


Gregory Summers. *Consuming Nature: Environmentalism in the Fox River Valley, 1850-1950.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. xii + 256 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1486-8.



Reviewed by William Lang

Published on H-Environment (October, 2007)

Increasingly over the last three decades, environmental critics and commentators who have decried the consequences of increased human population on the fate of the earth have also emphasized that the important statistic is not how many of us walk about, but how much we consume. It is consumption of fertile soil, harvested species, minerals, and habitat for other species that has created the environmental crises that society has identified. Despite this persuasive argument, historians have not focused sufficiently on consumption as the primary disrupter of environmental relationships. In general, historians have followed George Perkins Marsh's nineteenth-century characterization of "man the destroyer." In *Consuming Nature*, Gregory Summers directs our attention to "man the consumer."

Taking the modern history of the Fox River Valley in Wisconsin as a case in point, Summers argues that industrialization since the mid-nineteenth century has encouraged a new relationship between humans and nature, one that eventually helped shape mid-twentieth-century environmentalism. This transformation was not simple, nor

was it readily apparent to participants. We could not see it clearly, Summers implies, until late twentieth-century environmental attitudes and laws clarified how modern environmentalism addressed anthropogenic ecological deterioration in simplistic ways. Emphasis on protection, preservation, and remediation often ignored how humans' consumption of nature effectively divorced them from nature. Building on ideas introduced by William Cronon and Richard White that complicated our understanding of human interaction with nature, Summers takes readers deep into the growth of consumer society in the Fox River Valley.

The Fox River flows only thirty-five miles from Lake Winnebago in Central Wisconsin to Green Bay on Lake Michigan. Although short, the Fox dropped 170 feet on its way east to Green Bay, thereby creating enough waterpower to attract new industrialists in the mid-nineteenth century. Fox River became nationally famous for paper-making, an industry that relied on the river for transportation, power, production processing, and waste deposit. By the 1890s, paper mills in

Neenah, Appleton, and Menasha pumped more than one million dollars in wages into the local economy. This wealth, Summers explains, came directly from nature, as trees harvested from Wisconsin's ample forests became newsprint, construction paper, and paper wrappers. The industry helped generate publishing and printing companies, but natural limits to direct waterpower sources, especially during drought, and fading timber supply soon threatened growth. The solution was to extract more from nature from farther away and expand the paper industry through applied chemistry that added a broad range of new paper products and commercial opportunities. The Fox River paper story, as Summers points out, was replicated in industry after industry throughout the nation. In the face of perceived natural limits, new industrialism and new technology actually expanded human use of nature and created more wealth.

"Consumer society," Summers argues, "offers a tenuous foundation for environmentalism" (p. 200). In the Fox River Valley, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, the community drew more and more wealth from nature by developing hydroelectric power on the river, extending the metropolitan reach into the countryside, expanding the dairy industry, and developing tourist attractions. With each successive wave of development, Summers explains, the Fox River Valley became less defined as "a means of production" and more "a place shaped instead by consumption and the expanding control over nature that consumption made possible" (p. 109). This transformation took time, but it was inexorable. More and more, the earlier direct relationships between productive nature and wealth became less evident and less understood. The consumer culture disguised how and to what extent society facilitated remote uses of nature, leaving people relatively estranged from nature. In the Fox River story, as Summers tells it, the advent of modern highways increased commerce, while it also provided new access to nature by the metropolitan-

bound population. As historians Paul Sutter and David Louter have recently argued, the automobile offered unprecedented easy access to more distant landscapes, which prompted demands for more access and a contrary argument for protection and preservation of the wilder lands that lured so many from the city.

The estrangement from nature that consumption fed and the contrasting effort to protect nature--the essence of modern environmentalism--according to Summers, is best seen in the contest over water pollution on the Fox River immediately following World War II. Summers begins and ends *Consuming Nature* with the story of citizen activism in defense of a cleaner Fox River. The river was an industrialized generator of wealth, but it was also increasingly perceived as "a consumer amenity," a place worth protecting (p. 186). The battle became public in the Wisconsin Senate and in the valley cities, as the local chapter of the Isaac Walton League challenged the paper companies and their allies to cease polluting the river. A legislative victory eluded the nascent environmentalists, but the engagement was a harbinger of changes in public engagement that would flower by the 1970s. "If the legislature neglects the challenge of pollution today," Summers quotes a Wisconsin legislative proponent of anti-pollution laws, "the public will ultimately 'rise up' and demand an even more radical program in the future" (p. 197).

Much more went into the creation of 1970s environmentalism, of course, but Summers has directed our attention to an important underlying condition. The modern consumer society, especially one that relies more and more on synthetic and disguised connections to nature, cannot avoid a measurable disconnect from nature. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir warned about this separation, but Gregory Summers has expanded that warning and reminded us that solid environmental history can reveal how we got here and

what historical patterns bear understanding if we are to answer today's quandaries.

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

Citation: William Lang. Review of Summers, Gregory. *Consuming Nature: Environmentalism in the Fox River Valley, 1850-1950*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13753>



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