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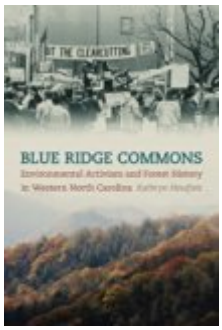
Kathryn Newfont. *Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. xix + 369 pp. $26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8203-4125-5.



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Remember the commons. That is what historian Kathryn Newfont implores us to do when thinking about the history of the American environmental movement in the late twentieth century. But her new book ***Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina*** inspires so much more than this simple appeal. In this history of the ways in which residents of Appalachian western North Carolina understood and responded to proposals to designate wilderness areas, drill for oil and natural gas, and clearcut in western North Carolina's national forests in the 1970s and 1980s, Newfont challenges assumptions about the environmental movement and contributes a new lens through which it might be viewed. Through explicating and examining what she calls "commons environmentalism" ***Blue Ridge Commons*** provides valuable insights about the complexity of American environmental values and how people confront environmental challenges according to their local interests and culture.

Newfont's arguments revolve around the book's central contribution to the historiography of the environmental movement: "commons environmentalism." Specific to her project, she defines the term as "an activism aimed at protecting a local forest commons for rural working people" and argues that this strain of environmentalism should be considered alongside wilderness preservation as an equally important and powerful strain of the movement (pp. ix, 3). She insists that commons exist all over the world and for many groups of people. Often overlooked by scholars as archaic or unsophisticated or as having disappeared in the early twentieth century during the transition to capitalism and federal management, she contends that the commons remained salient as a source of material and cultural sustenance for a large part of the rural, working-class population of Appalachia into the last decades of the twentieth century. According to Newfont, the commons have deep roots; they are "as American as apple pie" and "no less fundamental to American history and culture" than pri-

vate property (p. 9). She argues that paying attention to the commons helps explain the seemingly schizophrenic responses of local "commons users"--hunters, gatherers of herbs and other plants, loggers, and some recreationists--to proposals to both preserve and exploit the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests in western North Carolina. Reflecting a generations-old culture of commons use that presumed and defended use rights on undeveloped private property and public forests, commons users rejected proposals by the Forest Service during the second Roadless Area Review and Evaluation process (RARE II) in the late 1970s to designate certain portions of the forest as wilderness. They interpreted wilderness as an "enclosure" that privileged outside elites and shut out locals from the forest. Commons users sided with the extractive industries to fight against the Sierra Club and other environmental groups to keep these lands open to multiple uses. On its face, their opposition resembled that of the "wise use" movement that emerged in the West during the same period. However, just a few years later, these same people rallied against Forest Service plans to open thousands of acres of "forest commons" to drilling for oil and natural gas and to clearcut logging and even advocated wilderness designation as a solution to these threats even though these activities promised economic development. Like previous wilderness proposals, they viewed drilling and clearcutting as single uses that would close the commons by precluding all other uses. Newfont contends that Blue Ridge locals thus operated as "swing votes" in battles between industrialists and environmentalists (p. 168).

Newfont makes her case for the importance of commons environmentalism through an introduction and ten chapters that detail the evolution of the forest commons, commons culture, and environmental history in Appalachian North Carolina during the early 1900s, the creation of national forests by the Weeks Act in 1911, and then a close examination of the response of local residents and common users to three different land-use proposals. The organizing of local residents to respond to wilderness designation, expanded oil and gas drilling, and even-aged, clearcut logging provides the empirical support for her claims. She closes with a short concluding chapter and an afterward in which she returns to a wider focus on the importance of the commons and commons analysis in understanding American environmentalism as a social movement. Her narrative is skillfully woven around vivid character profiles of citizen activists and commons users that she brings alive through the use of oral histories and painstaking research in multiple private and public archives across the southeastern United States. In addition, detailed maps demonstrate to the reader the difference between the fragmented eastern national forests and the large, contiguous western national forests with which most historians are familiar. Finally, Newfont makes effective use of photographs to illustrate the relationships between local residents and the forest commons.

Blue Ridge Commons is not without a few small problems. For the most part, its narrative is both engaging and informative, but the last chapter, which chronicles the Western North Carolina Alliance's successful "cut the clearcutting" campaign, is sometimes redundant and can read like a stand-alone article. In addition, Newfont deals only slightly with the thorny issue of defining who had a commons claim to the national forests and who did not. In the last few chapters concerning local opposition to petroleum development and clearcutting, she does attempt to weigh the interests of users of the multiple-use forest commons with users of the recreational commons but the question of who is included in the commons and who is left out is left largely unresolved. In the earlier RARE II wilderness battles, recreationists were not considered by locals as users of the commons yet in the later battles against oil and gas and clearcutting, multiple-use commons users and wilderness advocates worked together. Perhaps this is resolved by Newfont's explanation of

multiple-use commons users as "swing votes" in battles between industrialists and environmentalists but the question of how to define the commons and who qualifies as legitimate users complicates using the commons as a means of understanding environmental conflicts. This difficulty is necessarily part of making sense of the complex intersection of culture, class, geography, and history which Newfont confronts; other scholars will likely encounter similar difficulty in approaching their own work from the commons perspective.

These problems detract little, however, from the contributions of the book to the fields of environmental and American history. It will prove valuable to anyone concerned with the history of conservation, national forests and resource management, environmentalism, Appalachia, and the American South, and will inform scholars interested in the intersections of environmentalism and other social movements, including environmental justice. Further, activists concerned with contemporary social and environmental issues will find many lessons about working with diverse populations and the importance of paying attention to place and context in their work. Though the boundaries for the commons sometimes remain difficult to locate, ***Blue Ridge Commons*** does what any good history should do: it uses solid observation and empirical research to encourage us to think differently about a topic. In doing so, it inspires us to remember to look for the commons in our own work.

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