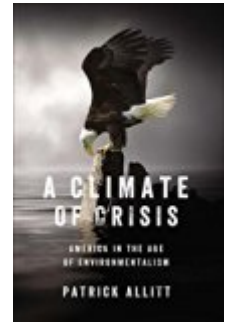


Patrick Allitt. *A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism.* New York: Penguin, 2014. 400 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59420-466-1.



Reviewed by John Spiers

Published on H-Environment (September, 2015)

Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Patrick Allitt's *A Climate of Crisis* offers a sweeping and yet nuanced history of environmental issues and debates since 1945. Allitt's previous scholarship has explored American religious history and the history of conservatism, but he brings a deft touch to a large and complex subject that is likely attributable to his years of teaching undergraduate American environmental history courses at Emory University. Much of *A Climate of Crisis* will be familiar given popular awareness of environmental issues and the existing scholarly literature on the subject. Indeed, Allitt makes copious references to primary and secondary sources, although his references to sources on the political, legal, and social movement facets of the topic could use more development.[1]

The book's main contributions are twofold. The first is its commitment to examining debates over environmental issues where so much other scholarship has studied environmental advocacy and then evaluated its successes and failures. The second is the argument, which is that industrial-

ization caused most of America's environmental problems, but in the process of improving people's lives, it raised expectations of environmental quality and created the momentum and the technologies to rectify most of the problems. Allitt explores a wide range of environmental debates through two perspectives. As he explains, "the pessimistic view, often expressed in crisis rhetoric, was that we were running out of basic necessities and faced a future of constraints, restrictions, even famines" while "the optimistic view, by contrast, was that human ingenuity could deal with the problems thrown up by economic growth and technical innovation" (p. xiv). *A Climate of Crisis* is a decidedly optimistic view of environmental issues in modern America and that is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness.

Unfolding across eleven chapters, the book has two parts. The first examines the rise of environmental concern from 1945 to 1980, beginning with fears of nuclear fallout during the arms race, which Allitt maintains set the tone for later envi-

ronmental debates by producing heated rhetoric, often on both sides, at the expense of reasoned analysis and assessment. During the postwar period, many more environmental issues, including the use of DDT, rapid population growth, suburban sprawl, and rising levels of air and water pollution were brought to the fore by socially conscious thinkers such as Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich, and Ralph Nader. Allitt, like many before him, explains how their work helped mobilize support for a national regulatory regime headed by the EPA and the proliferation of new organizations like the Environmental Defense Fund that joined with older groups like the Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society to form an effective lobbying force in Washington in the 1970s known as the “Big Ten.”

As the environment gained cachet in the 1970s, the list of issues grew. The energy crisis, endangered species, an accident at a nuclear power station at Three Mile Island, and the disposal of toxic wastes in working-class and poor communities like Love Canal all generated legislation expanding the scope of federal policymaking to protect not only human health but also the natural environment for its own benefit. As environmental regulations became more stringent, expensive, and confined to specific cases, a growing number of scientists, scholars, representatives of industry, and journalists—such as former Johnson administration official Ben Wattenberg—started to question the sense of alarm and the costs of the solutions.

The second half of the book examines the increasing diversity and polarization of environmental issues. Chapter 6 begins a familiar story about the Reagan administration’s “anti-environmentalist” agenda to undermine federal environmental agencies, but then moves into a more innovative discussion of “counter-environmentalists” such as economist Julian Simon, writer Wallace Kaufman, and social scientist Terry Anderson. These and other figures criticized environ-

mental leaders for dramatizing high-profile cases, while arguing that “free-market environmentalism” and related tools were more suitable than strict regulations for improving environmental conditions. The impact of this thinking has pervaded environmental policy over the last three decades in the form of public-private partnerships, financial incentives, and other tools of privatization.

The last few chapters explore various issues. Chapter 8, on deep and radical ecology, does a better job than most in connecting ideas with their implementation, showing how the work of Edward Abbey, author of *Desert Solitaire* (1968) and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), tied into the activism of Earth First! and Greenpeace. In chapter 9, Allitt offers an insightful discussion of how a lack of conclusive evidence about global warming led environmentalists to turn to the more diffuse issue of climate change to advance global concerns about the atmosphere. Peppered throughout the last third of the book are discussions of issues such as genetically modified food, endocrine disrupters, and the anti-tobacco campaign as a pollution issue.

A Climate of Crisis synthesizes a large and complex subject to develop an engaging narrative that offers a balanced assessment and a clear interpretation. Focusing on environmental debates over activism allows Allitt to move carefully yet quickly through a dizzying array of topics. He also provides a valuable corrective to the lauding of environmental advocates in the scholarly literature in recognizing their use—in his eyes, overuse—of “crisis” as a way to mobilize support for their agendas. The chronic email blasts from current mainstream environmental organizations are a good example of this.

The main weakness of the book is that it downplays environmental concerns by focusing on how the direst predictions never materialized. Allitt admits he is an optimist and in highlighting the progress made since 1945, he at times under-

states how these results depended on environmentalist ideas and social activism to mobilize support for public policies and other solutions. Environmental leaders dramatized issues, but so did their counterparts, which Allitt could do more to recognize. He also places great faith in American democratic decision-making processes for improving environmental outcomes. While that may be true compared to places such as the former Soviet Union, China, and the developing world, Allitt's work would benefit from referencing literature that highlights the shortcomings of public participation in the late twentieth-century United States.[2]

Minor misgivings aside, *A Climate of Crisis* is highly recommended reading. Undergraduate students taking survey-level coursework and instructors preparing the same, as well nonspecialist academics and secondary school teachers looking to familiarize themselves with the subject, would be well served by this book. So too would a lay public audience. Overall, this book offers a masterful synthesis of environmental issues and debates since 1945.

Notes

[1]. Some examples of missing references include Samuel Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Richard J. Lazarus, *The Making of Environmental Law* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Christopher J. Bosso, *Environment, Inc.* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

[2]. Matthew J. Lindstrom and Zachary A. Smith, *The National Environmental Policy Act: Judicial Misconstruction, Legislative Indifference and Executive Neglect* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 2001); Michael R. Greenberg, *The Environmental Impact Statement after Two Generations: Managing Environmental Power* (New York: Routledge, 2012); and Walter F. Baber and Robert V. Bartlett, *Deliverative Environmental Pol-*

itics: Democracy and Ecological Rationality (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

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

Citation: John Spiers. Review of Patrick Allitt. *A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43938>



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