After more than two centuries of damming and polluting their rivers, Americans are reversing course. Dams are coming down and the migrating fish that astonished early European explorers are returning. Before 1980 only eighteen dams had been removed from US rivers. In the last two decades that number has grown to over one thousand.[1] Although rivers are coming to resemble their pre-industrial state now more than ever, few serious studies of early American waterways exist. Erik Reardon shows that these struggles to preserve riverine ecosystems are much older than river restoration advocates may have considered, and his book hopes to inspire a “broader public awareness” to the potential rivers have for the communities they course through (p. 14).

Managing the River Commons focuses on New England, a region full of steep, rushing rivers that are most famous for launching the Industrial Revolution in the United States. Instead of the mills and canals that most scholars have written about, Reardon points our attention to the fish who preceeded them. The fish runs that migrated upriver each year from the ocean “occupied a central position within the region’s agrarian economy” (p. 5). Much like the Native Americans before them, New England farmers depended on river fish as a source of food and fertilizer. This fact provides the rationale for the book’s thesis: that protecting these fish created a distinct political interest which consistently lobbied for sustainable practices. Reardon interprets the efforts of these “farmer-fisherman” as part of a larger struggle to preserve a moral economy in the face of commercial and industrial forces bent on privatizing and exploiting the earth.

The first two chapters establish the importance of river fisheries in indigenous and early colonial communities, arguing that both created sustainable common-use practices to protect fish. Reardon quotes heavily from other secondary sources and his arguments echo the likes of Jeffrey Bolster who have shown that colonists severely depleted fisheries immediately upon their arrival. Reardon effectively demonstrates that colonists
both noticed that decline and realized they needed to enact conservation measures at least a full century before industrialization.

Chapter 3 reads as a composite biography of four river fisherman from Maine to Rhode Island who lived at the turn of the nineteenth century. Each depended on freshwater fisheries to boost their personal ledgers and overcome long winters or natural disasters. Although all four interacted with the emerging market economy, Reardon interprets the economic activity of these “farmer-fishermen” as directed toward personal consumption or local trade (p. 59). Their way of life came under considerable threat when commercial fishing practices entered rivers in the nineteenth century that netted the salmon and shad for sale in distant markets and enriched an emerging merchant class. Reardon shows that this class of farmer-fishermen ultimately turned to the state to punish unsustainable fishing practices and preserve rivers as traditional commons space.

Chapter 4 charts the high-water mark of yeoman resistance to commercial fishing and industrialization in the early nineteenth century. Unlike the regulators or liberty men who attempted to violently enact their egalitarian interpretation of the Revolution, “farmer-fishermen worked through established legal channels to protect a river commons defined by open and equal access and fair distribution of fish resources” (p. 74). By examining petitions sent to state legislatures, Reardon identifies a proto-environmentalist movement straining to preserve natural resources central to their economic lives. Unfortunately, the legislation that resulted from these efforts were experimental, inconsistent, and prone to rely on local regulation. Although much time is spent on describing these policies, Reardon fails to show that farmer-fishermen enjoyed popular support or were successful in reversing declining river fishery stocks.

The book concludes with the triumph of industrial interests on rivers and the near total destruction of river fisheries. Despite their numbers and conviction that justice was on the side of traditional practices, farmer-fishermen were not as united or wealthy as the industrial capitalist forces arrayed against them. Because they were rarely able to form a “broad-based coalition” (p. 116), farmer-fishermen could not forestall declining freshwater stocks. The final chapter spans from the mid-nineteenth century through to the twenty-first, charting the gradual development of an environmental sensibility in New England and the long, mostly unsuccessful attempts to restore fish runs. The author sees the contemporary environmentalists advocating for dam removal as employing the same arguments as farmer-fishermen from two centuries ago, even though they are unaware of it. The environmentalists who see rivers as spaces of ecological and recreational value are very different from the colonists and farmers in this book, although Reardon suggests that contemporary river advocates owe much to the efforts of these largely forgotten rural farmers.

River restoration is a growing movement in the United States and *Managing the River Commons* shows that historians have much to add to that conversation. River histories rarely extend beyond the nineteenth century, and Reardon demonstrates that most of the important decisions that created the environment we have inherited occurred at that time.

Reardon should be commended for resurrecting the intractable historiographical debates of new rural historians and new labor historians of the 1980s and 1990s. However, it is difficult to see what he is adding to that conversation. Readers familiar with the work of his advisor, Richard Judd (who edits the series at the University of Massachusetts Press that published the book) will find many similar themes concerning rural conservation. Many chapters rely too heavily on other historians, and the omission of more recent environmental history work by the likes of Strother Roberts is glaring.
Reardon consistently argues that farmer-fishermen provided persistent and strident opposition to the exploitation of river resources. The problem is the evidence provided in *Managing the River Commons* does not support Reardon's claim. The only consistent force in the book is Europeans' unsustainable fishing practices and the repeated failure or unwillingness to change course. It is true that farmer-fishermen wanted regulations, but they never went into effect. Central to Reardon's argument is that a certain sector of New England's population strove to preserve a sustainable river commons. The evidence from his own book casts doubt on the notion that such a place ever existed following the arrival of Europeans. Besides complaining about declining fish stocks, the only coherence farmer-fishermen seem to have in this study is their desire to unsustainably farm and fish New England's land and waters as their fathers did. That Reardon's focus shifts in the second half of the book to the region's largest or most remote waterways evinces this fact: fish had long vacated most southern New England rivers by the nineteenth century. *Managing the River Commons* shows that an early conservation ethic existed on America's rivers. However, repeated failure to preserve New England's river fisheries seems to suggest, contrary to Reardon's claims, that such an ethic was neither popular nor felt strongly enough to save the legendary salmon, shad, and herring runs for future generations.

Note


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