



# The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination

By Donald Worster

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## The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination By Donald Worster

Hailed as "one of the most eminent environmental historians of the West" by Alan Brinkley in *The New York Times Book Review*, Donald Worster has been a leader in reshaping the study of American history. Winner of the prestigious Bancroft Prize for his book *Dust Bowl*, Worster has helped bring humanity's interaction with nature to the forefront of historical thinking. Now, in *The Wealth of Nature*, he offers a series of thoughtful, eloquent essays which lay out his views on environmental history, tying the study of the past to today's agenda for change.

*The Wealth of Nature* captures the fruit of what Worster calls "my own intellectual turning to the land." History, he writes, represents a dialogue between humanity and nature--though it is usually reported as if it were simple dictation. Worster takes as his point of departure the approach expressed early on by Aldo Leopold, who stresses the importance of nature in determining human history; Leopold pointed out that the spread of bluegrass in Kentucky, for instance, created new pastures and fed the rush of American settlers across the Appalachians, which affected the contest between Britain, France, and the U.S. for control of the area. Worster's own work offers an even more subtly textured understanding, noting in this example, for instance, that bluegrass itself was an import from the Old World which supplanted native vegetation--a form of "environmental imperialism." He ranges across such areas as agriculture, water development, and other questions, examining them as *environmental* issues, showing how they have affected--and continue to affect--human settlement. Environmental history, he argues, is not simply the history of rural and wilderness areas; cities clearly have a tremendous impact on the land, on which they depend for their existence. He argues for a comprehensive approach to understanding our past as well as our present in environmental terms. "Nostalgia runs all through this society," Worster writes, "fortunately, for it may be our only hope of salvation." These reflective and engaging essays capture the fascination of environmental history--and the beauty of nature lost or endangered--underscoring the importance of intelligent action in the present.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Bancroft Prize-winning historian Worster (Dust Bowl) writes with a deep understanding of nature and its place in human affairs. In these lucid, authoritative essays, he ranges through American history to explore the people, ideas and economic developments that have shaped our attitudes and behaviors toward the land. The ecological crisis, he stresses, is "the crisis of modern culture," brought on by modernity's materialism. Several pieces address the roles of population growth, technology and the market economy in the degradation of the environment. Others exhibit a narrower focus, e.g., how Protestantism helped shape John Muir and other environmental reformers. Worster's examinations of the myths and realities behind our interaction with nature provide a needed perspective.

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From Library Journal

This collection of 16 essays concerns the impact on nature of Judeo-Christian belief, Adam Smith's economic theories, and humankind generally and also offers a historical perspective on the growth of environmental history. A common theme is Aldo Leopold's idea of a "land ethic." Worster shares his own awakening of environmental consciousness, and the essays reflect a diversity of sources and information. Environmental historians must be able to digest and understand data from science as well as other academic disciplines. Worster excels at this task; that, and his forthrightness and willingness to express opinions, make this book a winner. Recommended for both general readers and specialists in the field.

- Patricia Owens, Wabash Valley Coll., Mt. Carmel, Ill.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Sixteen thoughtful essays that examine the present and future implications of America's past relationship to the land--and that draw, as Worster (American History/University of Kansas; Rivers of Empire, 1986, etc.) puts it, a ``picture of the human past that is radically unlike anything you will find in the standard undergraduate history textbooks." In these pieces (some of which appeared originally in academic journals and books), Worster speaks with awe of the ``search to discover a less reductive, less ecologically and spiritually nihilistic, less grasping kind of materialism." In this spirit, reminiscent of Thoreau and Joseph Wood Krutch (one of the author's early inspirations), Worster sounds deeply skeptical over the prospect that a market economy can ever be compatible with responsible stewardship of this country's natural resources: His own preference is for an environmentalism ``that talks about ethics and aesthetics rather than about resources and economics." Not surprisingly, given these views, Worster throws a wet rag over the concept of ``sustained development"; hails an American conservation revolution that views the land as an interdependent ecosystem; and calls for an end to all federal subsidies of western irrigation projects. As an alternative to federal and state management of resources, he speaks eloquently about individual responsibility for the environment. And when he's not warning about our current encroachments on nature, Worster can be especially illuminating about how the environment has affected our past- -pointing, for example, to the Midwest's overemphasis on wheat- growing as a cause of the Dust Bowl crisis of the 1930's; discussing the 1935 Soil Erosion Act, the first comprehensive legislation to preserve the lifeblood of American agriculture; and carefully tracing the evangelical fervor of America's greatest environmentalists to the dissident and missionary spirit of Protestantism. Probably too pessimistic on reconciling conservation with a market economy, but informed and lucid about how we've lost ground in the fight to save our natural resources. -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

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