

Library



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Environmentalism

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First published in 2006 as part of the 'Short History of Big Ideas' series, this volume is a slight updating of the original text to reflect post-*An Inconvenient Truth* developments and to add some additional texts in 'Documents' and a few more recent titles in the 'References' section. In large part, however, its content remains as published in 2006 and there are all too few references to the key events or trends that have occurred since the original text was completed. For example, the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference and responses to it amongst environmentalists, perhaps justifiably in view of the broad sense of lost opportunity which surrounds that event, do not even rate a mention. Perhaps more critical considering del Mar's close linkage between levels of affluence and the degree of concern with environmental issues is the complete omission of reference to the 2009 global economic crash and the impact which that has had on popular and governmental prioritising of environmental policies. However, although some discussion of the immense burden of expectation which was laid upon that conference and the bitter recriminations which the frustration of that expectation unleashed would have been welcome, there is ample material in this slim volume to stimulate in-

tense debate amongst students and prompt some deep soul-searching amongst opinion-shapers, advisers and policy-makers.

As the author rather obliquely sets out in his introduction, this is not an environmental history which explores the physical manifestations of the human-nature relationship, and nor is it a study of particular culturally-driven environmental developments, such as the national parks movement. It is, he states, a book designed to set out in an easily accessible manner the complexities in western cultural attitudes to the environment, a 'recent history of western people's understandings of and sentiments about nature' (p. 4) which examines the factors that have framed the dichotomy between voracious exploitation of and almost religious reverence for the natural world around them. Quickly, however, 'western' becomes primarily transatlantic Anglophone culture, and largely North American at that; Europe provides a hazy background full of unrealised potential and false starts; Australia receives some case-study notice; southern Africa and South America apparently have nothing to contribute to the debate. Given the central role of the United States in the development of preservationist movements in the nineteenth century and the prominence of American authors, theorists and activists in the articulation of environmentalist theory and its progressive politicisation in the twentieth century, this focus is understandable to a degree but creates such an imbalance in the discussion as to render the volume problematical for use as an introductory text outside the USA.

The pace of the text is rapid: the history of the western view of nature down to the eighteenth century is covered in a little over one page. As del Mar has described this book as a cultural history of environmentalism, there are many who will find its Lynn White jr-derived cursory treatment of the Middle Ages and the dismissal of earlier Graeco-Roman views of nature in a single, backwards-looking sentence inadequate as an introduction to the vision of human mastery of their environment which is presented as coalescing through the Renaissance and into the Enlightenment era. Here is where some more history would have been informative and would have set the apparent dichotomy between medieval and modern attitudes to nature into a broader perspective. It would also have helped to redress

the overly Anglophone tone of the text. Montesquieu's philosophical observations on the environment's impact on the human condition, for example, prefigured the question of humanity's relationship with nature that is central to modern environmentalism. His thesis was formulated in a pre-industrial French context but its perception of environmental influences as material conditions of life acquired greater cogency in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the consequences of first British and then wider European industrialisation, urbanisation and capitalism for the majority of the continent's – and the world's – human and non-human populations became more evident.

Moving beyond that point, we are confronted by the polar twin paradox that del Mar argues has lain at the heart of most western attitudes towards nature for the last five centuries; the inverse relationship between the human ability increasingly to control and then transcend nature, and the power to substantially alter – or destroy – their environment, and their parallel efforts to preserve islands of what they have chosen to identify as unspoiled nature. At the stage in our cultural development where the majority of the population ceased to be directly involved in primary food-production, became mainly urban-dwelling, and increasingly employed in industrial production which consumed a growing volume of natural resources, there emerged also amongst the new elites to whom economic development and industrialisation had delivered prosperity and personal social freedom a tendency to idealise nature, to use it as a gauge against which to measure their own humanity, and to view it as a source of spiritual cleansing. This conflicting duality – rapacious exploitation and quasi-mystical reverence – is a dimension of the human-natural relationship which del Mar sees as remaining to the fore in western culture generally, despite generations of environmentalist rhetoric, with one facet or the other gaining temporary dominance subject to the prevailing economic and political conditions. Indeed, as he illustrates, the cultural double standard is so deeply entrenched in western society that the vision of mastery over and security in the face of nature is used to sell environment-threatening SUVs to the same affluent middle-classes who support some mainstream environmental conservation organisations.

The attitudinal dichotomies which this division signifies have long bedevilled environmentalism and expose the fundamental problem of (ir)relevance to the broad public which del Mar argues is the critical weakness in modern western environmental movements. When it comes down to a choice between economic well-being and environmental consciousness, the prevailing western economic and social model weights the decision heavily in favour of the former, regardless of the very real interconnectedness of the two positions. Del Mar has no solutions to offer for this other inconvenient truth; that is a matter for readers of his book to grapple with and respond to. This lack of a 'happy ever after' conclusion makes for an uncomfortable read and confronts us with our individual responsibility for environmental choices which we have for too long sought to avoid making and have abdicated into the hands of others. For that alone, this ultimately frustrating book should be required reading for everyone who claims to be an environmentalist.