

Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action

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First published in 1864, Marsh's ominous warnings inspired environmental conservation and reform. By linking culture with nature, science with history, "Man and Nature" was the most influential text of its time next to Darwin's "On the Origin of Species."

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Richard Reese says

In 1864, George Perkins Marsh published *Man and Nature*, the book that was the granddaddy of the modern ecology movement. Marsh was the U.S. Minister to Italy, and while overseas, he visited the sites of many ancient civilizations. This was a troubling and mind-expanding experience for him.

Wandering through the realms of extinct civilizations, he realized that they were all victims of self-destruction. Marsh saw ancient seaports that were now 30 miles (48 km) from the sea. He saw ancient places where the old streets were buried beneath 30 feet (9 m) of eroded soil. He stood in mainland fields, 15 miles (24 km) from the sea, which used to be islands.

He saw the sites of ancient forests, formerly covered with three to six feet (1-2 m) of soil, where nothing but exposed rock remained. He learned that the removal of protective trees and vegetation led to the loss of topsoil. He learned that irrigation often led to salinization — the soil became so salty that it was rendered infertile.

There wasn't much left of the formerly healthy ecosystems of the Mediterranean basin or the Fertile Crescent — places that once supported large thriving cities. With few exceptions, the modern population in these ravaged lands was far less than the population two thousand years ago. Most of the big ancient cities were either abandoned ghost towns, or desolate shadows of their former grandeur.

In the realm of the former Roman Empire, more than half of the lands were deserted, desolate, or greatly reduced in productivity. Forests were gone, much topsoil had been lost, springs had dried up, and rivers had shrunk into brooks. Fertile lowlands had become malarial swamps.

One unforgettable section in the book described in rich detail the arrival of farmers and herders in the French Alps. They had been driven into the mountains by population pressure. They whacked down the trees and then turned their livestock loose. The grazing animals stripped the land of all grass, and pulverized the scorched soil with their hooves.

Without forest or grass, the land could retain little water. When the wet season came, the water promptly ran off, taking the soil with it. Tiny creeks turned into roaring torrents, and entire fields and villages were suddenly washed away. Some places were reduced to bare bedrock wastelands.

For example: “The land slip, which overwhelmed, and covered to the depth of seventy feet, the town of Plurs in the valley of the Maira, on the night of the 4th of September, 1618, sparing not a soul of a population of 2,430 inhabitants, is one of the most memorable of these catastrophes, and the fall of the Rossberg or Rufiberg, which destroyed the little town of Goldau in Switzerland, and 450 of its people, on the 2nd of September, 1806, is almost equally celebrated.”

Marsh summed it up: “It is, in general, true, that the intervention of man has hitherto seemed to insure the final exhaustion, ruin, and desolation of every province of nature which he has reduced to his dominion. The instances are few, where a second civilization has flourished upon the ruins of an ancient culture, and lands once rendered uninhabitable by human acts or neglect have generally been forever abandoned as hopelessly irreclaimable.”

Marsh was from Vermont, where ambitious Americans were working furiously to replace forests with farms, and villages with industrial cities. There were still vast numbers of passenger pigeons, “which migrated in flocks so numerous that they were whole days in passing a given point.” He thought that farmers spurred their numbers by providing them with abundant grain to nibble on, and by waging genocide on their natural predators, the hawks. Farmers hated hawks because they often snatched their chickens without paying for them.

He was also amazed by the abundance of salt-water fish. “It does not seem probable that man, with all his rapacity and all his engineering, will succeed in totally extirpating any salt-water fish.” He could not foresee the arrival of industrial fishing, because he could not imagine human foolishness growing to such magnitude.

In Europe, he could observe the ruins of many civilizations, and note that this was how most experiments in agriculture ended. In America, he observed the same process in its infancy. Marsh was painfully aware that all of the worst mistakes made in the Old World were being imported to America, with similar effects.

The destruction of Old World civilizations had taken centuries, but Americans had all the latest technology, and their ability to ruin the land was far more efficient. Loggers were busy harvesting lumber in the mountains of New York. Hunters were busy driving the passenger pigeons to extinction. Farmers were destroying the vast healthy grasslands. It was not difficult to accurately predict the consequences of this madness.

The Western world was out of its mind with Perpetual Growth Fever, and everyone cheered for skyrocketing prosperity — nothing was more wonderful! The fever continues to rage today. Marsh lamented, “The fact that, of all organic beings, man alone is to be regarded as essentially a destructive power....” He realized that he was living in a world gone mad. He could very clearly see a horror show that the rest of society denied and disregarded.

Marsh was a brilliant outside-the-box thinker who was fully present in reality. He cared more about the vitality of the ecosystem than for temporary bursts of prosperity. He had a spiritual connection to life. He radiated intense common sense. He sincerely believed that it would be wise to learn from our mistakes, rather than endlessly repeat them. He thought that it would be wrong to remain on a path that would inevitably transform America into a wasteland.

In 2007, friends in California’s redwood country were hammered by floods. Loggers, who were working upstream, vigorously denied that the floods had anything whatsoever to do with their recent clear-cuts. It was a pure coincidence. Amazingly, the loggers were not seized by angry mobs and lynched for spewing such colossal lies. They got away with their crime because the education system has utterly failed to provide society with a competent understanding of ecology and sustainability.

Marsh did a decent job of providing readers with the ABC’s of ecology. Many years have passed since the first edition of *Man and Nature* was published. For the most part, his book has survived the test of time, and remains valid and important. But almost no high school (or university) graduates (or their instructors) would recognize Marsh’s name, or be able to intelligently discuss the history of logging, agriculture, topsoil destruction, and the fatal flaws of civilization — essential subjects that every citizen should understand in elementary school.

Faye says

I wanted to read George Perkins Marsh's, a famous Vermonter, most well-known book as it is considered to have been a significant contribution to the conservation movement. He documents the destruction of several environments but believe mankind could restore them. Marsh promoted management of nature and did not consider the human species to be part of the natural world.

Lauren says

If anyone finds this book, please let me know! The liberry dunna have it!

Mari says

Man and Nature was first published in 1864, so some of its ecological ideas are understandably dated. Yet Marsh's prose is enjoyable (especially the footnotes) and his concern with "the extent of the changes produced by human action in the physical conditions of the globe we inhabit" (3) was prescient.

Kazaan says

This guy was talking about the dangers of global warming and deforestation in 1864. Boy, are we slow to catch on....

Lura Landon says

I'm still reading this, but I think I'm going to have to buy it because it is taking too long as a library book. Good insights already into humanity's intent on altering landscapes and the environment for our own gain.

Stephen M. Theriault says

Vermont native gives a prescient explanation and analysis of the natural world and the physical, ecological and philosophical effects of man's civilization on its health and continued vitality. Way ahead of his time.
