

Deirdre
OTHERWISE

I have completed my review of LOSING GROUND (see below). I would be happy to work with you should you require any edits or changes. I presume you will again send some copies of Otherwise if my review is published. Feel free to send me a list of available books for review for the next issue.

Mark

PS I like the Earth Pledge web location! Good job!

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LOSING GROUND

American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century
by Mark Dowie
MIT Press, 1995 (317 p)
ISBN 0-262-04147-2 \$25.00

Reviewed by Mark J. Spalding

OVERVIEW

I think my biggest criticism of this book is its title. Rather than loss, it should instead describe fighting back from the brink of disaster. This book reads almost like a thriller that keeps you on edge to the end wondering how things are going to turn out, only to learn that it is up to you to figure out the right blend of rage and reform the environmental movement needs to succeed.

This book is a wake up call for environmentalists. It alerts us to our unnecessary failures (or at least compromises) and successes of all kinds. It warns us of our real enemies and the developing positive trends within our movement. The thesis of the book is to seek the truth behind whether the statement by Robert Nisbet that opens the book is to come about: "When the history of the twentieth century is finally written, the single most important social movement of the period will be judged to be environmentalism." Mark Dowie, the author, answers this question with a resounding - maybe, but one touched with optimism.

As Dowie admits, "measuring the success or failure of a social or political movement is a subtle and difficult task involving the assessment of largely subjective, unquantifiable trends and developments". However, this is exactly what he attempts to do by examining the history and potential futures of the environmental movement in the United States.

The first thing I did when I received this book was to go through the index and look up the issues and groups I had worked with to see how accurate was the author's account of events. The bottom line is that while I might quibble here and there over facts (or, more likely, the interpretation of the facts by someone interviewed by Dowie), I was impressed. He does focus more on the faults and later year failures of mainstream environmental groups and does not give them enough credit for their youthful years of activism, enthusiasm and success. However, for the most part, Dowie has concisely and accurately summed up the history of American Environmentalism in a way that will give context to someone new to the environmental causes and reason for reflection for those who have been in the fight for many years.

Dowie takes many major environmental groups, the big national groups, to task for becoming fat and lazy, co-opted by business and corrupted by power and access in Washington. He contrasts this with the growth and development of new strains of thought - new ecologies, the rise of new grassroots organizations, together with the introduction of truly social values into environmentalism (such as environmental justice). Dowie convincingly predicts that the environmentalism of the last decade, one of compromise, will be replaced by a more uncompromising force. The Fourth Wave, as he calls it, will treat environmental issues like the social issues they are and will not make trades or compromises. His analogy is that the civil rights movement did not say 'we will let you continue to discriminate at the workplace, if you will incrementally eliminate discrimination in the school house'. This type of trade would be unthinkable, but is arguably just the sort of trade-offs that have been made by national environmental groups in seeking environmental improvement.

How can this be? The Republican majority in Congress keeps telling us that the environmental movement has gone too far and needs to be reigned in. If environmentalism is to become a non-compromising social movement, this sounds like a collision. However, two factors indicate there will be no way for the Republicans to effectively resist environmental progress for much longer. First, Congress is wrong, Dowie argues. Environmentalists did not overreach, they could and should have wielded more power than they did. They made unconscionable compromises that did not truly protect the environment. Second, Congress is playing into hands of the new grassroots environmental movement by shifting decision making to the local level. At this level, Dowie suggests, every dump site, every incinerator will be blocked by Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) groups who will just say no. Once this spreads, the ability of industry to pollute will be severely limited and will become extremely expensive, thus giving the corporate world an incentive to change its ways.

THE HISTORY

Chapter 1 - The Environmental Imagination

The opening chapter starts with an adequate overview of the history of American environmentalism, discussing the major thinkers such as Muir, Leopold, Pinchot etc. which lead to the early 1900s divide between conservation and preservation interests. Dowie then inexplicably leaps ahead in time to the sea change of the 1960s from "nature" to "pollution" as the result of the impact of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*.

Dowie then recounts the launch of the modern environmental movement which occurred after the first Earth Day in 1970. This launch was also marked by the landmark passage of the National Environmental Protection Act of 1970. At this point, environmentalism became “an amalgam of resource conservation, wilderness preservation, public health reform, population control, ecology, energy conservation, anti-pollution regulation, and occupational health campaigns”. Unfortunately, this modern environmental movement was mostly white, male, middle-class, non-partisan leadership. In other words, a rather non-threatening movement.

Chapter 2 - The Culture of Reform

Dowie begins this chapter by noting the shift, by the late 60s, to lawyers and other professionals, who began to focus on litigation and legislation, and away from the activists. This includes the rise of mainstream national environmental groups which have focused on litigation and legislation as well as ecosystem management and education (thus neglecting human health, toxic waste and technology).

As a result, the environmental movement became a political powerhouse. During the 1970s, 23 major federal environmental acts were signed into law and many successes were achieved - land was protected, water was cleaned up and lead and PCBs in human blood streams decreased. At the same time, the mainstream’s lawsuits demanding enforcement of the federal acts began and resulted in other successes. Unfortunately, in its legislative lobbying activities, the nationals sold-out; in exchange for incremental change they made compromises often criticized by grassroots environmental organizations.

By 1993, the money was big, \$2.3 million/year was being given to environmental organizations. Approximately 70% of this money went to 24 mainstream organizations. The donors and foundations began to shape the groups’ agendas; not always for the best. The same groups also developed a dependence on initially successful direct mail campaigns (successful in raising money and for education), which are now beginning to lose their effectiveness. Direct mail also shaped the groups’ activities - an environmental campaign that draws donations can win out over one that has more ecological value. Other donors were corporations, sometimes those with bad environmental track records seeking to improve their reputations by gaining seats on environmental organization boards. Squandering an opportunity to gain independence, all this big money was spent on expansions, rather than on funding endowments.

Chapter 3 - Fix Becomes Folly

In the 1980s came the Reagan era counter-environmentalism; and the big mainstream environmental groups blinked. Reagan managed to stall environmental progress for a decade. The national groups lobbied to defend their legislation and litigated to enforce it, but no real lasting environmental protection was achieved. Environmentalism began to lose its bipartisanship at this point as Reagan Republicans began labeling environmentalists as elitists and enemies of economic progress. Reagan also successfully started the whole misguided cost-benefit analysis that the current Republican regime wishes to extend. The mainstream environmental groups followed a policy of habitual compromise on legislation and watched as litigation strategies became less effective as

Reagan packed the courts with his conservative appointments to the bench. The weakening of the main methods of legislation and litigation thus weakened the movement generally.

Chapter 4 - Antagonists

“Even the most polite and accommodating political movements create their own adversaries”. According to some, environmentalism, by its nature, threatens our notions of private property - the most important part of being an American. This ideology, developed by the Heritage Foundation and financed primarily by extractive enterprises such as lumber and mining companies has resulted in the creation of a number of antagonists. The first, is simply that industry can outspend environmental groups on lobbying Congress and the ideology gives them cover. Second, the Sagebrush rebellion was begun to protect grazing and mining rights on federal lands in the western U.S. This “rebellion” died out when it became apparent that the subsidies the cattlemen and mining companies were receiving made operations more profitable than if they were given the land.

The Wise Use movement on the other hand, which is also funded by extractive enterprises is more dangerous because it seeks to steal away support for environmental concerns by appealing to the grassroots level. It seeks to destroy the environmental movement and save free market capitalism from the harm done to it by environmentalists. One of the Wise Use movement’s strategies is to use the Constitution’s takings clause, again following the lead of Heritage Foundation ideology. Wise Use asserts that environmental laws and regulations diminish the value of land by limiting its use - which constitutes a taking and requires the government to compensate the person harmed. The mainstream response is limited. Some of the same corporations that support the Wise Use movement are now sitting on the boards of the national environmental groups. Control of the environmental movement is going to have to shift to the smaller NIMBY groups to counter the Wise Use movement community-by-community.

Chapter 5 - The Third Wave

It is in this chapter that Dowie really scolds the mainstream national environmental groups for their naive, short-sighted conciliation with industry and government. He calls this reform environmentalism. The key elements of which include market-based incentives, demand side management, technological optimism, non-adversarial dialogue and regulatory flexibility. Dowie is also critical of the mainstream’s acceptance of quantitative risk assessment as an acceptable tool for environmental management and policy. Worse yet, the third wave has brought in some of the worst multinational corporate polluters as supporters for environmental organizations, thus further threatening the independence and integrity of many mainstream environmental organizations.

Fortunately, not all environmental groups agree with Third Wave environmentalism, so a heated debate has arisen. Dowie cites some grassroots groups who feel that “third-wave environmentalism represents nothing less than a massive capitulation to polluting industries.”

Chapter 6 - Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is the key to the future. Justice may be the common thread running through all environmental agendas which will make them all link up and make environmentalism the most important social movement of the twentieth century. This will broaden the movement to include urban pollution, toxics issues, and human health, rather than a movement more focused on land, nature, and animals. Most importantly, says Dowie, the environmental movement has been mostly white and may now begin to include women and people of color.

In this chapter, Dowie traces the horrible story of Love Canal and the making of an environmentalist out of Lois Gibbs. Love Canal and other grassroots actions relate directly to the modern environmental justice movement and Dowie argues they have changed American Environmentalism forever. "Today, grassroots anti-toxic environmentalism is a far more serious threat to polluting industries than the mainstream environmental movement" and during the last 5 to 10 years it has been more effective. The basic premise is that by stopping the industry that pollutes at every turn, the cost of doing business will become high enough that corporations will "decide to recycle wastes, reclaim materials, substitute non-toxics in their products and eventually change their processes of production." These grassroots groups are crucial to the development of "community right-to-know laws, citizen enforcement provisions in federal and state legislation, and local input in waste-cleanup methodology and siting decisions".

Dowie also reviews the statistics that slowly confirmed the "massive inequities in environmental degradations and injustice in the policies used to correct them". Communities of color were targeted for toxic waste dumps. Meanwhile, cleanups focused on white neighborhoods. This helped make many people of color environmentalists overnight. The environmental justice movement began to put pressure on the mainstream groups to change their hiring practices, board memberships and program focuses - and more recently to chastise grant-making organizations for supporting organizations lacking in diversity.

In this chapter, Dowie discusses another event, which may become as momentous as Silent Spring or Love Canal. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit made the environmental justice movement a force to be reckoned with. It clearly added equal rights and human rights to the environmental equation. "Whatever happened, the environmental and civil rights movements need each other, and both will be the stronger for whatever coalitions they can build." However, Dowie admits it will not be easy to bridge the gap between those just trying to survive and those middle-class whites who seek to preserve wilderness and wildlife.

Chapter 7 - Faded Green

By 1990, the mainstream environmental movement had lost its steam. Litigation was not doing as well, thanks to Reagan's judicial appointees. Lobbying success was slipping because it was being met 10 to 1 by industry. To top it all off, direct mailing had begun to encounter list fatigue. The movement lost funding and had to go through downsizing and re-evaluation (albeit too superficial in many cases). However, this was all forgotten in 1992 when an environmental administration was voted into the White House. Many environmental staffers were appointed and there was great hope placed in the new

President. Unfortunately, by the next year the hope had all soured, but not before the mainstream Washington groups let too much slip by and passed up opportunities to press for significant change. They had turned a blind eye to Clinton/Gore's lack of follow through on campaign promises. Meanwhile, according to Dowie, Clinton used his "reverse access" to environmental groups to use them to his advantage for NAFTA and other environmentally questionable projects.

THE FUTURE

Even though Dowie only discusses the future in one chapter (and an epilogue) it deservedly takes up almost a quarter of the book and reaches the crescendo call for change. If anything, this chapter should be longer and more detailed. That said, this is the part of the book I will re-read over and again.

Chapter 8 - The Fourth Wave

Dowie sees a new era of American Environmentalism. One in which many ecologies are brought together by the thread of justice. One in which the many ecologies are not compromised in trade for incremental change. This view is for logical evolutionary change, not revolutionary radical change. The third wave dies out of its own inconsistencies. The national mainstream groups adapt, die or diminish in importance. The grassroots environmentalists ride in on a powerful, uncompromising fourth wave that encompasses many views and more importantly contains within it a multiracial, multiethnic, multiclass and multicultural diversity that equates with America. "At that point, environmentalism will begin to become a truly 'social' movement."

Dowie does recognize that the environmental movement is still in search of a defining manifesto, one that will encompass many theories:

- Deep Ecology
- Social Ecology
- Bioregionalism
- Feminist Ecology
- Spiritual Ecology
- Native Ecology
- Sustainable Development

Dowie also discusses the key players in this new dynamic:

- Splinters from the mainstream groups
- The Left
- The Greens
- True democrats
- Human Rights Activists
- Ecological Economists
- Makeover Mainstreamers
- Philanthropy Reconsidered

Epilogue - A Reason (or Two) for Hope

Finally, after all his analysis, Dowie comes forward and says he is optimistic. He almost apologizes, implying he has set up such a dark scenario that you can not possibly have reached the same conclusion. In this, he makes a mistake, but the Epilogue is nice anyway because it ties up some loose ends. Two sentences say it all to me: "It is said that we all exist within an ecological construct called 'the environment' and that we allow compromise of the environment at our own peril. The environmental movement is in crisis, as this book attests, but it very much alive. And far from its nucleus, on the outer edges of its vast penumbra, there are signs of rejuvenation." (and the last sentence in the book) "The American environmental movement has only begun."

The USEFUL

In the appendix of this book are three items which are incredibly valuable for future reference, not to mention greater understanding of three key statements of philosophy - the environmental justice point of view, the mainstream visions, and the antagonist's agenda:

- The Principles of Environmental Justice adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991.
- Michael Fischer's The Sierra Club Centennial Address of 1992.
- The Wise Use Agenda

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