

Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, eds. *Reconstructing Conservation: Finding Common Ground*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003. xiii, 417 pages.

This book is proof that conservation stands at a crossroads. It is also proof that such a pivotal moment can be healthy and progressive rather than so much destructive devil-dealing. The editors have collected essays on the future of conservation from some of the best and brightest among us. The germ of the collection is a "ground-breaking" seminar held at the University of Vermont in 2001. The presenters at that seminar represent an impressive array of scholars from a huge variety of academic disciplines and conservation organizations: would that more seminars were organized in such a fashion; would that more books were this interdisciplinary in nature.

The anthology begins with an insightful introduction that sets the stage for a mature attempt at understanding, addressing, and accounting for what some have referred to as the "deconstructivist" (or "reconstructivist") critique of conservation; a sometimes heated critique beginning at least in the mid 1990s and focused on the conceptual rethinking of certain beloved conservation concepts, "wilderness" perhaps most notably. It would, however, be mistaken to think that even the majority of the essays in this book are embroiled within this debate. They are, rather, thoughtful essays that are prompted in part by the moment in conservation history that this critique has triggered. Unlike other writings in this debate, the essays in this collection avoid false characterizations, name calling, and dogmatically entrenched defenses. No matter which side of the "po-mo-de-con" (or "po-mo-re-con") divide the authors fall on, they all amazingly seem to recognize the power and importance of this critique; nearly all see this as a crucial turning point for conservation rethinking and none of them fall in to the dogged entrenchment that we sometimes see from traditional defenders of the received view of conservation or wilderness.

Given the quality and importance of the individual essays, a snapshot of each is certainly worthy of the bulk of my review. The book is divided into three main sections. Section one, "Nature and Culture Reconsidered," begins with an essay by historian Richard Judd who offers an intriguing suggestion that eastern U.S. conservation efforts are "matured" as compared to those in the western U.S., given the eastern realization and acceptance of the fact that "nature . . . has a history" inclusive of humans. Western U.S. conservation continues to be haunted and hobbled by a wilderness mentality whereby nature is devoid of (significant) human impact. Historic preservation specialist Robert McCullough follows nicely and traces the parallel between the "deconstructivist" critique in natural resources and those same critiques in cultural resources. The next two essays offer critiques of the received view of wilderness and restoration efforts; the first within a U.S. context and the second from a non-U.S. perspective. In a nicely crafted essay, sociologist Jan Dizard presents a strong (one might even say "fervent") critique of the

traditional approach to wilderness thought and wilderness preservation. Dizard adeptly uses the case studies of the Buffalo Commons suggested by the Great Plains Restoration Council and the Chicago Wilderness Project to issue a serious warning about large scale restoration efforts. Perhaps the central problem with wilderness preservation and restoration efforts is, in Dizard's words, a failure to recognize "that not only are there different ways to 'love nature,' there are also different natures to love" (p. 50). Switching to Central America, anthropologist Luis Vivanco offers a thoughtful critique of traditional Western conservation and wilderness preservation theories and strategies as applied to the non-Western world. Vivanco suggests that conservation "has generated hostility because conservationists approached rural peoples not as equals with whom to negotiate but as obstacles and destroyers to be removed from the landscapes" (p. 67). Critical of Costa Rican conservation efforts, he offers those in Oaxaca, Mexico as a successful alternative.

Section two, "Reweaving the Tradition," opens with agricultural ethicist Paul Thompson who holds up "a renewed and revitalized agrarianism" (p. 78) as a necessary (although at times it seems he is suggesting it is a sufficient) condition for a properly reconstructed conservation. Volume coeditor Ben Minteer suggests that a reconstruction of conservation ought to focus not on non-anthropocentrism (sorry about the double negative) and the intrinsic value of nature, but instead on the "pragmatic" and anthropocentric (although he fusses over the term *anthropocentric*, suggesting the bulkier "pragmatic conservationism" instead) work of such historically neglected (at least in the conservation arena) thinkers as Louis Mumford, Patrick Geddes, and Ebenezer Howard. Although in my opinion non-anthropocentrism is not the dangerous subterfuge that Minteer makes it out to be, the essay nicely portrays the contributions of Mumford, Geddes, and Howard. Historian Susan Flader next traces the development of leading historical conservation figure Aldo Leopold; focusing specifically on Leopold's own development as a community citizen and activist, in turn providing commentary on an important component of any reconstructed conservation. Political scientist Bob Pepperman Taylor delivers a helpful account of the conservation successes and shortcomings of Helen and Scott Nearing, suggesting that social and political awareness are crucial for the spread of any reconstructed conservation (a sentiment echoed by others in the collection):

The lesson of Nearing's life . . . is that any reconstructed conservationism, . . . needs to avoid the two fundamental elements of Nearing's Progressive inheritance that led him away from democratic engagement and commitments: his view that issues about nature are principally technical in character and therefore best solved by experts, and his (usually unself-conscious) assumption that political conflict and disagreement and compromise are signs of corruption and injustice, rather than being the natural stuff of democratic politics. (p. 143)

Next, law professor and conservation writer Eric T. Freyfogle serves up a powerful critique of individualism in the forms of land ownership and market forces. Freyfogle urges conservation to “regain its communitarian grounding” (p. 147) or premise itself on what Freyfogle calls “an ethic of community” (p. 146). Freyfogle’s work here goes right to the core of our environmental woes; suggesting that “environmental degradation is a symptom of a flawed culture” (p. 146) and, therefore, “conservationists should push for cultural change” (p. 151). Setting the bar for conservation efforts and successes high, and constructively using the thought of Leopold and Wendell Berry, Freyfogle describes some of the factors that lead us away from a proper culture of conservation and attempts to reweave both our torn cultural tradition and the fabric of conservation. Conservation biologist Curt Meine pushes for a reconstructing of conservation that views “conservation and environmentalism with fresh eyes: as a dynamic amalgam of science, philosophy, policy, and practice, built upon antecedents in the United States and in cultures and traditions throughout the world, but responding to conditions unique in human and natural history” (pp. 170–71). This reconstruction includes a fresh accounting of the conservation arm of the progressive movement, an attempt to come to grips with the distinctions and similarities between conservation and environmentalism, and a demonstration of what was both lost and gained as conservation gave way to environmentalism.

Section three, “New Methods and Models,” begins with philosopher Bryan Norton. Although Norton makes some (I believe) dubious claims about the structure of the discipline of environmental ethics, and misreads (I believe) certain foundational episodes in environmental history, and creates (I believe) unnecessary divisiveness within environmental ethics, he does make strides toward providing conservation with a new (although somewhat confusing, at least to me) model for environmental problem solving. Offering a surprising and hopeful accounting of the wealth of values that people attach to nature, social scientist and volume coeditor Robert Manning presents the results of a sociological study done on the environmental ethics, values, and attitudes of people in the northeastern United States. Urging a more inclusive and pluralistic ecological economics in any conservation reconstructing, social scientists David Bengston and David Iverson demonstrate how neoclassical economic approaches to conservation both “systematically undervalue our dwindling natural heritage,” and “exacerbate conflict in natural resource management by ignoring or marginalizing deeply held values that people care most passionately about” (p. 238). Environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott presents a thoroughgoing and insightful history of ecological paradigm shifts and, even more importantly, maps that history on to corresponding shifts in the philosophy of conservation. His essay ends with a defense of his “biodiversity reserve” idea and the admonition that a “viable twenty-first century philosophy of

conservation would consist of an integration of central features of the three twentieth-century schools of conservation, informed and transformed by the contemporary flux-of-nature paradigm in ecology" (p. 261). Biologist Stephen Trombulak fulfills the title of his essay by providing "an integrative model for landscape-scale conservation in the twenty-first century."

The final section of the book, "Reconstructing Conservation Practice," contains essays from a number of important conservation practitioners and practitioner theorists. Stressing conservation as a way to conjoin both social and environmental health, natural resources professor Patricia Stokowski uses the effects of gaming in small Colorado mining towns to illustrate the role and importance—and some of the stumbling blocks—of community-based conservation efforts. Brent Mitchell and Jessica Brown present a persuasive defense of community-based conservation efforts throughout the world. Suggesting that "conservation is lost without people connecting at a personal level to land and resource" (p. 307), the essay is a spirited defense of local or regional level conservation efforts and for "communities rather than government agencies [to take] the lead" in on-the-ground conservation work (p. 297). Rolf Diamant, J. Glenn Eugster, and Nora Mitchell utilize stories of community-based conservation successes that make your heart swell, your eyes tear, and your mind believe that things really can change for the better. In a wonderfully written essay, George Perkins Marsh biographer David Lowenthal employs a series of tenets borrowed from Marsh to help direct our current thoughts about reconstructing conservation. In a poster-worthy conclusion, Manning and Minter lay out "Twelve Principles for Reconstructing Conservation" insightfully gleaned from the collection *en toto*.

If there is any shortcoming to the collection, it is a lack of even a greater variety of voices. Let me be clear, this anthology and the symposium that spawned it are far more inclusive than nearly any other "green" anthology on the market; both the symposium organizers and sponsors and the volume editors and publishers are to be congratulated for this inclusiveness. However, if conservation is truly to be reconstructed, I personally want to hear also from the writers and poets, to consider American Indian (and other) voices, to be sure to include more scholars and practitioners from west of the Mississippi where some of our most ferocious battles are being fought, and to include more thoughtful scientists (emphasis on "more" not "thoughtful"). I offer this comment not as a critique of this book, but as a goal for conservation literature in the future. In fact, this collection moves us down the right path. My hope is that the rest of us can swiftly become trail-wise enough to follow.

Michael P. Nelson\*

---

\*Department of Philosophy, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844; email: mpnelson@uidaho.edu.