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Book Review by Rupert Darwall

# THE GREENING OF AMERICA

*A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism*, Patrick Allitt.  
The Penguin Press, 336 pages, \$29.95



**I**N JANUARY 1991, 18-YEAR-OLD SCOTT Lancaster was jogging a few hundred yards from his Idaho Springs, Colorado, high school when he was attacked and partially eaten by a mountain lion. Local authorities expected an anti-lion backlash...but it never came. One of Lancaster's friends commented at his memorial service that to be eaten by a lion was "kind of fitting for him.... He was a real outdoorsy guy."

The incident exemplifies the problematic triumph of environmentalism in modern America. Mountain lions were killed as undesirable predators for much of the 20th century, but in 1971, after environmental groups crusaded to reverse their dwindling numbers and habitats, Governor Ronald Reagan signed into a law a moratorium on hunting them in California. The legislation reflected a transformation in attitudes—though not so drastic as to save the lion that killed Lancaster, which was shot three days after the attack.

Environmentalism has had more success than any other recent ideology in requiring

America's people and businesses to change their thinking and their behavior. Patrick Allitt, professor of American history at Emory University, writes in his valuable new book that taking environmental obligations seriously has become mandatory for anyone in political life, even though the meaning of those obligations is as vague and sprawling as the ones advanced a century ago in the name of Progressivism.

**A**S HE SHOWS IN *A CLIMATE OF CRISIS: America in the Age of Environmentalism*, environmentalism embodies an ascending hierarchy of concerns. At its base are threats to human health—the greatest issue for voters. In the middle is a desire to preserve nature, in the form of cherished landscapes, desolate wildernesses, and diverse flora and especially fauna. Few people had heard of the northern spotted owl, "that little furry feathery guy" according to President George H.W. Bush, before its habitat was threatened by unrestricted logging. At

the apex of environmentalism's hierarchy is an ideology profoundly hostile to industrialization. Environmentalism applies the concept of "alienation," borrowed from Marxism, to humanity's relationship with the natural world, alleging that modern industrial civilization threatens our survival and risks the planet's future: too many people consuming finite resources, too much pollution destroying fragile natural balances and damaging the Earth in ways beyond reckoning or repair. Reversing the Industrial Revolution holds little attraction for most Americans, however, who continue to value the quality of life produced by it, and have no desire to abandon the expectation that their material circumstances will continue to improve as they have for two centuries.

This hierarchy helps explain why, in the 1980s, the U.S. led the world in crafting an international agreement on phasing out ozone-depleting substances, such as those used in aerosol spray cans. Americans were concerned about the health threats, and since DuPont



had already developed viable substitutes for chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), life could carry on as before without them. By contrast, global warming, which Allitt calls “the strangest crisis in American history,” poses no discernible threat to human health. Even frequent appeals to the threat of species extinction, with images of polar bears on melting ice floes, haven’t been enough to move the needle of public opinion. Unlike CFCs, hydrocarbons have no viable substitutes. Our failure to decarbonize is not due to sinister economic interests, as environmentalists prefer to believe, but to a plain and massive reality: since the Industrial Revolution, humans have come to depend on fossil fuels.

**A**LLITT DEMONSTRATES THAT THE BEST way to put America’s current environmental situation into perspective is to study its history. In 1962, Rachel Carson helped launch the post-war environmental movement with her book *Silent Spring*. Yet, the environmental problems actually affecting Americans then—the smog of southern California and parts of the industrial Northeast, the destruction of Lake Erie and its vacation industry, the visible degradation of local environments—were not those described on the pages of that bestseller, which told a horror story of rural and suburban America poisoned by chemicals, chiefly pesticides and fertilizers used by farmers.

*Silent Spring* shows that environmentalism is most successful when it links the loftiest of environmentalism’s concerns, alienation from nature, with the most urgent, human health. In her book, Carson tied the chemicals prevalent in industrial-scale farming to the disappearance of animals and birds (“a spring without voices”) and to Americans’ health, falsely claiming that these “elixirs of death” were the cause of a growing cancer epidemic. In fact, among all environmental causes of cancer, tobacco smoking dwarfs everything else in its impact on mortality and morbidity—a fact hard-core environmentalists were reluctant to accept.

This “new mood,” as Allitt describes it, led Americans to demand a more careful approach to the environment. Air pollution, which had caused so much anxiety in the 1950s and ’60s,

was “drastically reduced in the next four decades, restoring the atmosphere even in cities whose population and traffic volume continued to increase.” But, at its worst, “the new environmentalism stimulated a mood of apocalyptic thinking.”

“There will be famines,” the lepidopterist Paul Ehrlich prophesied in 1967; by 1980, the U.S. and Western Europe would be unable to feed themselves. As Allitt observes, “humanity has a long history of making predictions about the future, nearly all of which have turned out to be wrong.” A 1975 report from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) warned, in tones of “repressed alarm,” that an Ice Age in the near future “was not impossible.” During the last phases of the Cold War, this fear became part of the peace movement’s argument when astronomer Carl Sagan popularized the notion of “nuclear winter.”

**T**HE 1970S ALSO SAW RISING ALARM about acid rain. In response, the Carter Administration set up an acid rain assessment program. In 1980, an NAS report called acid rain—with no apparent irony—“a new silent spring.” Studies had already shown that neighboring lakes often had sharply different pH levels, and a study of ancient lake bed samples suggested that in many cases the acidity had been there for millennia. In a precursor to the climate science wars, however, this was a forbidden conclusion. The study’s author, Edward Krug, was attacked by the deputy head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Only when threatened with litigation did the EPA relent and apologize.

After spending \$540 million, the assessment program report in 1990 broadly backed Krug’s conclusions. Acid rain from industrial sources was a nuisance rather than a catastrophe. By then it was too late. The Bush Administration had already designed a regulatory regime for sulfur dioxide emissions, tackling the non-cause of the non-problem in the amended Clean Air Act signed into law in 1990.

Hard scientific categories were also subject to flux. In the 1960s and ’70s, academic ecologists assumed ecosystems were inherently stable, which meant any instability was caused by exogenous events, of which human

activity was the most common and damaging. This view began to change in the 1980s. Environmental scientist Daniel Botkin believed that his peers clung to the notion of equilibrium for psychological reasons. Abandoning those beliefs, Botkin wrote, “leaves us [scientists] in an extreme existential position; we are like small boats without anchors.” The new ecological thinking implied that policy makers should no longer assume stability to be either normal or ideal. Indeed, it showed that questions as to what is natural and what is the proper role of human agency in natural processes go far beyond science’s capacity to answer, taking us into the domains of aesthetics, philosophy, and even theology.

Environmentalism gave rise to some spectacularly bad legislation. The 1980 CERCLA (Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act) Superfund law established the arbitrary principle of retroactive damages for environmental harm, even if firms had acted within the law at the time. If only one of a number of original polluters were identified, it could be made liable for 100% of the clean-up costs. Allitt writes that the cost “per life saved” by Superfund clean-ups ranges from \$340,000 at the worst sites to \$77 billion at the least contaminated. Following the establishment of a “loss and damages” stream in recent rounds of the U.N. climate change negotiations, Superfund creates an ominous global precedent for American businesses and taxpayers.

Perhaps the real crisis is within environmentalism itself. Over the last two decades, it has lost contact with ordinary Americans’ concerns about human health and scenic vistas. Environmentalists have, instead, recast their entire mission around global warming. For 18 years, however, global temperatures have held steady, widening the gap between computer-model predictions and observations. Even if environmentalists turn out to be right—or rightish—about future warming, they’ve become the worst imaginable advocates for preserving the environment. Perhaps, the environment is too precious to be entrusted to environmentalists.

*Rupert Darwall is the author of The Age of Global Warming: A History (Quartet Books).*

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