

Natural States

The Reality of Water and the "Environmental Imagination"

By Ron Steffans

In the annals of environmental writing, more so perhaps than in other genres, the reader is often invoked as an actor alongside the writer. From the discovery journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, we often read about the environment in order to follow the scientist who discovers new worlds or the journalist who exposes exploited resources and peoples. Or we're asked to follow the activist en route to social change. Or we're led along a path toward the personal insight that arises from a communion with the world outside our well-crafted ego.

These latest books on the environment fall within the continuum. *Whose Water Is It?* provides a comprehensive look at the politics and economics of the global water crisis; *Natural States* explores the role of local- and state-level political processes as a key locus for forming the modern "environmental imagination"; and *Even Mountains Vanish* invites the reader on a journey of personal hope, finding where extinction plays out amidst the survivors of the harsh world of plateaus, mountains, and tundra.

While only *Whose Water Is It?* focuses solely upon water, each of these books touches upon our lives amid water. Like universal phone service, the luxury of indoor plumbing and clean (if not always safe) drinking water has allowed Americans to assume that faucet-flowing water is a natural phenomenon, a fluid so cheap as to appear free. Fly into the Phoenix airport and count the aqua pools. Count the families who swim separately as the desert rivers and aquifers are sucked lower. As David Suzuki and Amanda McConnell note in their essay "A Child's Reminder":

A person in an industrialized country uses between 350 and 2,000 liters of water daily, whereas a person living in rural Kenya, for example, may use two to five liters.

The authors gathered in *Whose Water* discuss water as a primary element. From the myth of water wars (in a 50-year study, there were four times more water treaties negotiated than actual conflicts) to the reality of water mismanagement, we learn what we should already know: 10,000 to 20,000 children die each day from waterborne disease. The World Health Organization estimates that a billion people (20 percent of the planet) do not have access to clean drinking water. Yet based on the coverage by most media outlets, you are excused if you didn't notice that

the United Nations declared 2003 the International Year of Freshwater.

"Examples of the tragedy of the commons," writes attorney and law professor Robert Glennon,

include fouled air, polluted water, overgrazed public lands, clear-cut public forests, overharvested fisheries, and overhunted buffalo. ... For groundwater, the benefit from increased pumping—each new straw in the glass—goes entirely to the pumper, but the costs of environmental degradation are shared by all citizens who use the aquifer and by society at large.

For environmentalists, this is a familiar frame of seemingly unsolvable issues that pit local activists against government even as government succumbs to privatization interests. To the credit of editors Bernadette McDonald and Douglas Jehl, the

experts collected here have managed the watersheds and fought the good fight, and often won. Mike Dombeck, former chief of the U.S. Forest Service and director of the Bureau of Land Management, praises the good water of New York City because it comes from protected forestlands; he's joined by those who've studied desertification from Phoenix to China and who've fought for economically viable solutions that blend "hard" solutions, such as public-private infrastructure partnerships, with "soft" solutions that change the way individuals and communities share the water they have.

With water and with watersheds, we face the challenge of our time: to meld the separate, selfish selves into community and to honor communities from one border to the next. The scientists

and scribes of the environment often write of hazards self-inflicted yet committed anonymously and en masse, creating a literature that must meld naive connectivity—the self amid the splendor—with a self-aware pessimism.

The authors of *Natural States* argue that such resolution of self and community into political action relies upon the successful creation of an "environmental imagination." Richard Judd and Christopher Beach focus on key water issues in Oregon and Maine that helped shape the national water-quality and environmental movement in the early 1970s, arguing that the regional activism that bridged urban escapism and rural values provided the momentum to feed a larger societal rhetoric.

These campaigns protected open space, wild rivers, and wild coastlines in Oregon and Maine, but not without cost (such as Oregon's continuing rural-urban divide on conservation issues). Yet, with effort, we can remember the shared coalitions that accomplished so much in the past.

The environmental imagination gained permanent political standing in these divisive campaigns to defend regional nature icons.

Whose Water Is It?

The Unquenchable Thirst of a Water-Hungry World

Edited by BERNADETTE McDONALD & DOUGLAS JEHL

Preface by Former Senator PAUL SIMON
National Geographic Society, \$25.00 cloth,
ISBN 0-7922-6238-7

Natural States

*The Environmental Imagination
in Maine, Oregon, and the Nation*

RICHARD W. JUDD & CHRISTOPHER S. BEACH
Resources for the Future Press, \$32.95 cloth,
ISBN 1-891853-59-7; \$19.95 paper, ISBN
1-891853-60-0; 1616 P St NW, Washington, DC 20036

Even Mountains Vanish

Searching for Solace in an Age of Extinction

SUE ELLEN CAMPBELL
University of Utah, \$17.95 paper, ISBN 0-87480-771-9

Coastlines, mountains, and other distinctive landscape features provided powerful symbolic antidotes to the multiple problems of urban life. ... In the fight to secure pastoral and wilderness icons, the environmental imagination moved into mainstream American political discourse, where it achieved a place as permanent as America's love affair with rural places.

So how do we practice this environmental imagination? Whether you select federal or state controls, market forces or individual ethics, the protection of shared resources inevitably relies on the individual's compassion for place. Beyond the politics of water and the analysis of discourse, we must seek the places that matter. Such is the job of SueEllen Campbell. Her words are the least polemical or analytical, yet with poetry we can find the roots of action.

"For most of my life, I have dreamed of traveling far, far way," she writes, and in *Even Mountains Vanish* she travels after ptarmigan and marmots in the alpine tundra of her Colorado backyard; she follows cranes in New Mexico and tracks the tundra north into the Arctic. She wonders if marmots dream. In her travels, in her backyard star watching, and in the deaths of family and the turmoil of our times, Campbell faces

darkness and light. They whirl together until they blur, they layer into convoluted whorls. One afternoon in the Far North, two caribou spin in a tight circle, one pale in winter's coat, one dark in summer's. This is not just a metaphor.

In her loss she sees a world, an environment, enlivened by imagination. In a blue velvet chair she places the loved ones she's lost until a lonely room is filled with spirits. She decides,

This winter I'll summon every spirit I can imagine ... not only human but all living creatures, not only the recent dead but the long vanished and we who are still alive. Maybe I'll invite them all to join me on a boat—we'll all fit, since spirits like these don't need much space—and then we'll set out to float for a while on the waters that mirror the sky.

Such is the world these writers show us. Fitting the spirits into our boat, we float upon the water that proves our sole salvation. ■

REVIEWER: **Ron Steffens** teaches journalism and writing at Southwestern Oregon Community College and works summers for the National Park Service. He received the 2003 Oregon Literary Arts Fellowship for Creative Nonfiction.