

Nature's Voice: A Review of Environmental Literature

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By Sean McWay

I started this essay with the intention of crafting a new chapter, a 21st century update, to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. What I soon found was that this task is fundamentally impossible. There can't be another *Silent Spring* because it isn't 1962 anymore. The context has changed. This train of thought brought me the realization that the environment of a writer is inherent in his work. There is no separating a piece of writing from its publication date. Over time, writing styles have changed, media have changed and public opinions have changed. So, written works not only offer us insight into the writers themselves, they offer a glimpse into the atmospheres and social conditions that these writers worked in.

Going back to the beginning of environmental writing with whom I will call America's first conservationist, John Muir, we see a man in a different country than we know today. His words are passionate, descriptive and awe-struck. The strong spiritual overtones speak to his upbringing, in which his father, a pastor, pushed Muir to memorize nearly the entire Bible by age 11. But the effectiveness of his words – he played a large part in the founding of Yosemite and Grand Canyon national parks, in addition to countless other public lands around the West – suggest that his audience was receptive to this reverent message. In "A Wind-Storm in the Forests" he describes the storm-battered trees in rather human terms:

We hear much nowadays concerning the universal struggle for existence, but no struggle in the common meaning of the word was manifest here; no recognition of danger by any tree; no deprecation; but rather an invincible gladness as remote from exultation as from fear.¹

A modern audience would simply not receive these words the same way that Muir's audience heard them. Moreover, I will claim that these words would not even be written today. Environmental writers today speak of our problems, our failures and what we need to do to fix what we have disturbed. Muir comes from an entirely different angle, using the power of language and the raw beauty of nature to inspire audiences into protecting one of the few things we all hold in common – the land.

From these beginnings of conservation in the U.S., Aldo Leopold arose. Now one of the most widely respected figures in conservation, Leopold did much more than compose his famous descriptive work *A Sand County Almanac*. As a young man, Leopold worked for the U.S. Forest Service in several areas throughout the southwest, most notably the Gila Wilderness of New Mexico. He spent all of his energy on game management for hunting and was a prominent hunter of wolves. But when he saw how overpopulation of mule deer could destroy the native vegetation, he started to develop the more holistic ideas of land use and management for which he is famous. In a speech given at a conservation meeting in 1947, he outlined his idea that he called an ecological conscience: "Decent land-use should be accorded social rewards proportionate to its

social importance.”² The idea of an ecological conscience is a good look at what Leopold is really all about – responsible land-use. This powerful idea has not found a place in our capitalist economy, but Leopold also firmly believed in the ability of private landowners to maintain healthy practices. His message was pragmatic and universally relevant. Like Muir, he spoke about the land as something that all of us share in common and need to preserve.

The positive messages expressed in the early 20th century largely disappeared in the second half of the century. Environmental writing turned much more reactive and alarming. A powerful example of this is Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (1968). Abbey has a powerful ability to describe his surroundings with the utmost attention to detail. He sees and accepts the natural world exactly as it is and in the introduction to his book states: “I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact.”³ From this perspective, he is brutally critical of people who don’t see the world as he does. He hates tourists, pet-owners, the government (including the National Park Service), ornamental plants and anything that isn’t in its natural, true state. He stands as a powerful defender of nature, and anyone who reads his work is forced to pick sides: To Abbey, you are either with him or against him. This is a stark contrast to the earlier work of Muir and Leopold, but it fits with the times. In the late 1960s, opinions were polarized and the debates were fierce. His passion and intolerance spoke to a growing group of environmentalists.

Rachel Carson’s catalogue of writings, most notably *Silent Spring* (1962), also exhibits this shift toward reactionary writing. Her task of aggregating articles, anecdotes and science produced one of the most influential environmental texts ever written. Her passionate voice and strong criticisms made for a book that became a bible for some and made enemies with others. This tone, however, would not have been nearly as successful without the social turbulence of the 1960s. *Silent Spring* did not create the environmental movement, of course, but it did provide direction to an increasingly conscious and discouraged people. Carson’s frustrations and vision for the future were a perfect fit to the building unrest in society.

Comparing Carson’s work to a more modern take on investigative environmental writing captures this point. In 1995, Charles Little wrote *The Dying of the Trees* in much the same format as *Silent Spring*. He put together extensive research, interviews with experts and science into a comprehensive look at forest decline in North American forests. This book was met with little enthusiasm or attention. He tried to include his own strong voice in the work but it really lacks the fire that Carson brought to environmental problems. Rather than being demanding and specific, it feels like an educational overview. It is not because the issues Little presents are less important than the poisoning of our flora and fauna that Carson lamented; In fact, most of the issues he raises are the result of more contemporary ways we are poisoning our world. *The Dying of the Trees* never had popular appeal because Little failed to present the issues as relevant to a modern audience. He didn’t bring the problems back to people. Realistically, a lot of people do not care about protecting nature merely for the sake of preservation. In the urban world we live in, the intrinsic value of the natural world is easily lost. Writers need to give their work an extra level of insight in order to have wide appeal. I believe that this is done by explaining how the environmental issues relate directly back to people.

One way to relate the environment back to human life is through philosophy. Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest and religious scholar, wrote for 40 years about the failing relationship between humans and the earth. According to Berry, “our most urgent need at the present time is for a reorientation of the human venture toward an intimate experience of the world around us.”⁴ He sees this as vital not only for the sustenance of the earth, but also for the nurturing of our spiritual lives. This reference back to daily human life makes his writings much more focused and reachable for his religious audience. In somewhat similar fashion, Wendell Berry (unrelated) preaches the

values of agrarianism, which “promises a path toward wholeness with the earth, with each other, and with God, a path founded upon an insight into our proper place within the wider universe.”⁵ Wendell Berry raises questions and analyzes our current state to inspire a sense of longing in the reader to be “whole” with the earth. He is reverent toward nature in much the same way as Edward Abbey, but he keeps a sense of connecting that reverence to a more fulfilling life. When connecting more fully with nature could actually improve a reader’s spiritual life, the message speaks louder, in both these cases.

Gaining mass appeal for any written work is a challenge today. We are overloaded by information in all forms. A modern environmental work needs a creative approach to that human-focused message we see in most contemporary writing. Richard Preston mastered the integration of narrative into environmental writing with his 2007 book, *The Wild Trees*. In the midst of the captivating story of Steve Sillett and his adventures as a canopy scientist, readers learn the botany, evolutionary history, anthropogenic history and scientific value of coast redwood trees. His writing is descriptive, non-demanding and focused on person and place rather than any opinions he may have. The result is an educational, scientific book that is reachable for an extremely broad audience. While remaining completely inoffensive, it instills a sense of awe and care for nature in the reader. In another example, Olivia Judson’s science blog on nytimes.com, she takes everyday pieces of biology and explains the evolutionary science behind them. This is not limited to environmental concerns, and she broadens the scope to basically anything that will tie science to modern life – the yeast that makes bread (and beer), the placebo effect, mass migrations, to name a few. This blog captures what a modern environmental writer can do. It is universally accessible, relevant, uses multimedia and is very personal. Judson always gives a sense of how the natural processes she explains relate to a modern person.

These trends lead me to wonder if demanding, alarming works can still survive. With the rise of journalism that merely affirms a person’s views rather than raising new questions, it can be hard to trust passionate points of view. They seem, to us, polarized. (Would a modern Rachel Carson be waved off as an impassioned cuckoo with an agenda?) In response to this, writing has tended toward merely disseminating information and letting the reader decide what to do with it. This is a problem because big issues of today – notably, climate change – lack a written work that really rallies people together. So, the issue is left in the two separate circles of science and politics, and the result is our current mess of opinions that lack scientific basis. I think that for a real movement to change the direction our earth is heading, writers need to take advantage of the tendency of people to care much more passionately about the well being of our own species than any other. It isn’t enough to say that the forests are dying. It isn’t enough to say that our planet’s biodiversity is shrinking. But people will listen to the message that says millions of people will be displaced across the world from rising seas, famines and floods will encircle the earth and natural disasters will increase in intensity and abundance. This book is missing from a comprehensive review of environmental literature.

1 Muir, John. “A Wind-Storm in the Forests.” *The Century* 1894. Print.

2 Leopold, Aldo. “The Ecological Conscience.” Conservation Meeting. Minneapolis. June 1947. Address.

3 Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968. Print.

4 Berry, Thomas. “An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality.” *The Sacred Universe* 2009.

5 Berry, Wendell. *The Art of the Commonplace*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002.

Print.



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