

Bushwhacking to the Source: The Most Influential Nature Book You've Never Read

John Elder

MAN AND NATURE, PUBLISHED BY GEORGE PERKINS MARSH IN 1864, has long been acknowledged as a monument of environmental literature. In 1931 Lewis Mumford memorably called it “the fountainhead of the environmental movement,” while in 2003 William Cronon stated that it “stands right next to *Silent Spring* and *A Sand County Almanac* by any measure of significance.” But it also appears to be the case, as Editor Dave Mance remarked after a recent *Northern Woodlands* conference, that many more people acknowledge Marsh’s importance than have managed to finish reading his book.

The book’s difficulties are easy enough to identify. It’s a densely argued tome of 465 pages and 656 footnotes, synthesizing historical and scientific references from numerous languages into a daunting account of ecological destruction and a stern call for social and economic reform. It is not, and never has been, light reading. Furthermore, as Marsh’s biographer and editor David Lowenthal writes, “*Man and Nature* is a stylistic mélange, at once pedantic and lively, solemn and witty, turgid and incisive, objective and impassioned. A casual glance may discourage: one sees long sentences, interminable paragraphs, Latinate words, circumlocutory phrases, thickets of commas.” Marsh’s exposition is rarely elevated by the lyrical language or propelled by the narrative structure that make those other environmental classics by Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold so engaging.

Not surprisingly, the passage of a century and a half makes certain aspects of *Man and Nature* feel dated. The title itself puts some readers off, and many of Marsh’s references in the text and in footnotes are to scientists, controversies, and political figures that, while prominent in their own day, are now generally forgotten. The topical and contemporary texture that made his arguments so compelling to readers in his own day—inspiring the founding of national parks and national forests in the United States and around the world—can make perus-

The George Wright Forum, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 242–247 (2015).

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ing certain sections of his book today feel like turning the pages of yellowing newspapers. For historical or literary scholars such an archival experience can, of course, be intriguing, but that's not always so for other readers.

Nevertheless, there are several ways in which present-day readers may enjoy Marsh's chewy style and, in doing so, also experience the power and timeliness of his vision. I was a teacher of English and Environmental Studies for 37 years at Middlebury College. And it sometimes happened, in a class including readings from Basho, Wordsworth, or Oliver, for example, that a student would come up after the first or second meeting to confide that he or she just didn't like reading poems. My response was always "Not yet!" Poetry, like classical music or jazz (or wine or coffee, for that matter) will for some need to be a cultivated taste. Attributes or flavors that initially seem strange or off-putting gradually become prized through their association with other, more appealing, elements. In the same way, a reader who spends enough time with *Man and Nature* will come to see that the robustness of its prose is essential to the power and vividness of its arguments. As Lowenthal notes, "direct and evocative passages abound. The striking metaphor, the scathing denunciation, the barbed precept, the polished rhetorical summation—in these devices Marsh excelled, and they infuse the work with life."

Here's a passage from Marsh's Chapter I, "Introductory," that is in fact a single extremely complex sentence. It exemplifies Lowenthal's reference to a "thicket of commas"! At the same time, it conveys the stern, prophetic voice that gives the book its enduring power: "The earth is fast becoming an unfit home for its noblest inhabitant, and another era of equal human crime and human improvidence, and of like duration with that through which traces of that crime and that improvidence extend, would reduce it to such a condition of impoverished productiveness, of shattered surface, of climatic excess, as to threaten the depravation, barbarism, and perhaps even extinction of the species." The starkness of this assertion is reinforced both by the lofty parallelism of Marsh's language and by the profuse details of the preceding discussion. Within the half-dozen prior pages Marsh ponders the extinction of mammals and birds by human beings, changes to the climate caused by deforestation, and instances in which "parts of Asia Minor, of Northern Africa, of Greece, and even of Alpine Europe" have become lunar desolations because of human action. The same few pages include an extraordinarily lengthy and detailed footnote comparing 19th-century wastefulness with the more balanced and sustainable lives of pre-agricultural and pre-industrial peoples.

Many passages, including the one cited just above, are most effective when read aloud (which is, of course, also true of poetry). Reading the footnotes aloud, as well, helps passages that might have appeared ponderous or slow on the page to shine with Marsh's excitement, energy, indignation, and eagerly shared examples. Once one begins to encounter his prose in this way, it becomes clear that the long sentences and many asides express not an impulse for formal and authoritative control so much as an almost ungovernable sense of urgency. He wants to share the broad, potentially restorative picture of ecological and social health to which he himself has come after arduous studies criss-crossing disciplinary, national, and linguistic boundaries. Marsh reminds me of a certain type of magisterial, old-school college lecturer—not always so good, perhaps, at give-and-take or at bearing his audience in mind,

yet capable of holding forth rivetingly on a topic about which he is deeply learned and with which he is totally obsessed.

To appreciate Marsh's writing, then, one must learn to do so in part because of, rather than despite, his extravagant and crowded style. Making our way through his prose may sometimes feel like bushwhacking up an overgrown slope. Distinctive pleasures can arise from such an off-trail outing. The trees through which we struggle can suddenly open out around mysterious stone walls and cellar holes; the tangled syntax of such woods may be punctuated by glacial erratics and italicized by rusty choker chains. Details that may never have been noticed by travelers on a smoother path now thicken our sense of the surrounding forest's voice and story. After such laborious progress, we may be more ready to appreciate the immense vistas glimpsed from ledges above the tree-line.

Elm Lot, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, Woodstock, Vermont. Photo courtesy of Rolf Diamant.



Another lesson I learned while teaching at a liberal arts college was that practically any topic benefits from being considered in historical terms. Marsh's intricate style and his undergrowth of footnotes may both be harmonized with the broader thematic, scientific, and political contours of his book within the context of his day. For this reason I'd like to propose that any reader coming to *Man and Nature* for the first time simultaneously plunge into Lowenthal's magnificent biography, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*. Appreciative readers of the recent, acclaimed biographies of Adams, Hamilton, Jackson, and Lincoln will be equally fascinated by this account of Marsh's eventful and admirable life, in America and abroad.

One especially gripping aspect of the biography was Marsh's revulsion at the Gilded Age that followed the Civil War and the collapse of Reconstruction. Having been an ardent supporter of abolitionism and the Union, Marsh nonetheless chose to remain in Europe during the final two decades of his life because of a sense that America had become, in Lowenthal's words, "a morass of materialist greed." His objection to these developments reflects a conviction that the essential duty of a democratic government is to promote social unity and ecological health. He may have been deeply disdainful of Southern claims before the Civil War and the subsequent excesses of Gilded Age plutocrats and their tame politicians, but he was never cynical about the potential benefit of rigorous analysis and dialogue. His book is a strenuous attempt to focus civic conversation on the urgent necessity for certain changes. The parallel between the Gilded Age and the widening income disparity and unseemly political influence of tycoons now further reinforces Marsh's pertinence to a reader in our day.

In many other ways, too, Marsh's writings on environmental degradation remain as resonant as they were in 1864. A vivid example appears in a section of Chapter III, "The Woods," that is entitled "General Consequences of the Destruction of the Forest": "The face of the earth is no longer a sponge, but a dust heap, and the floods which the waters of the sky pour over it hurry swiftly along its slopes, carrying in suspension vast quantities of earthy particles which increase the abrading power and mechanical force of the current.... Gradually it becomes altogether barren ... and thus the earth is rendered no longer fit for the habitation of man." The combination of such specificity with the dire future Marsh foretells was arresting for his contemporaries. No one had made such predictions before or related them to such a wide range of observations, research, and historical evidence. They were, in the words of Wallace Stegner, "the rudest kick in the face that American initiative, optimism, and carelessness had yet received."

Marsh's jeremiads against deforestation can often be incorporated directly into today's ongoing dialogue about climate change. Unrestrained cutting at a local level and wide reliance on fossil fuels can both lead to urgent problems on a global scale. If Marsh's tendency towards heavy documentation sometimes slows down the flow of his work, it also conveys qualities of integrity and transparency that make his arguments hard to refute. In a country where partisan think tanks and corporate-funded ad campaigns willfully blur the dangers of climate change by making ungrounded assertions or simply fabricating their own facts, we could use more footnotes in our environmental dialogue. One of his most important attri-

butes as a writer comes in such encouragement to get serious about the problems we face rather than trivializing them as merely political issues.

Mumford called the book “conservation’s fountainhead” in order to claim it as an enduring *source* for environmental stewardship. Not only is Marsh a stern and exacting ancestor for those concerned about the health of our planet today, he also proposes specific, hopeful alternatives to the destructive habits he decries. In both these ways, he has contributed to an indispensable stream of thought. As Robert Frost advises his readers in “Directive,” with its own account of a New England pilgrimage through challenging terrain, “Your destination and your destiny’s/A brook that was the water of the house./Cold as a spring as yet so near the source....”

While *Man and Nature* is from start to finish a trove of arresting insights and examples, one more recommendation I would offer for those coming to this masterpiece on their own would be to concentrate initially on just two of Marsh’s six chapters—Chapters I, “Introductory,” and III, “The Woods.” In addition to containing some of Marsh’s sharpest denunciations of deforestation, they return again and again to the possibility of ecological and cultural renewal. What people have damaged they may also, acting together and guided by science, begin to repair. As he says in Chapter I, “In reclaiming and reoccupying lands laid waste by human improvidence or malice ... the task ... is to become a co-worker with nature in the reconstruction of the damaged fabric which the negligence or the wantonness of former lodgers has rendered untenable.” Just as awareness of Marsh’s historical context helps align his proliferating examples with his broader concern for political reform, so too does this pairing of danger and opportunity focus and unify *Man and Nature*.

“The Woods” is the longest chapter in Marsh’s book, the most fully documented, and the most central to his own life story. One reason this topic was so important to Marsh is that he was born in Woodstock, Vermont, in 1801, as an era of relentless deforestation was beginning. While growing up, he saw the slopes of nearby Mount Tom logged off, burnt, and eroded, the nearby streams clogged and their fisheries destroyed. Many years later, when he was an American diplomat in the Mediterranean (first in Turkey and then in Italy), his linguistic skills and archaeological interests led him to investigate the sites of ancient civilizations that had been destroyed as a direct result of their own deforestation. Across the millennia, he describes these episodes of ancient carelessness and waste as warnings about the ecological and cultural damage in his own day. All of his scientific documentation stems from this sense of prophetic urgency: unless governmental policies and economic practices are changed, collapse will surely follow.

Just as Marsh’s condemnation of “depravation,” “barbarism,” and “extinction” in his own era’s practices resounds through “The Woods,” this chapter also contains an equally powerful prescription for how they might change: “We have now felled forest enough everywhere, in many districts far too much. Let us restore this one element of material life to its normal proportions, and devise means for maintaining the permanence of its relations to the fields, the meadows, and the pastures, to the rain and the dews of heaven, to the springs and rivulets with which it waters the earth.”

How might we find the strength of mind and steadiness of action to undertake such a change? Marsh believed that for Americans of his own day one key was to cultivate a less restless relation to the landscape. As he states in the same section of “The Woods” from which the previous quotation came, “The face of physical nature in the United States shares this incessant fluctuation, and the landscape is as variable as the habits of the population. It is time for some abatement in the restless love of change which characterizes us....” Settling down could foster a greater capacity for attention to the natural world and a deeper affiliation with our surroundings.

Such an emphasis circles back to the concreteness and particularity of Marsh’s style. Little things in nature count and are easier to register if we can curtail our incessant mobility. Within this context, Marsh’s book can be seen as an act of gathering. Through the attentiveness it exemplifies, we may be able to escape from ignorant destruction based in the oblivious selfishness of “crass materialism.” Today, we are faced with cataclysmic changes deeply rooted in our hyper-mobile and consumerist society. It has thus far proven extremely difficult to make the required changes in most Americans’ way of life. But both in his own analysis and in the remarkable influence he had on a world-wide conservation movement, Marsh encourages us to try harder. In reading *Man and Nature* we are not only returning to an environmental landmark. We are reminded of the virtues of humility, balance, and restraint, which will be needed as we go forward. With such a profound reorientation we could recover the source of health and meaning and, as Robert Frost writes at the end of “Directive,” “Drink and be whole again, beyond confusion.”

[Ed. note: This article will appear in the spring 2016 issue of *Northern Woodlands Magazine*, and has been made available to *The George Wright Forum* by the generosity of the Center for Northern Woodlands Education. The mission of the Center for Northern Woodlands Education is to advance a culture of forest stewardship in the Northeast and to increase understanding of and appreciation for the natural wonders, economic productivity and ecological integrity of the region’s forests. www.northernwoodlands.org]

John Elder, 19 Mountain Street, Bristol, VT 05443; elder2348@gmail.com