



Preserving the Nation: The Conservation and Environmental Movements 1870 - 2000

Thomas R. Wellock

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In the popular imagination, the roots of environmentalism lie in actions undertaken at the beginning of the twentieth century to conserve the nation's natural resources and preserve its scenic wonders. To some extent, those who have chronicled environmentalism have reinforced this perception, often writing about the heroes who helped create national parks and save forests rather than considering fundamental trends. Although most make some mention of reformers who stressed curbing pollution and urban clean-up in the period after 1945, environmental histories rarely integrate the three strands of the movement into one comprehensive study.

In *Preserving the Nation*, Thomas Wellock explores the international, rural, and industrial roots of modern environmentalism that emerged in the last half of the nineteenth century—three related movements in response to a rapidly expanding economy and population that depleted the nation's resources, damaged land in rural areas, and blighted cities. The first group favored the conservation and efficient management of natural resources for production. The second, the preservationists, sought to protect scenic and wilderness areas and to sustain the spirit of the nation's pioneer heritage and virility. The third group, the urban environmentalists, sought reform to control industrial pollution and retard urban decay. Politically powerful and widely admired, resource management overshadowed the other two movements until the 1950s. After World War II, the two less-powerful strands of the movement, preservationism and urban environmentalism, wove into one, as the accelerating effects of affluence, scientific discovery, Cold War concerns, and suburbanization led the public to value outdoor amenities and a healthy environment. This renamed "environmental" movement focused less on efficient use of resources and more on creating healthy ecosystems and healthy people free of risks from pollution and hazardous wastes. By 1970, environmentalism enjoyed widespread popular support and bipartisan appeal.

What all three movements always shared was a common recognition of the limits of America's natural resources and environment, a belief in preserving them for generations to come, and a faith in at least some government environmental action rather than relying purely on private solutions. Not only does the history of these movements bring to light much about the expanding role of government in environmental regulation and the growth of the modern American state, but a look at environmental campaigns over the course of the twentieth century reveals a great deal about the racial, gender, and class divisions at work in the ongoing efforts to preserve the environment.

Accessible, insightful, and highly affordable, *Preserving the Nation* makes an ideal core text for use in courses in Environmental History as well as thought-provoking supplemental reading for Twentieth-century America and the U.S. survey.

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