BOOK REVIEWS

by
Mark Lutes

Evernden, Neil, **The Social Creation of Nature** (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)

The **Social Creation of Nature** challenges readers to examine their most basic assumptions about 'nature,' and one's place in the struggle to reconcile the human and non-human worlds. In bringing these assumptions to light, the book integrates an amazing variety of writers and perspectives. It contains some unpredictable twists and turns, and some readers may be put of by its extreme eclecticism and its refusal to acknowledge disciplinary traditions and intellectual boundaries. In this regard the bibliographical essay at the end of the book is very useful, and helps to situate many of the authors referred to in the book.

The book takes as its starting point the proposition that "It seems unlikely that we can hope to 'save nature' without first ascertaining just what it is we think we are attempting to save" (p. xii). From this deceptively simple point, the book embarks on a wide-ranging exploration spanning five centuries, and bringing together developments in Western art, literature, philosophy and science, in order to trace the genealogy of the modern conception of nature. In the process, it presents a compelling case for the power of language and conceptual frameworks to influence human relations with the world. The dominant understanding of nature, says Evernden, is at the root of our current 'environmental crisis,' and the only hope he holds out for resolving this crisis is by fundamentally rethinking our ideas of nature.

In fact, Evernden discusses not one 'nature,' but two. The distinction between them is crucial in the book, and to distinguish them he uses

> the convention of speaking of 'nature' when referring to the great amorphous mass of otherness that encloaks the planet, and to speak of 'Nature' when referring specifically to the system or model of nature which arose in the West several centuries ago (p. xi).

It is the second 'Nature' which is most familiar to the modern Western industrial society, and which has been widely criticized in the environmental thought literature for being resourcist, reductionistic, dualistic, mechanistic, and otherwise deficient. The bulk of this book is taken up in tracing the emergence of this concept of Nature over the past few centuries, followed in the final chapter by an exploration of a more satisfactory understanding of nature.

Evernden identifies three key stages in the process by which European views of the natural world changed over the last few centuries, corresponding roughly with the medieval period, the Italian Renaissance, and 17th century empiricism. In medieval society it was common to think of nature as having subjectivity and meaning--as being full of symbols which existed independently of human consciousness of them, the comprehension of which required an empathetic understanding. However, towards the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the Renaissance our modern idea of Nature begins to emerge. The meanings and subjectivity once seen in nature are "scoured" clean and appropriated to humans, leaving only the material world bound by mechanistic laws. Thereafter,

> (t)he empathized world of the medievals is dismissed as impermissible in the abstracted system called Nature. That system, relying as it does on the strict limitation of the permitted contents of Nature, requires a deliberate cleansing ... (and) the exclusion of all 'human' qualities (p. 55-6).

The propagation of this new view of Nature was no simple task, says Evernden, and was accomplished in part by the Renaissance art of Leonardo da Vinci and others, who showed landscapes and nature as composed of simply literal and ordered objects, often as a background for the meaningful human subjects, as in the Mona Lisa.

The Renaissance created the conditions for the next stage in the historical creation of modern Nature.

This was the empiricist tradition, with its almost exclusive attention to the surface appearances of things in the world. This restriction of nature to surface appearances corresponded to the humanist tradition of valuing 'human' qualities to the exclusion of all others, and the reification of the dualism between the human and the non-human.

> The increasingly strict division between human and nature provides a sense of secure separateness and assures that the only apparent path to knowledge of nature will be to gaze across the gulf at the visible surfaces of otherness. But perhaps the most apparent feature of the world has become the gulf itself, which constitutes a kind of moat that appears to protect while actually confining: we may be less besieged by otherness than imprisoned by self-worship (p. 87).

The view of Nature thus historically constructed in the West, as rule-bound materials with no meaning or value but that given it by humans, forms the basis of virtually all present day discourse about 'the environment.' And since all parties to the debate share the same underlying assumptions of Nature, it is not surprising that we seem doomed to keep repeating the same patterns of environmental destruction, with only new names for the chemicals and problems. Thus, says Evernden,

> ... if we would protect nature from the perils of the 'environmental crisis,' we must first acknowledge that those perils arose as a consequence of conceptual imprisonment. If we would save the world, we must set it free (p. 130).

Setting nature free would involve rethinking and perhaps eliminating the category of Nature, and developing a vocabulary for discussing the world that recognizes and appreciates 'wildness' with all its strangeness and mystery--as the 'wholly other' or the 'ultrahuman.' For, as Evernden concludes the book, paraphrasing Thoreau, "in wildness is, indeed, the preservation of the world" (p. 124).

Evernden presents a fundamental challenge to the worldview of modern industrial society, and also to that of environmentalism, which he says adopt fully the conceptual categories of humanism and of Nature as resource to be managed wisely:

> The wild other disappears the instant it is demystified and saved as a managed resource. ... and to 'save' in this context, means little more than to stack canned goods on a pantry shelf, neatly labelled 'preserved for future generations' (p. 131).

The book provides a useful cautionary tale about the hazards of uncritically using the dominant vocabulary and conceptual framework when attempting to challenge dominant institutions. There is a message here that environmentalists should take to heart.

However, my main criticism of the book is that it can potentially invalidate almost any political or activist project of challenging environmental destruction. As the book shows, it is exceedingly difficult to discuss what is being destroyed without relying to some extent on familiar vocabularies. To wait until a fully adequate vocabulary is developed and propagated widely enough to penetrate the dominant institutions, even assuming this would actually happen, would mean not addressing these issues for some time. But perhaps changing our view of nature is not only an intellectual or conceptual project, but a political one.

The book suggests that our 'environmental crises' are a consequence of our conceptual frameworks and vocabularies. While there is undoubtedly a correlation between our consciousness and actions in the world, there is not a simple cause and effect relationship. To identify our forms of consciousness as the root cause of environmental destruction ignores or relegates to a derivative status the historical, political and economic conditions under which particular forms of consciousness emerged. It obscures the question of how the dominant Western world-view emerged, whose interests it served, what political and economic forces supported and resisted it, what institutions embodied and perpetuated it, and how an understanding of these forces can lead to change.

In its account of the rise of the current view of Nature the book tends to gloss over or ignore the political, economic and social forces which are implicated in the changing views of nature. I strongly suspect a connection to the emergence of urban centres and trade in the middle ages, the shift of power and hegemony from the rural nobility and clergy to the urban middle classes, the decline of land as the basis of wealth, and the development of industrial production in Holland and England. I would also suspect that these changes were not independent of, or simply resulting from, changing views of nature, but that changes in both areas were mutually reinforcing, and embedded in political struggles raging at the time. If so, the changing conceptions of nature were at least as much the result of institutional changes as the cause. While the changing views of nature provided the convenient conceptual underpinnings for the human domi-

nation of the material world, they cannot be considered the cause.

If the conceptual imprisonment of nature so convincingly described in the book is the result of, or at least embedded in, the social transformations leading to the modern Western industrial society, then it is not clear that attempting to change our ideas of nature will yield the desired solution. If the dominant ideas in a society are strongly influenced by the social order (as a historical materialist approach would suggest) then it will be exceedingly difficult to change these ideas without simultaneously changing the social institutions that create and reproduce these ideas. This requires resistance, political struggle, organizing and activism. Whether this goes on under the banner of environmentalism or some other more appropriate label is not insignificant, but more important is that it happens. **The Social Creation of Nature** can provide valuable insights and direction for participants in this struggle.

McKibben, Bill, **The End of Nature** (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1990).

I first read **The End of Nature** about two years ago, and it probably influenced my choice of climate change as a research topic. I was convinced by the basic theme of the book; that global warming meant the loss of something that could not be accounted for in socio-economic terms, or even in measurable ecological terms. The idea that we are losing the 'natural' element in nature--that which is independent of human interference-- is a powerful one, and certainly resonated in my own experience, both growing up surrounded by forests in various stages of regeneration, and as an environmentalist arguing with the forestry companies that clearcutting does not exactly duplicate the effects of natural occurrences like fires and budworm infestations.

However, on first reading the book, and in subsequent re-readings, I was increasingly annoyed by the presentation of his argument. He worked his central point to death (so to speak), then further abused his metaphor by talking about the 'second end of nature.' This book is not so much a lament, as the dust jacket says, as a whine; a droning on and on about all the contradictions of living an affluent North American lifestyle, full of cliches but lacking in any real insight into the causes or the problem he describes. Because he eschews any real analysis of the forces behind the problem, all we are left with at the end is frustration. I don't think every book about environmental problems has to have an upbeat ending, with ten easy steps to redemption, but it should advance the discussion in some direction. Other than naming the problem in a distinctive way (a very worthwhile goal in itself), McKibben contributes nothing, and he could have accomplished his goal in a much shorter article, without all the repetitious hand-wringing.

Mark Lutes is enrolled in the PhD program in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University where he is researching the role of language and discourse in the policy debates around the issue of climate change. Mark is particularly fond of the vernal equinox, chicken wings and maritime humour. He is also the author of the "Fable for the New Age."