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Review: Living Through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism

By Paul Wapner

Reviewed by Byron Anderson

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Wapner, Paul. *Living Through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010. xii, 252 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262-01417-1, US \$21.95, cloth. Printed on recycled paper.

Wapner, Associate Professor and Director of the Global Environmental Politics Program at the School of International Service at American University, believes that the wildness of nature, the basis of American environmentalism, is coming undone. People are consuming the wildness of nature, wholly transforming it, and altering it beyond recognition. The human imprint is everywhere and there is no longer a clear distinction between human and nonhuman domains. Yet, the end of nature need not be the end of the environmental movement, but rather an opportunity to liberate itself from a nature-centered perspective and “...devise strategies for creating ecological and social health in a world where it is impossible to separate humans and nature” (p. 12).

Wapner formulates a dream of naturalism versus a dream of mastery dichotomy, and from there strives to find a middle path between the two dreams. The dream of naturalism, the desire to fully integrate with the natural world and the dream of mastery, the impulse to control nature, clash in many ways, for example, philosophically and politically, as well as in policies and practices. A middle path embraces a politics of ambiguity by admitting that we do not know everything but can come to understand what is important. We cannot separate humans from non-humans nor should their fates be dealt with separately, but rather both should be acknowledged and respected. A postnature environmentalism goes against much of American environmental thinking, especially preservation, conservation and sustainability. Rather, postnature accepts the end of nature, lives with uncertainty, and goes about creating a livable world. Wapner believes that, “nature is not some other-than-human world that we find but rather part of the world we make” (p. 17). Passively reducing our consumption will not save us. Rather, Wapner urges us to “take an active role in shaping our world, but also respect the wildness that harbors within that world, and let it express itself and shape us” (p. 214).

Living Through the End of Nature is an important addition to the literature encompassing the effect of humans on nature which includes luminaries such as Barry Commoner (*The Closing*

Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology, 1971), Bill McKibben (*The End of Nature*, 1989), William Cronon (*Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, 1995). Wapner strengthens the foundation established by these authors by summarizing that we need to bring “a sense of humility about the real and preferred limits of our interventions” (p, 214) and recognizing “the collective fate of humanity/nature and then righting ourselves to the mysteries inherent in that mélange” (p. 218). If only we could.

The book is nicely supplemented with photos expressing a human/non-human world, as well as notes, references, and an index. Highly recommended for public and academic libraries, and individuals concerned with the consumption of wildness or the future of the American environmentalism.

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