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Electronic Green Journal

Title

Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8c1904ks>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(8)

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Publication Date

1998

DOI

10.5070/G31810313

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Peer reviewed

Review: *Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River*

By Richard Bartlett

Reviewed by [B. Kenton Temple](#)
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Bartlett, Richard A. *Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River Controversy*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. 348p. US \$35.00 ISBN: 0-87049-887-8.

The water of the Pigeon River that flows into Cocke County in East Tennessee from Haywood County, North Carolina, at the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains, is dark brown and speckled with foam. It is not a typical clear and sparkly mountain stream. Its waters are undrinkable, its fish inedible and it is of limited use as a tourist attraction. On the other hand, much of the odor has been reduced, it is not as black or as foamy as it had been and it is used for some whitewater paddling. But the story chronicled in Richard A. Bartlett's book *Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River Controversy* is not yet over.

Dick Bartlett is a retired history professor with several books concerning rivers and the American wilderness to his credit. He has the noteworthy ability to present a controversial story with a maximum of well-researched details and human interest and a minimum of evil villains, and a lack of empty emotional rhetoric. He clearly and convincingly builds a case for continued reduction of the pollution in this small river while holding the interest of readers who feel that support for economic issues and improvements in the natural environment are not mutually exclusive. His book is not painful reading for those who care deeply about threats to the spaces and waters that nurture their spirits.

The story of Champion International Corporation, a billion dollar pulp mill located at Canton, North Carolina, the citizens of Cocke County, a rural area in northeast Tennessee, and the Pigeon River, a small stream that runs past both, began when an Ohio paper manufacturer built a mill at that site in 1908. When the mill went online the fresh, clear, clean water that flowed into the mill flowed out as a "warm, foamy, colored, stinking mess" (p. 41). But the mill also provided a living for the citizens of the community in which it was located and through the years has paid a

healthy amount of taxes to the state of North Carolina.

That the mill's effluent ruined a beautiful stream that flowed into the neighboring state of Tennessee was overlooked, and continued to be overlooked for seven decades. The author is careful, however, to note that "throughout the industrial age, entrepreneurs - for the most part intelligent, educated men - have accepted pollution as a concomitant of business" (p. 56). For a greater part of its existence "the economic and social good of a pulp and paper mill so heavily outweighed the environmental bad effects that there was no contest"(p.56). Champion's mill was continuously enlarged, and while those who lived downstream were unable to alter this plan they were not silent. But the times were against them and they struggled on. In 1940 the town of Newport, through which the Pigeon River flows, had to pipe its water from the French Broad, six miles away and over a ridge (p. 64).

Although it is hard to say when, the times have changed, and more voices have joined the controversy. Governors, congressmen, and regulatory agencies from the federal and state governments have become involved. Citizen groups have formed and public hearings have been held. Throughout the book, Richard Bartlett has deftly handled the personalities and the intricacies of a story that could be difficult to follow. He weaves interviews, newspaper accounts, and facts from scientific papers and agency reports into a narrative account with which the reader becomes involved, as if it were a novel. Heroes emerge but "bad guys" are in short supply, and Champion's supporters are treated with respect.

As the book ends Champion has modernized its plant and the Pigeon River is no longer black, it is now just brown, has less foam and is not as smelly. The story, however, continues. North Carolina has issued Champion a variance to continue releasing its effluent at current levels. The EPA could grant the variance, and again Champion could be allowed to evade compliance with the Clean Water Act.

Certainly libraries in East Tennessee will want this book, as will those in any community whose citizens are concerned with protecting the integrity and beauty of the streams and lakes that supply their drinking water. bktemple@utk.edu is in Reference Services at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville Hodges Library 1015 Volunteer Blvd. Knoxville, TN USA 37996-1000 USA.TEL: 423-974-9164.