

[Clark Bremer on Reiger, 'Escaping into Nature: The Making of a Sportsman-Conservationist and Environmental Historian'](#)

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John F. Reiger. *Escaping into Nature: The Making of a Sportsman-Conservationist and Environmental Historian*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2013. Illustrations. 263 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87071-710-9.

Reviewed by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University) **Published on** H-USA (June, 2016) **Commissioned by** Donna Sinclair

Nature's Impact: An Evolution of Thought

John Reiger's autobiography, *Escaping into Nature: The Making of a Sportsman-Conservationist and Environmental Historian*, is exactly what the title purports it to be. The text covers representative events in Reiger's life that demonstrate his evolution from a child exploring nature as a coping mechanism for familial issues to a man passionately concerned with environmental issues.

The book's structure should be acknowledged before the content, given that some of it was a bit unexpected. The table of contents provides a road map for the book as well as for his journeys throughout the country. Each chapter title incorporates a geographical region, state, or combination thereof. For an autobiography, the piece has a surprisingly thorough index, inclusive of people, places, and topics. A brief notes section is also provided. Throughout the text, black-and-white photographs, with descriptions, are interspersed to illustrate poignant concepts and passages. These provide interesting visuals to accompany the writing and they serve to expand understanding of the text. Reiger's academic colors show through in that he includes a selected bibliography of his own work.

Reiger is careful to keep the environment and ecological concerns at the forefront of his text, demonstrating both his dedication to conservation and the impact that nature has had on him. Readers are confronted with environmental aspects of the settings, topics, and events he discusses throughout the book. Reiger's writing lives up to his assertion that he is "in nature" and not "a spectator to nature" (p. 16). This is not done through pontification but rather through thoughtful reminders of how the environment was or was not protected, how it was taken for granted, and how it has been used over time. All of this is accomplished by directly linking environmental aspects to his personal existence, thus providing inspiration for individuals to connect with their own surroundings.

Reiger introduces the reader to a myriad of ecological zones through his explanation of "special spaces." These refer to out-of-doors areas that he found influential in his understanding of nature. They range dramatically from undeveloped lots to bridges to forested locations to vacant city lots. He not only explains the importance of the spaces for his understanding of conservation and the development of his ecological awareness but also includes information on the flora and fauna of each area. His thick description, which remains easily accessible, allows the reader to almost feel what he

did, thus joining him in these experiences.

Reiger does not hesitate to reveal his emotional connection to nature. An example from his preteen years shows him grieving for bobwhite quail, while also telling the lesson he learned from watching them disappear. "I mourned their loss and never forgot the lesson they taught me—that nothing will make wildlife disappear quicker than the destruction of their homes, their habitats, and we should do everything we can to stop, or at least mitigate, that process" (p. 15). This lesson learned at a tender age seems to have made a lasting impression.

The reader is given a glimpse of Reiger's experiences in a variety of states, including but not limited to New York, Colorado, Maine, Connecticut, and Florida. Connecting with these differing ecological zones makes for an understanding of nature that is expansive in both breadth and depth. Reiger is a historian by training. His dissertation was on George Bird Grinnell, thus academically he had a strong understanding of nature. However, the actual experiences he had within these differing regions grants authenticity to his knowledge of nature and informs his writing.

The chapters take the reader from early childhood to professorship at Ohio University - Chillicothe. Chapter 7, which deals with his work as a teacher, scholar, and conservationist with the Audubon Society, is a solid chapter, but it leaves the reader wanting more. This is not to denigrate the other chapters, as what they recount was critical to the evolution of his thought. Rather, this is to say that at barely 250 pages, there was room to provide a little more on his life as an actual conservationist. Why not delegate an entire chapter to his work as a professional conservationist? This would have allowed for further exploration of his scholarship, activism, and nature connections. Chapter 7 has dramatically different environmental backdrops, South Florida and Connecticut. His experiences in the Keys included the more typical fishing; encounters with crocodiles while wading; a quintessentially nontypical at-sea rescue by smugglers; and an introduction to environmental spaces that one would think should be special spaces, but we are simply told they "did not receive the status of special space" (p. 179). It is in Connecticut where he takes the position of executive director for the Connecticut Audubon Society. That position alone, with all of the ins and outs of politics, probably could have filled an entire book. And we learn more about his interest in archaeology in this chapter, a topic revisited throughout the book. The conservation archaeology connection is one that might also have served as a standalone chapter.

In all honesty, the critique of chapter 7 stems simply from a desire for more information about Reiger's evolution of thought on nature. Inspired by Aldo Leopold, Theodore Roosevelt, and George Bird Grinnell, Reiger's work provides a well-structured narrative that offers inspiration and motivation for any reader concerned with ecology and the environment. Regardless of one's personal position on hunting and fishing, this text, like *Sand County Almanac* (1949), has much to offer for understanding modern conservation issues. More important, Reiger provides an example of how an individual can connect to the special spaces in their own lives.

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