

[Kates on Neuzil, 'The Environment and the Press: From Adventure Writing to Advocacy'](#)

Review published on Saturday, February 12, 2011

Mark Neuzil. *The Environment and the Press: From Adventure Writing to Advocacy.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008. xviii + 325 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-2403-5.

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Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker

A Sweeping History of Environmental Journalism

About forty years ago, legal scholars began debating whether the environment ought to have “standing” in the courts--that is, whether trees, water, and such should have legal rights similar to those enjoyed by human beings. The argument for “standing” is a fascinating and forceful one. It has not been fully accepted, but it has profoundly affected the way we think about the natural world and the human community’s place within it.

In *The Environment and the Press*, Mark Neuzil posits that the primary role of environmental journalists is to give “standing” to environmental issues in another venue--that of the public arena. Neuzil, a journalism professor at the University of St. Thomas, points out that environmental issues are particularly malleable. They ebb and flow with time. Natural resources are invested with meaning that can change. The national forests of Theodore Roosevelt’s time, for example, were viewed as a renewable source of timber and as an emblem of sound management and government power meant to offset the rapacious ways of monopoly. Forests alternately have been framed as a venue for recreation, a source of flood control, a home for endangered species, and--most recently--as “lungs” for a planet that is hungry for oxygen and awash in carbon dioxide. The job of the journalist is to present nature in metaphorical terms that make sense to a human audience.

Numerous histories of environmental journalism have examined particular times and places, explaining how writers have interpreted specific landscapes and engendered their protection. One thinks, for example, of David Backes’s fine works on the canoe-country wilderness of northern Minnesota. But few historians have attempted to tell the story of environmental journalism in broad strokes. Neuzil’s book is just such a synthesis, and it runs all the risks of that genre. It is sweeping and ambitious, and critics certainly can argue (and have) over what it includes or leaves out. In any event, it is an artfully written survey of environmental journalism’s major antecedents, its accomplishments, and its failings, supplemented by some speculation about its future.

Some might date the flowering of environmental journalism to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) or Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), but as Neuzil convincingly demonstrates, the genre’s roots are ancient and deep. He notes that Roman writer Pliny the Elder examined phenomena such as erosion and invasive species during the first century A.D. More recently, the Morrill Act of 1862 may have been the biggest boon for environmental journalism in early U.S. history. It prompted the land-grant colleges to offer education in farm reporting, which in time came to encompass bigger

questions of humankind's relationship to the land.

As one might expect, Neuzil pays tribute to nature writers such as John Muir, whose rhapsodies helped make Yosemite something of a natural cathedral. (The less-remembered John Burroughs, by contrast, wrote mostly about humble places; he preferred the company of chickadees and wildflowers, whereas Muir was given to stunts of biblical proportions, such as climbing trees during raging thunderstorms.) Henry Thoreau, too, is given his due, but beyond that, Neuzil's book is less predictable. A product of Iowa, an angler, and a shooting enthusiast, he is a breed apart from many scholars (and, for that matter, from many environmental journalists). He echoes Canadian science writer Thomas F. Pawlick's lament about the post-World War II decline in farm journalism, a development that has left many Americans estranged from the people who produce their food. Neuzil also is highly attuned to the role of the so-called hook and bullet press that agitated for fish and game protection beginning in the nineteenth century.

He writes lovingly of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, which was first published in 1653 and has been continuously in print since 1750. Walton's tale established a particular type of outdoor writing--the pastoral narrative combining instruction with personal observations. "It is a story of nostalgia," Neuzil writes, "of slow-moving English streams and countryside cottages; rolling landscapes and lightly populated, friendly villages; handmade fishing gear, firm handshakes, and grandfatherly advice" (p. 67). Theology and politics are interwoven with Walton's gentle adventure, proving that environmental narratives can carry multiple messages that both reflect and transcend their immediate setting.

Hard-edged advocacy is somewhat newer. Neuzil provides examples going back a century. His recounting of the journalistic crusade to ban feathers, and even whole stuffed songbirds, as adornments on women's hats is both instructive and gruesomely fascinating. Advocacy's pace quickened in the 1960s, when activists realized that state power could be brought to bear against pernicious modern phenomena such as automobiles and chemical pollutants. In Neuzil's view, this impulse crested about 1970, when environmental concerns spawned the first Earth Day and led to the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency. (The book's foreword, appropriately, is by Russell E. Train, who held high-level environmental jobs in the Nixon and Ford administrations.) Many large news organizations hired environmental reporting specialists about the same time.

So where is the profession headed now? The problem, as Neuzil sees it, is that environmental issues have become more complex and less visceral in recent years. Casey Bukro, a longtime environmental reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, recalls in Neuzil's book how he and a colleague would illustrate water-quality lapses in the 1960s: One of them would simply stick his hand in a waterway and grab a handful of sludge, which made for a striking, if nauseating, picture. Then there was the 1939-40 campaign by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* against air pollution. The newspaper, which won a Pulitzer Prize for its efforts, editorialized against the city's ever-present pall of "smoke." This brand of pollution was no mere abstraction: It blackened the sky, covered everything in soot, and made people sick. Today's problems--think of ozone depletion or mercury in fish--are just as dangerous and much more intractable, but they are harder to see.

How can today's intangible stories compete with sludge and soot? Or a river that catches fire, as Cleveland's Cuyahoga infamously did in 1969? Confronted with complicated and contentious issues,

editors on the assignment desk are left scratching their heads. (I experienced this phenomenon myself in the early 1980s when I was an environmental reporter for a daily newspaper in Michigan. I wrote a piece about the newly worrisome “greenhouse effect,” the warming of the planet triggered by carbon dioxide emissions. My editors did not know what to make of the story, so they buried it on an inside page next to the used-car ads.) The environmental coverage gap is particularly acute in TV newsrooms, which are loath to devote resources to stories that lack visual appeal. “The bodies cost too much and the commitment to in-depth coverage has never been there,” one TV news veteran tells Neuzil (p. 206).

Nor does he shy away from the shortcomings of stories that do get written. A key failing is reporters’ perennial inability to assess and explain risk. The 1989 flap over the use of the pesticide Alar on apples, for example, alarmed many consumers, but few of the stories included any explanation of what the proverbial apple-a-day might mean for the health of a typical person. Unseen but scary substances--remember dioxin?--are more likely to induce panic than understanding if reporters do not slow down, do their homework, and state the facts clearly. That takes time and money, both of which are scarce in today’s pressured media environment.

Nonetheless, Neuzil sees promise in Internet journalism and long-form media that can transcend commercial pressures, particularly public radio. He treads gingerly about the issue of whether environmental journalists should also be activists, noting that their professional organizations have studiously avoided making public pronouncements on issues that their members cover. But he argues--rightly, I think--that mere coverage is itself a form of advocacy. By giving “standing” to one issue over another, journalists in effect are saying that the issue is worth considering, and thus important.

There is no grand theory here linking recent environmental journalism to its predecessors. In *Beauty, Health, and Permanence* (1989), historian Samuel P. Hays defined “modern” environmentalism as an outgrowth of consumer society and quality-of-life issues after World War II. (By contrast, in his classic *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* [1959], Hays argued that the conservation of Theodore Roosevelt’s time was more in tune with the needs of producers.) Others credit the science of ecology, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, or the atomic bomb for inspiring deep awareness of humankind’s potential for both ruining and saving the planet. Neuzil, perhaps wisely, neither endorses nor disputes the major interpretations in this territory. Instead, he skillfully tells his own version of a very large story. There is room for many more voices here.

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Citation: James Kates. Review of Neuzil, Mark, *The Environment and the Press: From Adventure Writing to Advocacy*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32167>

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