Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina

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Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina

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Much of the analysis of mainstream American environmentalism has centered on the concept of nature as wilderness or environmental justice. While the wilderness arguments are constructed around the notions of pristine nature, amenity, and nonhuman welfare (ie typical concerns of affluent urban consumers), environmental justice scholarship and activism have challenged this narrow version of environmental thinking as the political ideology of privileged groups and have prominently highlighted the link between environmental inequalities and wider divisions based on social, economic, and political disparity.

Amid these two dominant strands of American environmentalism, Kathryn Newfont focuses on the concept and practices of commons, which she identifies as "commons environmentalism": a largely unexplored and different type of thinking about environment in the United States. She uses a case study of the Blue Ridge Mountains to provide a rich empirical analysis of rural western North Carolina and the struggles and environmental activism of local people to protect their forests. The book discusses the growing evidence of commons environmentalism, a concept that has so far featured mostly in developing world contexts and is a rare occurrence in American history and culture, where private property has held center stage.

In the book, commons is defined as "any resource that is widely accessible, used by many people, and communally owned" (p 9). Newfont identifies commons environmentalism as "the determined forest defense efforts of mostly rural, often working-class people in the southern Appalachians, people who were typically not friends to wilderness" (p 3). However, there is no simple definition and there are no strategies of commons environmentalism; the author identifies "environmental schizophrenia" at times, ie the paradoxical stance taken by the local people (first fighting against environmental protection, such as a wilderness approach, and then for protection). Nevertheless, commons environmentalism is the fundamental concern of local people, irrespective of their changing tactics over time.

The book argues that while the emergence of commons environmentalism happened around the same time as wilderness environmentalism in the United States, the latter became prominent in environmental thinking and analysis, whereas the former remained largely unnoticed. Until recently, commons systems have been poorly understood outside practitioner groups and a small circle of scholars. Scholars have become interested in the study of commons, identifying different types and categories, comparing systems of their governance, tracing threats, and describing patterns of response to these. Among the most notable work on commons is that of Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom, although her works centered on the agrarian political economy of developing world contexts. In this sense, this book makes a novel contribution as a developed world case study focusing on the political and environmental struggles of American rural working people.

The book provides an interesting read of environmental history and forest politics in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina and a varied account of the environmental activism of different actors in the region. Each chapter provides a detailed empirical analysis of the contested forest policy and politics and associated conflicts with the region's environmental history.

As the title suggests, the main theme of the book is forest history and the rise of commons environmentalism in the United States; the Blue Ridge forest commons features as the centerpiece of its story. Much the same general theme permeates across its chapters. The book also touches upon a variety of issues and debates around environmental and forest management. These include wilderness vs open access vs commons, clear-cutting vs selective harvesting, ecocentric or preservationists' views vs more utilitarian views on the role of forests, de facto vs de jure commons, single use of forests vs multiple uses, private property vs national control, and local knowledge vs technocratic expertise. The book tells a fascinating story about the tactics of diverse actors: the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and forest bureaucracy; national environmental groups, such as the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club; private industries; and mountain residents of different kinds (farmers, businessmen, scientists, politicians; rich, poor, and middle class; rural and urban; landowner and tenant; native and newcomer; etc). There are also details of power relations and conflicts among various groups, such as local people, state officials, and timber companies, and between land speculation outfits (eg oil and gas companies) and private estates, a modest-means local majority and a well-off absentee minority, and insiders and outsiders.

Well-organized chapters make the book's structure simple and handy. After an introduction on forests, commons, and various debates on environmental philosophies, 10 chapters detail accounts of environmental struggles and forest history. Chapter 1 sets out historical contexts of the Appalachian forest commons, which are deeply rooted in American customary values. The forests in state-owned and private lands were historically used as de facto commons for hunting, fishing, gathering, and grazing. Hence, "local residents often valued mountain forests as working

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and peopled commons harvest grounds, not as unspoiled wilderness" (p 10). Chapter 2 details how forests in the southern Appalachians were managed in response to wholesale forest destruction from industrial harvests. This resulted in the passing of Weeks Act in 1911: a "watershed piece of legislation" in forest protection that allowed federal purchase of private lands. As a result, a series of national forests were established. This enabled continuity in commons culture, although forest management and regulation changed. Chapter 3 explains how federal control of the forests of the Blue Ridge created contestations among local communities. This chapter also provides a history of USFS, including early work on forestland mapping and associated logistical challenges. Chapter 4 explains the nature of de jure commons and the relationship between national forests and Blue Ridge residents, including issues of lost tax revenues and eviction as a result of nationalization of forests. Even after their formal nationalization, these forests remained wooded commons for local people. Chapter 5 details the conflicts and resistance in relations to commons, clear-cutting, and wilderness. In particular, such contestations were embedded in contrasting features of the commons and the wilderness. While commons culture considered the woods as familiar, peopled, and richly historical, the wilderness idea was based on forests as wild and ahistorical—and thus, by definition, human-free.

In the 1970s, there was widespread opposition to the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE II) process, an effort to expand the federal wilderness system created under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Chapter 6 discusses the wilderness approach to forest management as a form of commons enclosure. It details arguments that wilderness designation would turn multiple-use forests enjoyed by many local residents (eg for hunting, fishing, gathering, and grazing) into single-use recreation sites for well-off visitors. Thus, the wilderness politics is shown to be polarized along cultural and economic lines and as an insiders vs outsiders debate. Chapter 7 is in contrast to the antiwilderness perspectives in the previous chapter. Using the case of the Southern Nantahala Wilderness, it details the way wilderness began to be seen as a win–win solution for local residents (with use of commons for hunting, gathering, fishing, and grazing), the timber industry (with provision of timbering allowances), and environmentalists (aimed at forest conservation) alike. Wilderness supporters pointed to clear-cutting as a looming enclosure threat (which also had a devastating effect on the forest ecology) and argued that wilderness designation would be an effective means of protecting the forests that would benefit their commons use. As a result, Southern Nantahala became the only wilderness area created in the region as a result of the RARE II process.

Chapter 8 then discusses the turn of the events when the energy crisis of 1973 propelled a national drive to make the United States more energy self-sufficient, which resulted in a massive push to locate and tap new domestic reserves (with petroleum prospectors turning to Nantahala and the Pisgah National Forest). Consequently, the mountain residents rallied actively to oppose oil and gas leasing in national forests and defended their commons. Chapter 9 discusses how timber enclosure threatened forests as clear-cutting returned in the region. As Ronald Reagan's administration ushered in a new era of public lands management, it encouraged industrial harvesting of timber to make the public lands financially self-supporting. This continued even during Jimmy Carter's administration, as the 1976 National Forest Management Act encouraged the USFS to raise more revenue. Because of a rise in timber harvesting and practices of clear-cutting in the southern Appalachians, mountain opposition increased. The decisive moment came when antiwilderness and anti-clear-cutting sentiments overlapped as both groups changed sides tactically and galvanized through the leadership of the Western North Carolina Alliance in 1989. Chapter 10 details the alliance's Cut the Clearcutting! Campaign, which proved to be a political masterstroke. It marked a crucial turning point in the decades-long debate over clear-cutting in the western North Carolina forests and led to the successful mobilization of commons environmentalism in the United States.

Conclusion and afterword sections are devoted to a summary of main findings and theoretical insights on the concept of the rising popularity of commons environmentalism. As the author concludes, "The Blue Ridge examples demonstrate the enduring power of one American commons…. In every period, a commons history of the USA waits to be unearthed. The Blue Ridge story, while important, remains only a beginning" (p 273). She continues: "the power of commons, mobilized as commons environmentalism, offers a potent tool for addressing forest issues on every level, from local to global" (p 277).

The book is well written and meticulously researched. It consists of in-depth archival work and uses a number of historical artifacts, letters, and other documents. It is fully referenced with endnotes in each chapter and contains 18 pages of maps and pictures. Embedded in the history of the Blue Ridge forests are countless personal stories of various people; the author uses some of them for illustration. Lively stories from various interviews and conversations with Appalachian residents provide additional amusement. However, at some points, where the evidence is inadequate, the book is speculative at best.

Easy to follow and accessible to all kinds of readers, the book is recommended reading for everyone interested in commons and environmental history. In particular, it will provide a tool for many researchers, policy-makers, and environmental

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activists. Although the book is focused on western North Carolina, it has far-reaching relevance and importance to similar types of commons in the United States and worldwide. The focus of mountain lives and livelihoods makes it particularly interesting because it provides a detailed account of how mountain settlers, who are often stereotyped as indigenous cultures, are environmental activists on their own. Undoubtedly, the environmental history and politics of mountain commons have useful parallels and resonant insights for other places.

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