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Book Review of, Green Persuasion: Advertising, Voluntarism, and America's Public Lands

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Yet, the successes of the environmental movement engendered intense polarization. As Sowards notes in his final chapter, new regulations met swift backlash from conservatives affiliated with the Sagebrush Rebellion, who felt that new protections for ecosystems would mean the loss of income and identity. These conservatives called for a “return” of public lands to western states so that they could dictate policy more easily, while environmentalists deemed the regulations too weak and turned to direct action tactics to prevent logging in national forests. The latter’s actions were undergirded by a philosophy of biocentrism and the theory of island biogeography, both of which challenged traditional management practices’ impacts on biodiversity. As a result of this new era of polarization, the public became increasingly politicized with the Left and Right clashing over spotted owls in the Pacific Northwest and wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone National Park.

Still, Sowards sees hope. As he suggests in his conclusion, the very nature of public lands calls for collaboration, as does democracy. In that way, the nation might look to public lands as a foundation for unity and citizenship.

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Green Persuasion: Advertising, Voluntarism, and America’s Public Lands. By Jeffrey K. Stine. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Scholarly Press, 2021. xi+237 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Open access.

This richly illustrated, well-written, and well-researched book is difficult to categorize. It offers rewards for scholars with both particular and broad interests in environmental history, as well as for the general reader.

Specialists in the history of institutional environmental history will be most interested in the second half of the book, a detailed history of the Take Pride in America program that stretched from the 1980s well into the twenty-first century. This treatment breaks the most scholarly ground and reflects the most research into original, archival sources. But most readers will most enjoy the book’s first half, in which Stine

lays out the broader themes that anticipated the Take Pride in American initiative, the broad cultural and political factors that paved the way, pun intended, for a sort of environmental volunteerism designed to generate positive feelings without much disturbing the status quo. Here Stine explores how the advertising industry merged its efforts and interests with the federal government during and after World War II with campaigns such as Smokey Bear for fire prevention and Keep America Beautiful to counter littering. This part of the book is richly illustrated with posters from these campaigns, including a photo of President Reagan and Iron Eyes Cody, the famous “crying Indian” of the highly effective ad campaigns of the mid-1970s.

Indeed, as Stine effectively argues, the initiative meshed with Reagan’s desire “to harness the growing dissatisfaction with federal programs to promote private support of public causes” (38). Reagan was also the first president of the twentieth century, Democrat or Republican, to present himself as a sort of antienvironmentalist, a decision underscored by his highly controversial secretary of the interior, James Watt, who seemed to delight in proposing policies that outraged even many moderates. By 1983 the Reagan administration decided to tack toward the center on the environment, at least rhetorically. They forced Watt’s resignation and then, after Reagan’s reelection, asked the Ad Council to help them get the new Take Pride campaign off the ground.

Stine does a fine job of describing how Take Pride’s early campaigns neatly blended conservative understandings of nationalism, private enterprise, patriotism, and masculinity. Led by some of Hollywood’s most manly men—Clint Eastwood, Charles Bronson, and Lou Gossett Jr.—Take Pride articulated a brand of nature loving very different from flower children or eco-warriors. The campaign targeted not the nation’s consumption of finite resources or manufacturers’ pollution, but rather particular acts of littering, theft, or “vandalizing our public parks and playgrounds,” as Eastwood put it in an early public-service announcement (62). Indeed, Take Pride quickly drew support from land-using groups, such as off-road vehicle users, criticized by liberal and radical environmentalists for bringing noise and pollution to wild places. The Take Pride initiative, as Stine puts it, “offered them an opportunity to counter their critics by demonstrating their civic responsibility via voluntary service activities” (68).

Reagan’s successor, George H. W. Bush, embraced both volunteerism (1,000 Points of Light) and environmentalism more overtly, though

the Take Pride program was not a major player in his administration. Take Pride enjoyed a renaissance of sorts under George W. Bush's first administration, with the enthusiastic support of the recreational-vehicle industry and other businesses and organizations interested in associating nature loving with high levels of resource consumption. Barack Obama's predilection for volunteerism enabled the program to persist on a smaller scale until Donald Trump, a very different sort of Republican from Reagan, let alone Nixon, let it "wither on the vine" (116).

Green Persuasion, then, is both a skilled history of a modest and relatively short-lived federal program and an exploration of the complicated, ironic, and contested history of how environmentalism has often expressed the sensibilities and served the interests of big business, unfettered consumption, patriotism, and traditional masculinity. Indeed, Stine is perhaps at his best as a cultural historian, and we can hope that he continues to explore these themes on a broader canvas to trace, for example, how the largely conservative or mainstream themes he details here overlapped with the sensibilities of more esoteric nature lovers such as mountain bikers, surfers, and rock climbers and masculinist eco-radicals such as Edward Abbey.

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