

# The Environmental History of Pennsylvania

Joel A. Tarr

*Carnegie Mellon University*

This special issue focuses on the environmental history of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Curiously enough, considering the extent to which the Pennsylvania environment has been affected by agricultural expansion, natural resource exploitation, and industrialization, there has been relatively little written on the topic. There is no comprehensive environmental history of the state and only a limited number of monographs, dissertations, and articles. Perhaps this is not surprising considering the fact that environmental history is a relatively new field, but the record is still meager considering the richness of subject matter and of sources.

A partial explanation for the dearth of published material is that until recently, the Commonwealth's colleges and universities did not have environmental historians on their faculty. Nor were graduate students being trained in environmental history. Today, however, there are 70 Pennsylvania members of the American Society for Environmental History (ranked sixth among the states in terms of numbers of members), while at least ten colleges and universities in the state present courses in environmental history.<sup>1</sup> This number will undoubtedly increase in the future as student demand increases and graduate students enter the academic market.

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have helped advance the cause of state environmental history. They have created an interesting and informative web page on the Internet, "Pennsylvania's Environmental Heritage,"<sup>2</sup> which deals with important historical events, presents profiles of important environmental leaders, reproduces valuable historical reports, and provides some bibliography. The Museum Commission and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have also published several books dealing primarily with state forests and parks as well as biographies of John J. Nolde and J. Horace McFarland, important for their work in forestry and conservation.<sup>3</sup>

The five articles in this special issue illustrate progress being made in documenting state environmental history. Written by environmental scholars and archivists at institutions both in and out of the state, they provide evidence of the missing importance of the field.

First, Brian Black and Paul Sabin deal with Pennsylvania's nineteenth-century oil boom. Driven by the "rule of capture," which put a premium on rapid development, much of Pennsylvania's petroleum was quickly exhausted. Black traces the development of the boom culture, which negated the ecological and landscape character of the region, instead substituting an ethic based

on commodification, extraction, and trade. Sabin looks at the way gendered language influenced perceptions of the oil boom as it interacted with the natural environment.

Second, Charles Hardy, III, examines the history of shad in the Delaware River Basin from 1682 to the present. Hardy traces this fish through periods of abundance and exploitation, over-fishing, pollution, extinction, and then revival, as federal, state, and local forces combined to improve the basin water quality. Hardy's article, as does Black's, also deals with the important issue of the over-use of the commons, raising important issues of public values, public goods, and necessary environmental controls.

The third article, by Nicholas Casner, is more biographical. It focuses on an important Pennsylvania environmental activist of the pre-Environmental Movement years—Kenneth Reid, national director of the Izaak Walton League in the 1930s, Pennsylvania Fish Commissioner under Governor Gifford Pinchot in the late 1930s, and a native of Connellsville, Pennsylvania. Water quality issues shaped the national debates over matters of federal water policy in the 1930s and 1940s. The interests of the Izaak Walton League were a combination of preservationist and conservationist ideals. Reid reflected these ideals, but increasingly he believed that "wise use" resulted in environmental destruction. He also came to believe that only the federal government could control the pollution, especially mine acid drainage, destroying water quality in the state's streams and rivers.

Thomas G. Smith's article on John Phillips Saylor presents another profile of an environmental crusader. This Republican Congressman from Johnstown became a leader in the attempt to protect wilderness ideals, helping to block a dam on the Colorado River at Dinosaur National Monument in Utah (Echo Park), opposing the Kinzua Dam on the Allegheny River, and leading the fight for preserving "wild" rivers. Smith carefully takes the reader through the battle over protecting unspoiled rivers, showing the leadership role played by Saylor. Although a conservative Republican, Saylor had little sympathy for the views of property owners when wildland preservation was at stake.

Stefano Luconi looks at the politics of smoke control in mid-twentieth century Pittsburgh. He demonstrates that Italian-Americans voted for David Lawrence despite, not because of, the anti-pollution policies he undertook with the support of Republican businessmen. Although cleaner energy cost more, the Pittsburgh ethnics remained loyal to the party of Roosevelt and the New Deal, as they benefited from the patronage supplied by the Lawrence machine.

The last article in this special issue deals not with a case of environmental preservation but rather with construction of an archive to forward the writing of Pennsylvania environmental history in the future. Dominic LaCava

and Ruth C. Carter, both at the University of Pittsburgh Archives of Industrial Society, discuss that library's Environmental Archives of Industrial Society, created by noted environmental historian Samuel P. Hays and his wife, biologist Barbara Hays. This collection contains a large number of resources relating to Pennsylvanian, national, and international environmental issues. This description of the archives provides a valuable tool for those wishing to pursue environmental history both on the state and national level.

Finally, Martin Desht, a photographer whose exhibitions on Pennsylvania life have appeared throughout the Commonwealth and nation, contributes a photographic essay. He also offers some perceptive commentary on the state's environment as we approach the year 2000.

This special issue only introduces the Commonwealth's environmental history. The field is extremely fertile and a wide range of topics exist to be explored. Among these are deforestation of the state, the impact of coal mining on the Pennsylvania environment, air, water, and land pollution issues, the development of state environmental policy in the twentieth century, the relationship between specific industries in the state and environmental change, and analysis of the role of individuals and organizations in environmental improvement. In addition to the authors represented in this special issue, studies are now underway by environmental scholars and graduate students. Clearly the future will enrich the body of scholarship dealing with Pennsylvania environmental history.

## Notes

1. The ten are Allegheny College, Carnegie Mellon University, Dickinson College, Juniata College, Muhlenberg College, Pennsylvania State University (Altoona College and University Park), Slippery Rock University, Temple University, Villanova, and West Chester University.

2. The web page address is [http://www.dep.state.PA.\\_us/dep/Pa\\_Env\\_Her/pa-env-her.htm](http://www.dep.state.PA._us/dep/Pa_Env_Her/pa-env-her.htm).

3. See Dan Cupper, *Our Priceless Heritage - Pennsylvania State Parks* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and

Natural Resources, 1993); Lester A. DeCoster, *The Legacy of Penn's Woods — A History of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 1995); John J. Nolde, *A Single White Pine* (Harrisburg: Bureau of Forestry, 1995); R. R. Thorpe, *The Crown Jewel of Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the U.S. Forest Service*, 1997); Ernest Morrison, *J. Horace McFarland — A Thorn for Beauty* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, 1995).