

## THE RISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL TOURISM

*Thomas A. Chambers*

When Robert Juet gazed on the lower North River's shoreline in 1609, he noted that "the mountains look as though they contain some metal or mineral, for some of them are almost barren of trees, and what few trees do grow there are blighted." Further upriver he "found good land for growing wheat and garden herbs. Upon it were a great many handsome oak, walnut, chestnut, ewe and an abundance of other trees of pleasing wood. In addition, there was much slate and other good stone for houses."<sup>1</sup> Sailing with Henry Hudson, Juet was among the first Europeans to view the river valley that would later bear his captain's name, although the ways in which subsequent travelers interpreted that landscape would change dramatically over the next four centuries. Juet and other seventeenth-century Europeans saw the land through the lens of economic development. Every tree, mountainside, meadow, or water body existed as a resource to be exploited, a potential area for economic activity.

Two centuries later American and European tourists discovered new meaning for the dramatic landscapes of the Hudson River Valley and much of the Mid-Atlantic region. Their new view of nature as a source of deeper meaning and evidence of God's

grandeur led to later movements to preserve and protect scenery as a valuable part of American culture. By interacting with nature along transportation routes like rivers, railroads, and canals, tourists helped to define American ideals of the natural environment and how it should be used. In searching for places to see and respond to, tourists cultivated one of the earliest environmental ethics in American culture.

Like Juet, other European explorers coasting North America paid the most attention to the natural resources of the ocean, seashore, and navigable rivers. The Dutch identified the North River, later the Hudson River, and the South River, later the Delaware River, as the principal nautical features that merited further exploration. In his excellent recent history of New Netherland, Jaap Jacobs analyzes early Dutch travel accounts and promotional tracts, finding an emphasis on natural resources such as minerals, farmland, fish, and fur-bearing animals. Each of these, as well as the trees and crops that differed from what people knew at home in Holland, could be exploited for settlement and profit. The Dutch West India Company formed out of the competition among several Dutch trading companies to make money from the newly charted territory. It was an early joint stock company, and the environment provided the resource to be developed. Traders sailed up the Hudson River and the Connecticut River to exchange European goods with native peoples for beaver and other furs, bypassing the Delaware River at first because its entrance "is full of sandbars and shoals," as Johannes de Laet noted in 1625. Dutch traders at Fort Nassau (near Camden, New Jersey) attempted to develop the Delaware River fur trade, as did Swedish rivals at Fort Christina (modern Wilmington, Delaware) before their defeat by the Dutch in 1655. Peltry proved less profitable than farming here, and the main areas of settlement remained near the North River. The natural protection of New York Harbor attracted the majority of settlers and made Manhattan, initially called New Amsterdam, the center of trade with the Atlantic world. Few settlers populated the 126 nautical miles between docks on Manhattan's lower tip and the fur trading post at Fort Orange (present-day Albany, New York). The early Dutch view of the land as an economic resource guided the way they settled New Netherland.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century, and for the majority of the eighteenth century, the Hudson River Valley existed as "fly over country," or in this case "sail past country," that most travelers barely noticed and where a few farmers eked out a precarious existence. Travelers hastened up the river to Albany, where commerce thrived, armies mustered to counter

French ambitions to the north and west, and successful farmers, both tenant and landlord, made a modest living off the fertile soil. Carl Carmer first described this undeveloped country in his beautifully written book, *The Hudson*, originally published in 1939. Miners, loggers, and fishermen populate Carmer's river, making a living on the land while a few scenic-minded travelers admire the views of the Catskill Mountains and lightly developed landscape. By the mid-eighteenth century the travel narratives of European and American writers as diverse as the naturalist Peter Kalm and Maryland politician Charles Carroll of Carrollton began to view the landscape and its rustic inhabitants as objects worthy of attention. Many of these accounts are collected in Roland Van Zandt's anthology, *Chronicles of the Hudson*. Several electronic resources cover much of the same ground but lack Van Zandt's useful introductions and annotations, let alone his regional focus.<sup>3</sup> Early travel accounts provide some of the richest sources for environmental history because of their detailed descriptions of landscapes, flora, fauna, and the utility of natural resources. Native peoples, however, are largely absent from these accounts, having been killed either by Europeans or in intertribal warfare aided by Europeans, or been forced westward. At best, Native Americans appear as another exotic species on the American landscape.

These catalogs represent a fairly small portion of travel accounts, however, as more people traveled for pleasure by the early nineteenth century. This "commercialization of leisure" took place primarily in the Mid-Atlantic region, as early mineral springs resorts such as Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania, and Ballston Springs, New York, attracted tourists.<sup>4</sup> In getting to these relatively remote places, travelers passed through countryside that stimulated their thinking. Whether in carriages, on river sloops and later steamboats, or aboard canal boats, travelers pondered the natural scenery viewed along the way. The primary tourist route in the early nineteenth century, up the Hudson River to the Catskill Mountains and Saratoga Springs, helped to transform American ideals of scenery and the environment.

Several recent books analyze the link between scenery, tourism, and concepts of the environment along the Hudson River, making it perhaps the most-studied body of water in the eastern United States. Tom Lewis's *The Hudson: A History* covers the same geographic territory as Carmer's earlier work on the same river, but with much more scholarly grounding and an eye toward modern environmentalism. Long after the Dutch fur trade ended, the Hudson was, writes Lewis, "home to others who exploited the river and its land for their own gain." The first 185 pages of this gracefully written

and deeply researched book cover the Dutch, English, and Revolutionary War periods when people's interactions with the river were largely extractive. Once Lewis begins to investigate the nineteenth century, when tourism began to develop significantly, the link between travel and landscape becomes apparent. The Hudson River School artists responded to the scenes viewed from the deck of a steamboat moving up or down the river, and painters such as Thomas Cole and Asher Durand depicted a scenic, peaceful river largely undisturbed by man.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between tourism, scenery, and environmentalism is an important and well-analyzed topic, especially with regard to the Hudson River. Barbara Novak wrote one of the first modern studies of the Hudson River School of landscape painting in 1980, and others have followed her example. Novak, William Truettner, and Alan Wallach have demonstrated how eighteenth-century ideals of the sublime and the beautiful changed into a love of the picturesque and the desire to find and view such scenery on the American landscape. The paintings of Cole and others sold well because they depicted familiar landscapes—the Hudson River Valley and Catskill Mountains—that many New Yorkers from the emergent upper class saw on their travels up and down the river.<sup>6</sup> The picturesque scenery of cloud-enshrouded mountains, softly lit meadows, or towering waterfalls prompted Americans to contemplate their nation's place in history. The United States, because it lacked the decaying historic ruins and corrupted history of Europe, possessed unspoiled nature and the potential to create a better society on the new continent.

The painters of the Hudson River School followed the writings of English critic William Gilpin, whose influential "Essay on Picturesque Travel" (1792) recommended a middle landscape between the sublime/beautiful dichotomy. In the 1750s Edmund Burke articulated that viewing nature's raw power in the form of a jagged mountain or rushing stream produced terror and reverence for God's power.<sup>7</sup> Now, picturesque tourists searched for scenery that produced joy and pleasure, as well as evidence of their nation's progress. A smokestack, house, or train might appear in the background of a Hudson River School painting, but it belonged as part of the landscape, man's presence integrated with the natural world. Such scenes also evoked nostalgia for the vanished past and a simpler time before technological innovations. Because the Hudson developed initially as a transit route between Manhattan harbor and the fur-trade center at Albany, the valley's settlement and economic development lagged, leaving it in a

relatively undisturbed state. Its landscape, positioned between centers of commerce but along a major trade route, afforded tourists and artists the opportunity to reflect upon a land that remained rural. Underdevelopment made the Hudson River Valley an ideal locale to mourn the consequences of development; all places once looked like it before the ravages of industrialization. The same technology that painters lamented, of course, included the steamboats and railroad locomotives that carried tourists past the scenes that sold so well. The conflict between commerce and nature began long before debates over cap and trade legislation.

The importance of this one particular region—the Hudson River Valley—in developing landscape ideals and concepts of nature has been ably demonstrated by a number of scholars. Richard Gassan goes so far as to identify the Hudson as the cultural hearth of landscape ideals and especially the importance of wilderness in inspiring national strength. His important work, *The Birth of American Tourism*, focuses solely on the Hudson River and the tourist sites that developed along its shores. Riding a carriage up the steep path from the river to the Catskill Mountain House—a hotel perched on a cliff overlooking the river with little to recommend it beyond the salubrious fresh air, an inspiring view, and mountain hikes—became a rite of passage for mid-nineteenth-century Americans who aspired to cultural sophistication. Similarly, knowledge of the scenery's emotional impact demonstrated gentility. Publications such as guidebooks and William Guy Walls's *Hudson River Portfolio*, a collection of twenty handsome engravings depicting picturesque scenes along the river, popularized the region's landscapes. Tourism and scenery, then, developed hand in hand.<sup>8</sup>

Literature played its part as well, with authors such as Washington Irving, James Kirke Paulding, and James Fenimore Cooper writing fictional accounts of the region's history. They connected their stories with specific locations, and spots like Cooper's Cave or André's Tree—Revolutionary War British spy Major John André—became popular tourist attractions, as Wayne Franklin points out in his magnificent study of Cooper's fiction and times. Travelers expected to see the same landscape that Natty Bumppo experienced, and the desire to preserve these historic scenes—such as the ruins of Revolutionary War forts along the Hudson or at Ticonderoga—fostered a reverence for landscape and natural scenery.<sup>9</sup>

David Stradling expands upon the limited chronological scope of Gassan's work in his *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills*. He traces the importance of the Hudson River's western bank, dominated by the Catskill

Mountains, in formulating American concepts of nature and our relationship with the environment. Because the Catskills were located so close to the nation's burgeoning metropolis, New York City, urban residents visited and responded to the region's scenic beauty. Just over a hundred miles of travel by river, rail, or road transported a tourist from Manhattan's chaotic bustle to an Edenic wilderness. Like other authors, Stradling analyzes the Hudson River School and its reliance on the Catskills for inspiration at the same time that New York City harvested mountain forests and mines for raw materials to build the city. His remarkable book covers the well-known relationship between landscape painting and nature, and also analyzes the Catskills' importance in modern environmental history well past the golden age of Thomas Cole and his compatriots. Whether it was Gilded Age robber barons constructing spectacular hotels and commodifying the landscape; environmental writer John Burroughs persuading New York State to create a forest preserve in the 1890s; or New York City purchasing and flooding mountain lands to provide safe drinking water for its inhabitants, Stradling keenly points out the conflicts between people using the land and preserving it.

As the twentieth century progressed and the Catskills lost some of their allure, new groups of tourists, like Jewish residents of New York City who found welcoming accommodations in the region's Borscht Belt, traveled for rural relaxation. The development of the New York State Thruway along the Hudson River's western bank provided increased access for automobile tourists and spawned a new industry of campgrounds and ski resorts that transformed the Catskills into a playground for the athletic leisure class. Their interactions with the natural world helped to increase American appreciation for wild places such as the Catskill Mountains.<sup>10</sup> Stradling's outstanding recent book, *The Nature of New York*, extends these themes across the state and offers a comprehensive history of environmental activism in New York.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of tourists in developing environmental thought existed beyond the Catskill Mountains, though. The upper regions of the Hudson River possessed natural sights that attracted tourists and vacationers in the nineteenth century. The famous "philosopher's camp" was located on the shores of Follensby Pond in the summer of 1858, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Louis Aggasiz, William James Stillman, and several other Massachusetts luminaries chopping wood, constructing lean-tos by hand, hunting, fishing, hiking, and cooking over a fire for one month. Their experience deepened the men's appreciation for nature and desire to protect it. Emerson's 1867 poem "The Adirondacs," published after his visit

to the camp, is an early and eloquent meditation on interacting with nature, as well as the potential for mankind to coexist with modified wilderness. Visiting the wilderness, and the Adirondacks in particular, gained prominence in the decades after Emerson and his fellow campers roughed it amid the pine trees. William "Adirondack" Murray, a prominent Boston minister, popularized wilderness vacations in the late nineteenth century by convincing Americans that leisure was not by definition wasteful. His version of "muscular Christianity" advocated traveling to mountains, getting fresh air, and exercising, both to improve health and to bring one closer to God. As a physician, the Almighty could improve individual and societal health, if only Christians experienced wilderness adventure and the hard work necessary to survive there.<sup>12</sup>

The kinds of vacations Murray advocated became wildly popular, and thousands of tourists descended on the Adirondacks each summer. But without adequate transportation infrastructure, accommodations, or resource management, the region quickly became overfished and overhunted, and the temporary summer camps looked shabby after a few years of overuse. Increased heavy lumbering in the late nineteenth century denuded many mountainsides, and the well-heeled tourists who came looking for wilderness scenery protested. Sportsmen's periodicals that covered the wilderness for these gentlemen adventurers wrote about the devastation of the Adirondacks and helped lead the campaign for their preservation. As Paul Schneider points out in his accessible book, *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness*, the 1885 creation of the Adirondack Forest Preserve, the nation's first significant attempt to conserve wilderness, stemmed in large part from the desire of wealthy tourists to enjoy mountain scenery and fish in clear streams, not ones muddied by landslides from nearby logging operations.<sup>13</sup>

As Bill McKibben demonstrates in his slender yet rich volume *Wandering Home*, traveling over a landscape brings deep understanding of its history and ecology.<sup>14</sup> Some of the nation's earliest grassroots environmental campaigns began along the Hudson River, in areas that people traveled and inhabited intensely. Whether in resisting the hollowing out of Storm King Mountain to create a pumped-storage hydroelectric plant, forcing polluters to clean up the chemicals they dumped into the river, or opposing the construction of a massive power plant within sight of Olana (the retreat of landscape painter Frederic Church), the interaction of people with nature has proven central to environmental preservation efforts. Comprehensive studies of a state's environmental history, such as David Stradling's *The Nature*

of *New York*, take an important first step in understanding the role of travel and the environment. With additional state-level histories, especially for Pennsylvania, and new case studies of individual wildernesses and resorts, we will have a fuller understanding how visiting nature can produce more than a stressed landscape.

## NOTES

1. Robert Juet, "The Third Voyage of Master Henry Hudson," September 25 and 30, 1609, as quoted in Donald S. Johnson, *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson* (Camden, ME: International Marine, 1993), 123, 125.
2. Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Settlement in Seventeenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1–31, quote on p. 4; C. A. Weslager, *New Sweden on the Delaware, 1638–1655* (Wilmington, DE: Middle Atlantic Press, 1988).
3. Carl Carmer, *The Hudson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992); Roland Van Zandt, *Chronicles of the Hudson: Three Centuries of Travel and Adventure* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 1992); Library of Congress, *American Notes: Travels in America, 1750–1820* <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lhthtml/lhthhome.html> (accessed November 15, 2011); Wisconsin Historical Society, *American Journeys: Eyewitness Accounts of Early American Exploration and Settlement*, <http://www.americanjourneys.org/> (accessed November 15, 2011).
4. Carl Bridenbaugh, "Baths and Watering Places of Colonial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 3 (April 1946): 151–81; Barbara Carson, "Early American Tourists and the Commercialization of Leisure," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 373–405.
5. Tom Lewis, *The Hudson: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 4.
6. Barbara Novak, *American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach, eds., *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
7. William Gilpin, "Essay on Picturesque Travel," in *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: To Which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting* (London: R. Blamire, 1792), 26, 48–50, 53; Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: J. Dodsley, 1757), 127–28, 213.
8. Richard H. Gassan, *The Birth of American Tourism: New York, the Hudson Valley, and American Culture, 1790–1830* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).
9. Wayne Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
10. David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).
11. Stradling, *The Nature of New York: An Environmental History of the Empire State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).



## THE RISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL TOURISM

12. Philip G. Terrie, "Romantic Travelers in the Adirondack Wilderness," *American Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 59–75; Davis Strauss, "Toward a Consumer Culture: 'Adirondack Murray' and the Wilderness Vacation," *American Quarterly* 39 (Summer 1987): 270–86.
13. Paul Schneider, *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).
14. Bill McKibben, *Wandering Home: A Long Walk Across America's Most Hopeful Landscape: Vermont's Champlain Valley and New York's Adirondacks* (New York: Crown Journeys, 2005).