

Everyday Environmentalism: Concerning Consumption

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Editors' Summary

Modern consumption patterns are a product of the historical development and industrialization of the United States, including increased consumer spending and demand for energy-intensive goods. These historical and social trends provide the foundation for understanding contemporary patterns of consumption of natural resources, undoubtedly a cause of global climate change and other serious adverse environmental effects. Significant environmental problems have occurred due to the continued depletion and degradation of public resources, with little consideration for the ultimate costs, whether known and ignored or simply unforeseen.

In today's culture, perhaps it is far too easy to throw away recyclable waste, grab a bottle of water, or print that e-mail message on paper made from a felled tree. Taken individually, these actions seem harmless, and their environmental impacts typically are not recognized. "The increased cognitive severance for consumers between environmental cause and effect exacerbates the potential environmental impact of such increased consumption."¹ This distance is evidenced in energy consumption, food choices, and home preferences. Televisions magically turn on, fast-food restaurants permeate our cities, and large homes overrun the suburban landscape. Many who engage in these activities remain happily ignorant of the environmental costs of common behavior and activity patterns.

Environmental ignorance couples dangerously with regulatory reluctance. Short-term economic gains drive modern public policy,² and this public policy ignores individual behavior.

The dominance of economic reasoning and the pragmatism of growth politics conspire to insulate from policy scrutiny the individual black boxes in which consuming is understood to occur. As a result, an entire realm of questions cannot be asked. No one in public life dares—or needs—to ask why people consume, let alone question whether people or societies are better off with their accustomed consumption patterns.³

Thus, modern culture and politics inhibit public discussion of the very questions this book chooses to address: Why do we use so much electricity in the home? Should we change our diets? Why do we live where we do? And an empirical query: why do people consume what they do?

This Article traces the links between historical consumption and economic development patterns in the United States, the resulting ecological harms, and the societal reluctance to deal with a new era of environmental concerns driven by the consequences of individual behavior. Part I describes the early American historical forces that helped lead to today's culture of convenience, development, and consumption in the United States. Part II discusses the more recent phenomenon of American consumption defined by consumerism, overconsumption,

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1. RICHARD J. LAZARUS, *THE MAKING OF ENVIRONMENTAL LAW* 220 (Univ. of Chicago Press 2004).
2. THOMAS PRINCEN ET AL., *CONFRONTING CONSUMPTION* 5 (MIT Press 2002). ("Economic growth, facilitated at every turn by public policy, becomes the lubricant for civic processes of democratic planning and compromise.")
3. *Id.* at 5.

and commoditization. While modern discussions of environmentalism and sustainable development fail to address “escalating consumption levels and, especially, the roots of such escalation,”⁴ this Article focuses on this historical perspective to demonstrate the deep roots of modern consumption patterns and their environmental consequences. As discussed in this book, efforts to change these embedded patterns and moderate their environmental impacts necessarily will demand use of a wide range of legal and policy tools.

I. Manifest Destiny

Modern consumption patterns in the United States are rooted in a tradition both of depending upon natural resources for survival and of taking pride in defeating nature. The rise of a market- and consumer-driven economy has shaped current individual preferences and developmental decisions, leading to a lack of balance between market forces and natural resources.

While Native American Indians managed the landscape and consumed the land’s natural resources, the rate and scope of consumption increased when European settlers landed in the New World. Expansion followed, fueling a movement later called “manifest destiny” in the 1840s when the United States embarked on efforts to enlarge its territory.⁵ Manifest destiny meant that this expansion, perceived as being arranged by God to create a vast democratic republic, fulfilled a duty to take possession of the land from those races that were perceived to waste it.

Manifest destiny “sanctioned the spatial motion that encouraged control over natural resources as Europeans swept westward bearing the torch of ‘civilization.’”⁶ John Quincy Adams, in exhorting the case for acquiring the Oregon territory in the northwest United States, said:

We claim that country—for what? To make the wilderness blossom as the rose, to establish laws, to increase,

4. *Id.* at 2.

5. This discussion of manifest destiny, expansionism, and American history’s relationship to natural resources and the environment draws upon the following sources: ANDREW C. ISENBERG, *THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BISON: AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY, 1750-1920* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2000); CAROLYN MERCHANT, *THE COLUMBIA GUIDE TO AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY* (Columbia Univ. Press 2002); FREDERICK MERK, *MANIFEST DESTINY AND MISSION IN AMERICAN HISTORY: A REINTERPRETATION* (Knopf 1963); RODERICK NASH, *WILDERNESS AND THE AMERICAN MIND* (Yale Univ. Press 1982); ANDERS STEPHANSON, *MANIFEST DESTINY: AMERICAN EXPANSIONISM AND THE EMPIRE OF RIGHT* (Hill & Wang 1995); Donald Worster, *The Vulnerable Earth: Toward a Planetary History*, in *THE ENDS OF THE EARTH* (Donald Worster ed., 1988); Donald Worster, *THE WEALTH OF NATURE: ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND THE ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION* (Oxford Univ. Press 1993).

6. CAROLYN MERCHANT, *ECOLOGICAL REVOLUTIONS: NATURE, GENDER, AND SCIENCE IN NEW ENGLAND* 201 (Univ. of N.C. Press 1989).

multiply, and subdue the earth, which we are commanded to do by the first behest of God Almighty.⁷

A. *Setting the Stage for a New Nation*

The European colonists came to the New World viewing the natural world as something to control. Western thought and Judeo-Christian tradition “generated a powerful bias against the wilderness,” associating undeveloped land with the supernatural and realm of evil.⁸ More pragmatically, settlers took pride in defeating their surroundings, which they felt threatened their survival. Soon after arrival, settlers identified commodities they could extract from or grow in their new environment for trade: furs, fish, and forest products in the North, and tobacco and later cotton in the South.

The settlement and formation of the United States occurred as modern capitalism emerged, illustrated by Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, an early treatise on capitalist economic organization, published in 1776. Capitalism was thought to deliver a better life to people “through the technological domination of the earth.”⁹ Capitalists urged people to produce not only to sustain themselves and their families but also to develop surplus in order to make money in the marketplace. This view precipitated a more expansive view and use of resources, permitting society to “regard everything around them—the land, its natural resources, their own labor—as potential commodities that might fetch a profit in the market.”¹⁰

The rise of individualist capitalism in the United States was perceived to protect early American values. Yet, the form this took in both early and modern American society and law oscillated between the values of conservation and planned development on the one hand and resource consumption and unchecked economic growth on the other. The founding fathers feared strong centralized power and corruption from the Old World, where they perceived that too few people had held too much power and land. Consequently, to avoid this situation, they argued that citizens should sustain themselves on their own land, a historical model for sustainability.

Thomas Jefferson and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, in *Letters From an American Farmer*, suggested that private land ownership gave people independence and freedom, and they and others believed that turning the land into private property could help avoid Old World corruption. Jefferson thought the nation’s citizens should consist of the

7. MERK, *supra* note 5, at 31.

8. NASH, *supra* note 5, at 10-17, 22.

9. Worster, *supra* note 5, at 11.

10. *Id.* Labeling the environment as a market commodity becomes increasingly problematic when natural resources are undervalued or *not* valued in the market, not because it is immoral or improper.

yeoman farmer, dependent on no one. To realize this, each generation must have “the material means to stake out its own future, provided it would always be an agrarian and pastoral one.”¹¹

This promotion of the agrarian lifestyle faced a Hamiltonian capitalist movement that successfully built the nation’s infrastructure and banking system and helped yield a more advanced state of land use. Commentators urged people to turn the wilderness into fields and farms “with such frequency . . . as to become common-place.”¹² Andrew Jackson, in his inaugural address in 1830, asked, “what good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute.”¹³

Over time, American law and public policy facilitated industrialization, as well as corporate growth and the modern market economy, resulting in development far more centralized and imposing than imagined during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. While these changes simultaneously paved the way for technological progress and increased living standards, yet another trend emerged. The criticism: “[s]ince 1790, power . . . flowed increasingly into the hands of persons concerting their purposes in corporate entities that by their nature are quite unsentimental about the earth.”¹⁴ The movement from agrarian roots to commercial industrialization stimulated by a market economy increasingly fostered major ecological problems due to corporate manufacturing and the otherwise beneficial rising standard of living.

B. *Promoting the Market Economy and Achieving Manifest Destiny*

The emergence of modern capitalism also shaped land policy in the United States, promoting both land acquisition and private development on a much larger scale. From the 1780s through the mid-1860s, the government acquired hundreds of millions of acres through state cessions, Indian treaties, and purchases from states and foreign nations. Following these mass land acquisitions, the U.S. government, well-intentioned and for the public benefit, sold or disposed of about one billion acres in the 150 years after the drafting of the Constitution. For example, the government subsidized railroad construction by granting nearly 100 million acres to railroads. The market economy fostered the development of canals, bridges, and roads that carried goods to and from the market. These transportation networks, while necessary, “brought sudden sweeping change to the landscapes and communities through which

they passed.”¹⁵ Similarly, farmers and homesteaders, in search of more abundant and fertile land than was available in the East, acquired, by cheap price or occupation, nearly 300 million acres of public lands mostly in the West. Soon, fueled by a commercial boom and increased demand for food in America and Europe, inland subsistence farmers shifted to market farming. Technologies, according to historian Walter Prescott Webb, like the Colt six-shooter (1835), barbed wire (1874), the John Deere plow (1846), mechanized harvesters, and other agricultural implements, helped farmers control the Plains and increase production. All of this promoted the nation’s growth and prosperity and raised American standards of living.

Over time, the government’s promotion of manifest destiny and resource consumption expanded to the point that it overwhelmed the government’s parallel role as a resource steward. The responsibility of the government as a resource steward had been championed by conservationists, such as Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, and John Muir, who are credited with starting the environmental movement through their writings on ecology and natural history, founding conservation groups like the Sierra Club, and protecting park lands. According to the harsh conclusion of sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen, as Americans settled the frontier, they worked to convert “all public wealth to private gain on a plan of legalised seizure.”¹⁶ “There was a kind of order to the taking: what was most easily available for quick riches went first”—fur-bearing animals, gold and other minerals, timber, iron, other metals, oil, natural gas, water power, irrigation rights, and transportation rights-of-ways.¹⁷ The resource-rich frontier became an “ongoing extension of market relations,”¹⁸ reflecting little balance between responsible consumption and unlimited growth. Take, for example, the near extermination of the American bison. Fur traders, employed by trading companies, started exploring the West and capturing the animals in the 1820s. Steamboats, which began to travel the Missouri River in the early 1820s, attracted traders to the northern plains to hunt bison. The railroads, arriving later, contributed to the collapse of the bison population by helping hunters easily reach the herds. Even more people journeyed west to kill bison after hide-tanning technologies improved. By the 1870s, commercial hunting had decimated the bison population. The size of the North American bison herd was an estimated 30 million in 1800. By 1889, people had slaughtered millions of bison, taking them to the brink of extinction with a population of just 1,000. Wrote Carolyn Merchant: “Living nature disappeared from the everyday experience for most Americans by the mid-twentieth century.”¹⁹

11. STEPHANSON, *supra* note 5, at 22.

12. MERCHANT, *ECOLOGICAL REVOLUTIONS*, *supra* note 6, at 204.

13. NASH, *supra* note 5, at 41.

14. ROGER G. KENNEDY, *MR. JEFFERSON’S LOST CAUSE: LAND, FARMERS, SLAVERY, AND THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE* 60 (Oxford Univ. Press 2003).

15. WILLIAM CRONON, *NATURE’S METROPOLIS: CHICAGO AND THE GREAT WEST* 72 (W.W. Norton 1991).

16. THORSTEIN VEBLÉN, *ABSENTEE OWNERSHIP AND BUSINESS ENTERPRISE IN RECENT TIMES: THE CASE OF AMERICA* 168 (B.W. Heubsch 1923).

17. Wilbur R. Jacobs, *The Great Despoliation: Environmental Themes in American Frontier History*, 47 PAC. HIST. REV. 1, 18 (1978).

18. CRONON, *supra* note 15, at 53.

19. CAROLYN MERCHANT, *AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION* 110 (Columbia Univ. Press 2007).

Industrialization and urbanization continued at a rapid pace in the United States. “There were 140,000 industrial establishments in the United States in 1859; many were hand or neighborhood industries. Just 40 years later, there were 207,000, excluding hand and neighborhood industries. By 1900, the United States was the world’s leading manufacturing nation.”²⁰ The growth of cities and factories fostered air, water, and noise pollution, as well as garbage production and disease. With the advent of motor vehicles, urbanization gave way to suburbanization. With Henry Ford’s creation of the automobile assembly line in 1914, more than 100,000 autos could come off assembly lines each day, and soon more than 100 million passenger cars were driven in the United States.²¹ The trends of commoditization, industrialization, and urbanization (and then suburbanization) continued from the 19th into the 21st century, accompanied by ever more extensive impacts on land use, natural ecosystems, and food systems.²² Thus, the historical tradition of using resources with little acknowledgment of environmental factors was firmly established as the underlying platform on which modern U.S. industrial and consumer activity were built.

II. Modern American Consumption

Modern America is a post-World War II construct. Modern American consumption patterns are rooted in the pre-war past but are more immediately driven by American economic changes after World War II. World War II stimulated technological innovation and provided Americans with exciting new consumer products. These products soon became broadly available on a much larger scale to meet the consumer demand fostered by a growing population, increased wealth, and more leisure time.²³ Air conditioners, televisions, processed and packaged foods, and automobiles dramatically changed the American lifestyle.

The war had ushered in a technological revolution that generated plastics and pesticides, atomic weapons and energy, revolutionary new drugs, and a whole universe of domestic consumer goods aimed at eliminating the drudgery of everyday life. The growth of these industries, and others that would inevitably follow in their wake, promised an unprecedented period of productivity, prosperity, and affluence. Proud of their technological achieve-

ments, most Americans celebrated the apparent victory of human technology and science over nature.²⁴

This supposed “victory” over nature continued through the new millennium with increased consumer spending for manufactured goods, growing and continued demand for fossil fuels for energy production and transportation, and the commoditization of agricultural goods. Increasingly, social status was defined through acquisition of large homes, fancy cars, and state-of-the-art electronics and appliances.

These expanding American consumption trends, while discussed in various history and economics books, generally have not been examined in environmental history texts. Yet, it is apparent that the continued increase in available consumer goods led to the grand scale of consumption that characterizes modern America and contributed to the resulting environmental degradation. Perhaps these modern consumption trends are not surprising, given the nature of the “progress” following World War II. Even *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* states:

The end of World War II brought unprecedented wealth and power to the United States and historical precedents suggest that such hegemony might have presaged a vigorous and energetic theatre. . . . But this was not to be. A certain confidence, sense of well-being, and exuberance, of course, did manifest itself in American culture, but more often in consumer goods than in arts. Cars, for example, began to sprout tailfins—futuristic icons of useless excess—with the 1948 Cadillac; homes began to fill with gleaming white appliances; sleek “entertainment centers” disguised as furniture became the centerpieces of living rooms, and movies increasingly abandoned the “noir” tones of black and white for the saturated colors of Technicolor.²⁵

By 1960, nearly 90% of American homes had a television. By the 1970s, \$40 billion had been spent on road construction to accommodate as many cars as one-half the U.S. population. The nation had reached a point where “the maintenance of America’s comfort and convenience level requires enormous quantities of energy and a bottomless pit of natural resources.”²⁶

This rapid consumption stripped domestic natural resources and fostered environmental pollution. The tragedy of modern American consumption is that it has lacked the influence of sustainability, conservation, basic necessity, artistic and educational endeavors, or any other broader social goals.²⁷ Instead, American consumption is driven by

20. MARTIN MELOSI, *EFFLUENT AMERICA: CITIES, INDUSTRY, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT* 50 (Univ. of Pittsburgh Press 2001).

21. DONALD WORSTER, *THE WEALTH OF NATURE: ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND THE ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION* 7 (Oxford Univ. Press 1994).

22. See, e.g., WILLIAM CRONON, *NATURE’S METROPOLIS: CHICAGO AND THE GREAT WEST* (W.W. Norton 1992); THEODORE STEINBERG, *NATURE INCORPORATED: INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE WATERS OF NEW ENGLAND* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2004).

23. See HAROLD G. VATTER & JOHN F. WALKER, *HISTORY OF THE U.S. ECONOMY SINCE WORLD WAR II* (M.E. Sharpe 1996); JOSEPH PETULLA, *AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: THE EXPLOITATION AND CONSERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES* (Boyd & Frasier Publ. 1997).

24. MARK CHRISTOPHER CARNES, *THE COLUMBIA HISTORY OF POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICA* 341 (Columbia Univ. Press 2007).

25. DON B. WILMETH & CHRISTOPHER W.E. BIGSBY, *THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AMERICAN THEATRE: POST-WORLD WAR II TO THE 1990s* 89 (Cambridge Univ. Press 2000).

26. PETULLA, *supra* note 23, at 333.

27. PRINCEN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 1 (stating “Consumption and consumerism have long been consigned to the edges of polite talk among North Americans concerned about environmental degradation and the prospects of sustainability. How much, and what, do we consume? Why? Are we happier in the process? How much is enough? How much is too much for the

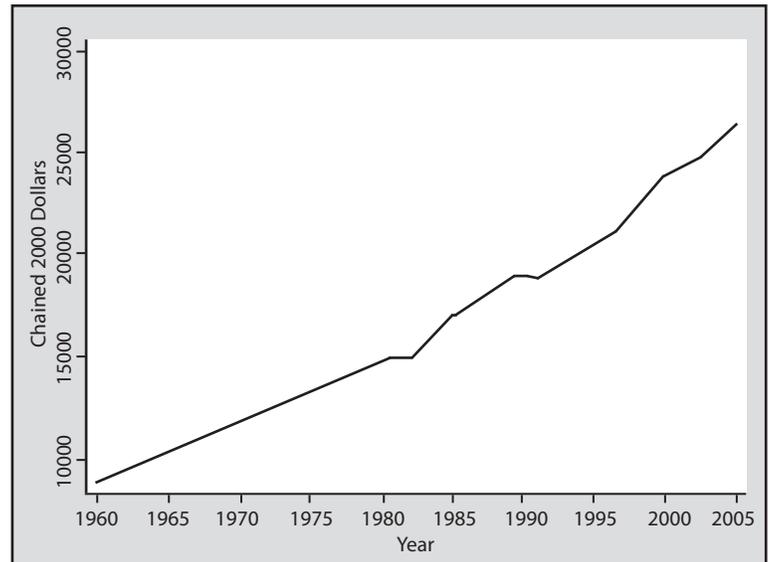
individualism and consumerism, “the crass elevation of material acquisition to the status of a dominant social paradigm”; commoditization, “the substitution of marketable goods and services for personal relationships, self-provisioning, culture, artistic expression, and other sources of human well-being”; and overconsumption, “using more than is necessary.”²⁸

Americans simply have adopted a culture of spending more money and absorbing more resources in order to accumulate more. Consumerism has emerged as a “cultural orientation maintaining that the possession and use of an increasing number and variety of goods and services is the principal cultural aspiration and the surest perceived route to personal happiness, social status, and national success.”²⁹ It is useful to put this qualitative trend into quantitative terms. Worldwide per capita growth in consumption for many resources is expanding 8 to 12 times faster than population growth.³⁰ Worldwide consumption expenditures reached \$24 trillion in 1998, doubling in just over two decades.³¹ In the United States alone, aggregate personal consumption expenditures rose by 74% between 1990 and 2000,³² and, as seen in Figure A, per capita consumption continues to increase.

Consumption has not only depleted natural resources and thinned the wallet; it has also fattened the waistline, as nearly two-thirds of Americans are overweight and nearly one-third are obese.³³ Individuals throughout the world, and Americans in particular, seem destined to test the bounds of resource consumption. And, unfortunately, consumers “dislocate the patterns and choices of daily life from larger problems and trends,”³⁴ including, notably, the aggregate environmental impacts of those choices.

Land use and development are no exceptions. U.S. land consumption churned at a rate of about 2.2 million acres per year during the 1990s, up more than 30% from the 1980s.³⁵ Of the nearly 9 million acres developed between

Figure A: U.S. Per Capita Personal Consumption Expenditures in Real Dollars, 1960-2005



Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007* 434, Table 655 (2007), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/07statab/income.pdf>. The “chained dollars” measure is meant to reflect real prices over time.

1997 and 2001, most projects used previously undeveloped land, otherwise known as “greenfields.”³⁶

There are other costs to expanding our dominion over natural resources and relying on the convenience generated by technological progress. Consider the following statistics. In 2005, Americans generated 4.54 pounds of solid waste per person per day.³⁷ Estimated U.S. water usage was 408 billion gallons per day in 2000.³⁸ The average American household uses 101 gallons of water each day,³⁹ and people are drinking more and more bottled water, leaving piles of plastic waste in need of recycling. To meet the demand for paper used by the copy centers on every corner and the low-cost printers available at any electronics superstore, combined with the acreage used for increased development, the United States will lose at least 23 million acres of forest by 2050.⁴⁰ Changes in consumer activity have also resulted in increased energy use, as “energy demand is shifting away from manufacturers and towards consumers.”⁴¹

These modern consumption patterns are a product of the historical development and industrialization of the

social fabric and health of the planet?” and suggesting that society does not want to address these questions because people want the “good life,” and do not want to challenge “consumer sovereignty” and our modern economic system).

28. PRINCEN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 3.

29. RITA ERICKSON, “PAPER OR PLASTIC?” ENERGY, ENVIRONMENT AND CONSUMERISM IN SWEDEN AND AMERICA (Praeger 1997) (citing Paul Elkins, *The Sustainable Consumer Society: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 3 INT’L ENVTL. AFF. 243 (1991)).

30. PRINCEN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 4.

31. *Id.* at 219.

32. *Id.*

33. U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 2007, at 131 tbl. 198, available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/07statab/health.pdf>.

34. ERICKSON, *supra* note 29, at 3.

35. NATURAL RES. CONSERVATION SERV., U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., NATURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY, 2001 ANNUAL NRI (2003), available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/NRI/2001/urban.pdf>.

36. *Id.* (“Between 1997 and 2001, almost 9 million acres were developed, of which 46 percent came from forest land, 20 percent from cropland, and 16 percent from pasture land.”).

37. U.S. EPA, MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE IN THE UNITED STATES: 2005 FACTS AND FIGURES, at 4 tbl. 3, available at <http://www.epa.gov/osw/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/mswchar05.pdf>.

38. SUSAN S. HUTSON ET AL., ESTIMATED USE OF WATER IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2000 (2004), available at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/2004/circ1268/>.

39. AMY VICKERS, HANDBOOK OF WATER USE AND CONSERVATION 12 (Water-Flow Press 2001).

40. LAZARUS, *supra* note 1, at 219; SUSAN M. STEIN ET AL., FORESTS ON THE EDGE 2 (2005), available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/fote/reports/fote-6-9-05.pdf>.

41. ERICKSON, *supra* note 29, at 113.

United States, including increased consumer spending and demand for energy-intensive goods. These historical and social trends provide the foundation for understanding contemporary patterns of consumption of natural resources, undoubtedly a cause of global climate change and other serious adverse environmental effects.⁴² The bottom line is that significant environmental problems have occurred due to the continued depletion and degradation of public resources, with little consideration as to the ultimate costs, whether known and ignored or simply unforeseen.

Judge J. Skelly Wright, in a famous environmental law case interpreting the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA),⁴³ recognized that we must be concerned with the “destructive engine of material ‘progress,’” putting “progress” in quotations to question the long-term value of so much economic development.⁴⁴ And environmental historians have noted that the origins of environmental degradation are alive in the present and that their histories are “to be useful not just in helping us understand the past but in helping us change the future.”⁴⁵

42. See, e.g., ALAN DURNING, *HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? THE CONSUMER SOCIETY AND THE FUTURE OF THE EARTH* (W.W. Norton 1992).

43. 42 U.S.C. §§4321-4370f, ELR STAT. NEPA §§2-209.

44. *Calvert Cliffs Coordinating Comm. v. U.S. Atomic Energy Comm'n*, 449 F.2d 1109, 1 ELR 20346 (D.C. Cir. 1971).

45. William Cronon, *The Use of Environmental History*, 17 ENVTL. HIST. REV. 1, 3 (1993).