

Book Review By Sonya Newenhouse

Last Earth Day I heard an inspiring river talk by Tim Palmer at the River Alliance and Gathering Waters conference, “Celebrating Community Based Conservation”. At that time, Charlie Luthin (Director of Wisconsin Wetlands Association) et al had just won the Wisconsin wetland legislative battle and Madison Environmental Group had just published our Wisconsin Wetland Wonders calendar to commemorate Earth Day. I was a wetland novice, turned curious. Tim had many books for sale, but my attention was drawn to the work of his partner, Ann Vileisis. A former student of Bill Cronon, Vileisis, wrote Discovering The Unknown Landscape: A History of American’s Wetlands, which has won prestigious awards in the Environmental History field.



This book was sitting on my nightstand all summer, but not until a fall vacation did I devour it on my back porch. The book is extremely thorough and Vileisis intertwines information on wetland art, politics, law, literature, and science to report the wetland story. She begins her tale with a personal experience, followed by maps and descriptions of America’s wetlands in the late eighteenth century. Since that time scientists estimate that we have lost 53% of our nation’s wetlands. Right away, she also describes how property right laws have hindered wetland protection. Land is treated as private property. Water is public property. Wetlands, part land and part water, are thus caught in the middle.

The book also describes the historical uses of and attitudes toward wetlands -- from places where hunters found birds, Native Americans harvested wild rice, and farmers harvested marsh hay to feed horses in the city, to places where disease manifested. Before the turn of the twentieth century, scientists did not understand that mosquitoes, not evil swamps, caused malaria. Words change as attitudes change, and in the 1950s ecologists coined the term “wetland” to replace “swamp”. Some things don’t change much. Hunters still enjoy hunting in wetlands. Native Americans still harvest wild rice.

In chapter 5 (of 18) Vileisis begins the drainage discussion as well as the details of every law affecting wetlands since 1849. But just as you are about to get bored with the details of any particular legislation, such as the Swamp Grant Act, Vileisis adds art and literature to the story. She describes how Thoreau found solace in swamps, how Martin Johnson Heade was the first artist to paint salt marsh landscapes, how Harriet Beecher Stowe used wetlands as the backdrop for her anti slavery message in the novel *Dread, A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856).

The book also describes how government agencies were actors in this complicated story such as: 1) the Army Corps of Engineers and their long disruptive relationship with wetlands, 2) the National Park Service and the difficult

and ongoing creation of the Everglades National Park, 3) the Soil Conservation Service (known today as National Resource Conservation Service) and their wetland drainage promotion programs, and 4) the Fish and Wildlife Service and their influential inventory report “Circular 39” published in 1956 – a public document used as a tool to protect wetlands.

Nonprofit members and staff will enjoy this book for its history of various environmental nonprofit groups. For example, the Environmental Defense Fund (known today as Environmental Defense) was created in 1967 as a result of combining science and law to win a class action suit to stop the use of DDT in local marshes and lakes in Long Island, New York. Specifically, members of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin and Midwest Environmental Advocates will find this book of interest as urban and legal issues are referenced many times. The Nature Conservancy is also cited often in reference to wetland protection. One story describes a deal with Union Camp Corporation to donate, 50,000 acres of Virginia wetlands – the largest single corporate gift in it’s history

Is this book perfect? No, but nearly so. It is very detailed and delves into all the relative legislation – making it a bit difficult to keep the story straight as you read. Selfishly speaking, there are not many references to Wisconsin. So if you are looking for local details they will be absent. I marked all the Wisconsin references in my copy. If you want those citations, I would be happy to share them with you.

The bottom line – read the book to appreciate 1) that we continue to lose more than 100,000 acres of wetlands every year, 2) that there is still a lot to learn from history and from our current actions (or lack there of), and 3) that wetlands represent an American paradox – the desire to maintain private rights (land) with the desire to protect a public good (water). Personally, I have a new appreciation for the water that sometimes seeps into my basement. The concrete foundation was installed in 1916 on Rutledge Street and is ever so slowly sinking where, after all, a marsh once flourished on Madison’s Isthmus.

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