



The Decline of Nature: Environmental History and the Western Worldview

Gilbert F. Lafreniere

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No book could be more timely than *The Decline of Nature*. LaFreniere offers an in-depth analysis of the fundamental issues that must be faced if solutions for environmental crisis are to be found. His arguments are a refreshing alternative to the superficial policy proposals of politicians and the glib reporting of the mass media. *The Decline of Nature* is a masterful critique of the stories that own us. LaFreniere's analytical effort is a veritable tour de force. From the Foreword by Professor Max Oelschlaeger, Northern Arizona University The virtue of his book is threefold: it ingeniously connects the latest findings of environmental science to the broad stream of cultural history; exposes the flaws inherent in western attitudes about nature, especially the destructive, providential "idea of nature; and revives the much neglected field of speculative philosophy of history From an appreciation by Professor Klaus Fischer, author of *Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West* and *Nazi Germany: A New History ...* Sweepingly brilliant! Dr. J.Donald Hughes Description: This work is a radical rethinking of the key currents of intellectual and environmental history. *The Decline of Nature* is an account of Western attitudes and behavior toward nature, from the deforestation of Western Europe during the High Middle Ages through the Scientific Revolution and the technological exploitation of nature in the 19th and 20th centuries, and on to the Environmental Movement. The destruction of European and colonial ecosystems parallels the rise of modern mechanistic science and a science-based idea of progress which has been perverted by economic ideologies into a belief in unlimited development of nature-as-resources into the amenities of the consumer society. Ecosystems and species diversity have declined to isolated and shrinking remnants subject to further degradation due to global warming resulting from human intervention in global climate cycles. These massive changes will have a catastrophic effect upon evolutionary processes, mankind and the survival of the Earth. *The Decline of Nature* is an environmental history of ideas embedded in a compact account of Western civilization's ecological impact upon the planet, particularly in Europe and its colonies. The major thesis presented is the idea that two speculative philosophies of history (attempts to understand the meaning of history) and their associated worldviews have been largely responsible for destructive attitudes and behaviors towards nature. They include the idea of providence (i.e. the Christian worldview) and the idea of progress (the science and technology-based vision of unrestrained economic development and material accumulation since the 17th century). Some scholars understand the idea of progress as a secularization of the Christian millennium, the creation of a new Eden through science and technology. A third, alternative philosophy of history, the idea of history as multiple cycles of civilizations rising, flourishing, and declining, was popular in both classical Greco-Roman and ancient Asian civilizations, but was rejected by Western civilization until its revival during the Renaissance and in 19th and 20th century. Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* was the founding work of cyclical philosophy of history in the 20th century. Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and other 20th century speculative philosophers of history have been criticized by postmodern philosophers for creating logically indefensible grand narratives. However, Spengler's mysterious cycles of civilization have found at least a partial scientific explanation in the new discipline of environmental history. Environmental degradation played a major role in the decline of ancient Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, Mayan and Asian civilization.

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