Review of Book: *In a Dark Wood: the Fight over Forests and the Rising Tyranny of Ecology* (by Alston Chase)

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In a Dark Wood: The Fight over Forests and the Rising Tyranny of Ecology
Alton Chase, 1995, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. 535 pages (Cloth, $29.95; ISBN 0-395-60837-6)

Debate over natural resource and ecological policy is often fierce. Whether driving spikes into Douglas fir to discourage harvest or liquidating a company's timber holdings to drive up short term corporate profit and shareholder value, this debate may have more in common with war than democracy. Presidents, governors, business owners, and school teachers can be forced to take sides in debates that offer no safe havens.

Conflict over ecological policy is particularly severe in the Pacific Northwest. The future of forest and range lands, both public and private, is up for grabs. The combatants are engaged in a confrontation of prodigious proportions, a confrontation whose implications few fully appreciate. It is a battle for control of land, but in a larger and more important sense, it is a war of competing cultures, values, and philosophy. The debate is not simply competition between rural and urban residents, between college graduates and high school dropouts, or between workers in the silicon forest and the redwood forest. It is a battle of ideas, a battle of cultures, a battle over the future of western civilization. It is the ideas that interest Alston Chase. Not the protests. Not the Wall Street takeover strategies. Not the policy advocates masquerading as impartial scientists.

The ideas driving the policy conflicts cannot be precisely categorized. On the surface the policy skirmish is over who wins and who loses, but there is a much deeper clash. It is not owls versus jobs, nor is it corporations versus the interests of people. In Chase's view it is a clash between biocentrism ("all living things have equal value") and competing philosophies. The debate over how to define ecosystem management, according to Chase, involves far more than technical aspects; it is fundamentally a debate over the dominant philosophies that underlie western civilization.

This book has at least three goals. The first is to trace the philosophical development of ideas that would eventually spawn the "environmental" philosophy. There really are no good guys or villains here, only the clash of competing philosophies.

The second goal is to explain the current debate over ecological policy issues within the larger philosophical context. Too often, reports on ecological policy debates emphasize the actions of the participants, certainly more appealing to television news producers, but less important than the ideas that precipitate the actions. A confrontation between mill workers and protesters makes great television footage, but what causes such a confrontation?

The third goal is to offer solutions or approaches to resolve some of the conflict. No one seems happy with the current political situation, but what can be done, if anything, to resolve it?

The author's focus is the debate over forests in the Pacific Northwest, primarily the western regions of northern California, Oregon, and Washington. As he tells the story of the forest policy debate, Chase detours to describe the development of a range of divergent ideas, some philosophical, some scientific. A chapter may cover a particularly nasty confrontation between timber workers and environmentalists, but as he quotes ideas espoused by the antagonists, the author will explain how, in his view, those ideas evolved from an earlier time.

Chase adopts the same style to explain some of the science involved in the debates. He will step back and describe how concepts of ecological "health" and "integrity" were developed and marketed in the scientific arena and eventually in the political arena. Even in the scientific arena, he names individuals and often speculates on their political motives.

Phrases such as "Equal rights for all species," "Loggers are people too," "Back to the Pleistocene," and "Environmental fascism " are not merely slogans to Chase, they represent religious and moral positions. From the perspective of academia and government, or from outside the region, such slogans may be dismissed along with the latest campus protest or "wise use" hyperbole. Should they be? Not according to Alston Chase.

He also follows the evolution of the free market philosophy, describing in detail its emphasis on individual autonomy. In contrast, he traces some

of the roots of environmentalism to the area of progressive unionism and the idea of community good. Chase's background as a philosophy professor is apparent in his writing.

The role of government and the bureaucracy is covered in detail, especially as it relates to the Pacific Northwest forest issue. For example, the author detours to describe how the government employees who drafted versions of the Endangered Species Act hid, intentionally or not, the ramifications of the legislation from Congress; members of Congress thought that the Endangered Species Act would deal with, at most, a few hundred species. As interesting as these detours are, they sometimes break up the chronological flow of the book.

Chase describes how the people in timber towns across the Pacific Northwest were caught between competing paradigms of which they understood little. Even after the political die had been cast that sealed their fate, they never really understood the motivation of their opponents. It is this group that garners Chase's sympathy. Held in disdain are the scientists who have stepped from the scientific "is" to the advocacy "ought;" scientists—ecologists in particular—who have used science to argue in favor of biocentric policy positions. Chase contends that science may be used to describe what *is* the condition or characteristic of an ecosystem or to predict the ecological consequences of various decision options, but science cannot be used to render judgement of what option *should* or *ought* to be adopted.

Chase is generally successful in meeting the goals he has set. He tackles issues that are difficult and emotionally charged. He pulls no punches and is particularly hard on scientists who operate as policy advocates. In fact, many readers will feel challenged by his confrontational writing style. To his credit he does not attempt to settle debates with platitudes, an all too frequent cop-out for authors addressing ecological policy.

Some "pop ecology" ideas are attacked with apparent glee. Chase is blunt in shattering the myths of a pre-1492 "pristine" North America, the "balance of nature," and concepts of ecological "health." Such information may not surprise scientists, but his manner of presentation will likely infuriate environmentalists who often prefer the myth of a pre-European pristine landscape. He makes short work of the desirability of managing ecosystems to "presettlement" conditions. None of this is new to scientists working on ecosystem management issues, but Chase's brusqueness may offend some readers. Readers with environmentalist political leanings should expect to be challenged.

I found myself squirming as he portrayed many ecologists as little more than handmaidens for environmentalists. Perhaps because this is closer to home, I am more sensitive. His condemnation is not categorical, but his tone is dismissive. Ecologists who use their scientific background and positions, especially taxpayer paid, to argue for political (generally environmentalist) positions warrant scorn, according to Chase. He argues that many, perhaps most, ecologists have lost their credibility as scientists because they have become spin doctors for environmentalist positions.

Clarifying the proper role of scientists, particularly ecologists, in formulating public policy is important. Some categorize ecologists as pseudoscientists, little more than "environmentalists" who use their scientific credentials to lobby for particular public policy positions. Others regard ecologists as analogs to physicians, technical experts who can help explain to decision makers and the public the consequences of policy alternatives without advocating any particular position. In Chase's mind, there is no doubt where most of us would be categorized.

Much of what is written today about biological diversity, ecosystem stability, ecosystem health, and sustainability accepts as a premise a biocentric world view. Whether or not one agrees with the biocentric position in the philosophical debate, it is this premise (or the alternatives) that largely defines debates; consequently this issue deserves a larger portion of the public discourse.

Chase is a good writer and his book is worth reading. Whether you agree or not with his interpretations of ideas and events, he presents information in an interesting, provocative manner. Because he is so direct, he is likely to offend those with strongly held environmentalist positions.

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