

The Chesapeake: An Environmental Biography

John R. Wennersten

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“Human endeavor rarely results in a world we want. One man’s utopia is another man’s dystopia.” So says the author in his chronicle of the gradual deconstruction of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem at the hands of man.

One might think, mistakenly, from the title of this book that it is a dry discussion of statistics on overfishing and overpopulation, pollution and politics. While it contains an abundance of information on the factors contributing to the decline of the Chesapeake Bay’s bounty, Wennersten’s saga, however, unfolds more as if he is recounting a great adventure-as, indeed, he is. The tragedy of the despoilment of the Chesapeake region is also the story of man’s great adventure in settling the region.

Adventure and folly go hand in hand, and Wennersten, who teaches American history and politics at the University of Maryland, does not spare the details. Timber barons and self-reliant watermen share the blame with politicians squabbling over borders and stubborn settlers seeking to remake the land and waters into the image of what they felt it should be. Canals, railroads, logging, farming, tobacco, and highways all played their part. Since the Chesapeake drainage basin spans from upstate New York and Pennsylvania through Maryland and Virginia, many of the bay’s most serious problems, he says, had their origin in such places, where settlers and later residents neither knew nor cared what effect their actions would have on an area so far removed.

The author has done yeoman research, and included voluminous footnotes and a bibliography as interesting as the rest of the book, separated into subject areas like “Indians, Slavery, and Disease” and “The Watermen’s Culture.” He relates incidents in the Chesapeake’s history, such as the war between the Oyster Police and the oystermen, with attention to detail and a respect for the inherent drama-as well as the foolishness of refusing to see beyond today’s needs.

Wennersten’s careful research and obvious concern for the region show clearly in his reasoned discussions of the multitude of problems facing the area, as conservationists continue to battle with special-interest groups over how best to “save the Bay.” Yet he resists the urge to demonize any group, and tells the story of each fairly, explaining the harsh necessities that faced early settlers, pointing out the realities of each group’s contribution to the problems, and discussing clearly the flaws in the arguments of extremists on both sides.

He also recognizes man’s inherent inability to appreciate what he has until it is gone, or nearly so. For, as he concludes, “We cannot claim innocence.”

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