

2010

A Chronicle of Changing American Attitudes Towards Wetlands

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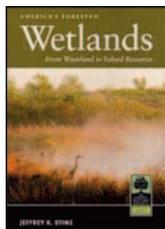
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McBroom, Matthew W., "A Chronicle of Changing American Attitudes Towards Wetlands" (2010). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 402.
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■ A CHRONICLE OF CHANGING AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD WETLANDS

America's Forested Wetlands: From Wasteland to Valued Resource. Jeffrey K. Stine. 96 p., \$8.95. Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 2008. ISBN-13:978-0-89030-071-8.

As noted by Mitsch and Gosselink (1993) in the preface to the second edition of their textbook on wetlands, in a search of television news stories, there were no references to wetlands prior to 1989. However, four years later, the topic of wetlands conservation was a defining issue in the political, entertainment, scientific, and education arenas. Mitsch and Gosselink (1993) further observed that the wetlands protection debate had moved from the back of the sports section in many newspapers (the outdoor column) to the front page. Clearly, there had been a major cultural shift in the United States in a relatively short period of time toward wetlands. In this latest addition to the Forest History Society's Forestry Issues Series, Jeffrey K. Stine chronicles how American attitudes have changed over time regarding wetland ecosystems. Stine shows how this shift was in fact a long time in coming, and what happened in the early 1990s was just the surfacing of attitudes that had been evolving since America's inception.

The purpose of the Forestry Issues Series is to bring a historical context to forest management issues, and this latest installment effectively accomplishes this task. Jeffrey Stine examines the historical information and synthesizes it into a very readable summary of how Americans have changed in their understanding and appropriate valuing of the Nation's wetland resources. Stine documents how early use followed by exploitation eventually led to a greater appreciation of wetlands by society.

Stine begins his chronicle by examining the value that was placed on wetlands by Native Americans and early European colonists. These areas provided basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter in the form of various plants, fish, fowl, and other game species. However, as European populations increased, wetlands were increasingly valued for their potential agricultural productivity and were drained and developed. Technological advances allowed more efficient drainage and ditching, until by the dawn of the 21st century, over half of America's wetland resources had been developed, with over 80% of this loss due to agriculture.

The book then focuses on wet forests and how over-harvesting took its toll through the United States. One example discussed was the Southeast's cypress swamps and bottomland hardwood ecosystems. After the logging boom

collapsed in the 1930s when timber resources had become exhausted, many bottomland hardwood forests were then converted to agriculture. Stine estimates that in pre-Columbian times, the Mississippi River valley's wet woodlands occupied 26 million acres, but were reduced to 5 million acres by the 1990s. Many of these forests were also converted from wetland tree species to more mesic commercial timber species by the installation of drainage works, a practice that remains controversial in the forest industry to this day.

Environmental conservation movements typically begin with the shock of perceived loss, followed by greater valuation, leading to conservation, and finally to legislation and litigation. Wetlands conservation has followed in this same vein. Therefore, Stine's book next examines both the laws and court decisions that have determined not only how wetlands are to be conserved or developed, but the very definition of wetlands. This definition remains in a state of flux up to the most recent Supreme Court decision, *Rapanos v. United States* in 2006. This ruling is not likely to be the last word on determining precisely what is and what is not a wetland, and consequently, what conservation strategies may be appropriate for a particular piece of property.

It is important for natural resource managers to consider Søren Kierkegaard's famous dictum "Life must be understood backwards ... [but] it must be lived forwards." Kierkegaard goes on to lament the difficulty of this task without "the necessary resting place from which to understand it—backwards." (Kierkegaard, 1959). One of the goals for the Forestry Issues Series is to provide this "necessary resting place" where understanding can take root in forest resource managers. Like other conservation issues, public attitudes and statutory dictates regarding wetlands are in a dynamic state. Americans can anticipate that future attitudes and laws will likely be different from those of today. If appropriately informing in the debate, forest managers can provide the knowledge and experience needed by society for both wetlands conservation and economic prosperity. An integral component is first developing and then enhancing this historical understanding, and these installments from the Forest History Society (including Stine's latest book on wetlands) are a great resource for accomplishing this.

Literature Cited

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