

The Bulldozer in the Countryside

Suburban Sprawl and the Rise
of American Environmentalism

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American Geographical Society for giving me permission to use material from my article "William Whyte, Open Space, and Environmental Activism," which appeared in *Geographical Review* 88 (April 1998): 259–274.

As a graduate student, I was helped greatly by a three-year University Fellowship and a one-year University Dissertation Fellowship. John Clark, William Tuttle, and Pete Shortridge offered thoughtful suggestions as members of my doctoral committee. From the start, Peter Mancall, Lisa Bitel, and Victor Bailey gave me all kinds of encouragement. Because Don Worster attracted a talented group of students to Kansas, I also had the advantage while in graduate school of belonging to a lively community of environmental historians. I am especially grateful for the good company of Brian Black – a friendly basketball foe and a relaxing conference roommate.

I owe much to Penn State too. To ensure that I had sufficient time for research and writing, I was given a term off from teaching. The staff in the Interlibrary Loan office enabled me to use a wealth of hard-to-find books, articles, and government documents. The University Photo / Graphics shop produced the prints of most of my illustrations. My department heads and deans – A. Gregg Roeber, Roger Downs, John Dutton, and Susan Welch – have given me helpful counsel and strong support. I have also enjoyed the chance to work with so many fine colleagues.

At Cambridge University Press, Frank Smith was a model editor. He was enthusiastic about the project from the time of our first conversation, and he was a fine guide on the trail to publication. I also appreciate the work of all the people involved in the production of the book.

I have always felt blessed in my family, and I owe more than I can say to my parents and my siblings – Donald and Sheila, Ethan and Lisa. I also have been fortunate in my friends. I especially thank Ben Fine, Alina Macneal, and Randy Scholfield. All became friends long ago, during formative periods of my life, and all continue to enrich my years.

Robin Schulze has lived with this book as long as I have. She is a true scholar, and her example and sage advice have helped me immeasurably. But I am grateful for much more. For me, Robin is home: comfort, joy, love. I dedicate this book to her with thanks for everything.

Introduction

In 1950, photographer William Garnett made a series of aerial photographs of the construction of Lakewood Park, a California suburb. Four of Garnett's images soon became iconic. The first was a bulldozed landscape – a large tract of earth with no topographical features, no trees or grass, indeed no visible life of any kind. In the second photograph, the tract had dozens of foundations in lines stretching indefinitely beyond the frame. Except for the utility poles and the piles of lumber by each foundation, nothing rose more than a few feet above the ground. The third photograph showed the wood skeletons of the houses-to-be. In the fourth photograph, the roofs and walls were done. The ground was still bare and the streets unpaved. But the tract was about to become a neighborhood.¹

The photographs were commissioned by the developers. Like Levittown, Lakewood Park exemplified a revolutionary new way of building, and the developers took great pride in the project. "This is planning as businessmen can do it," one told *Time* magazine. The development was a gigantic undertaking, covering 3,500 acres and costing \$135 million. The plans called for the assembly line construction of 17,000 homes. The community would also have 17 churches, 20 schools, 37 playgrounds – and a shopping center with department stores, supermarkets, banks, service stations, offices, movie theaters, and recreation facilities. In two years, the developers predicted, more than 70,000 people would live in Lakewood Park. To promote the project, the developers

1. I first saw the four photographs in Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 36–37. But the series has appeared in many places, as I explain later in the text.

bound enlargements of Garnett's photographs in a beautiful presentation book.²

The national media also published Garnett's photographs in stories about "the world's largest planned housing development." In a two-page piece entitled "New Homes: 1,000 a Month," *Business Week* reproduced all four images, from the barren tract to the framed homes on the grid of unpaved streets. The photographs dwarfed the text. In a matter-of-fact tone, the captions highlighted the audacity of the developers. "Earthmoving job involved more than 3-million cu. yd. for drainage, streets, sewers, and water supply. . . ." "Construction timetable is the key to success. . . ." "Framing is done by new methods aimed at speeding work. . . ." "It'll look like this on completion. . . ." Together, the photographs suggested the remarkable energy of American business in meeting a vital need.³

By 1970, however, the Garnett photographs had become symbols of environmental devastation. The first sign of revisionism came in a 1964 book, Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard*. The book was a biting pictorial attack on "the planned deterioration of America's landscape" – a kind of anticoffee-table book – and Blake included the four Garnett views of Lakewood Park. Each photograph was half a page, with no caption. The introduction to the book made clear how Blake interpreted the images: The suburbs were "wastelands." Blake was not alone. In 1969, architect Nathaniel Owings used Garnett's photographs to illustrate a call for a new conservation aesthetic. For Owings, the bulldozed landscape was an object lesson in "what we want to avoid." Now we needed to "salvage what we have damaged" and "save what is still unspoiled." We needed to build communities that would "thrive in harmony with the surrounding land."⁴

2. The quotation comes from "Birth of a City," *Time* 55 (April 17, 1950): 100. D. J. Waldie describes the presentation book in *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996; reprint, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 4. For the project statistics, see also "New Homes: 1,000 a Month," *Business Week* (September 9, 1950): 52–53; Ray Day, "Lakewood Park: The City They Built in 6 Months," *American City* 66 (May 1951): 100–102.

3. "New Homes: 1,000 a Month," 52–53. In addition, see Day, "Lakewood Park," 101; William Garnett, "Over California," *Fortune* 49 (March 1954): 112.

4. Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 8, 106–107; Nathaniel Alexander Owings, *The American Aesthetic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 14, 24, 27, 29, 105, 107.

The radical rereading of Garnett's work reflected a dramatic change in the way many Americans reckoned the costs and benefits of suburban development. In the years after World War II, the nation's biggest homebuilders were hailed as heroes: By making the United States a nation of homeowners, the boosters argued, tract housing would help lay the foundation for a booming mass-consumption economy. Yet, just a generation later, a host of critics were calling the sprawl of suburbia an environmental disaster – and arguing that the problem of environmentally destructive development demanded far-reaching government action. The causes and consequences of that momentous shift in thinking are the subject of *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*.

The story begins with the postwar revolution in construction. The adoption of mass production techniques greatly intensified the environmental impact of homebuilding. For the first time, builders put hundreds of thousands of homes in environmentally sensitive areas, including wetlands, steep hillsides, and floodplains. Builders also began to use new earth-moving equipment to level hills, fill creeks, and clear vegetation from vast tracts. The result was more frequent flooding, costly soil erosion, and drastic changes in wildlife populations. The postwar subdivisions typically had little open space. Because the cheapest and largest tracts were beyond the reach of municipal sewer systems, the use of septic tanks increased sharply, yet septic tanks were a problematic method of disposing of household wastes in densely settled areas: Septic-tank failures caused outbreaks of disease, groundwater contamination, and eutrophication of lakes. In designing homes, builders abandoned regional traditions that kept homes warmer in winter and cooler in summer. Instead, the ranch house became the norm in places as diverse as Minnesota, Arizona, Florida, and Kansas – and residential use of energy skyrocketed.⁵

The problems did not become apparent all at once. Though the postwar building boom was an environmental catastrophe on the scale of the Dust Bowl, the signs of trouble were not nearly so striking as in the 1930s. No black clouds darkened suburban streets at

5. I first made this argument in "Building on the Land: Toward an Environmental History of Residential Development in American Cities and Suburbs, 1870–1990," *Journal of Urban History* 20 (1994): 407–434.

midday, no dust swept from the plains of Lakewood Park to the committee rooms of the nation's capitol. Yet, one by one, the environmental costs of tract-house development became subjects of debate. Even before the end of World War II, a variety of people were talking about the need for energy-conserving "solar houses." The septic-tank problem began to concern federal housing administrators in the late 1940s. The first questions about the wisdom of building on sensitive lands came a few years later, in the mid-1950s. *Fortune* and *Life* published influential essays about the loss of open space in the late 1950s. In the early 1960s – before the publication of *Silent Spring*, and long before the first Earth Day – the U. S. Geological Survey began to investigate the effects of suburban growth on water and soil.

The arrival of bulldozers in the countryside also inspired protests. By the mid-1960s, indeed, the sprawl of the tracts had provoked hundreds of grass roots campaigns to stop "the rape of the land." The protests struck classic chords. For more than a century, the nation's most gifted writers had expressed anxiety about the sudden appearance of "the machine in the garden." Would Nature survive the advance of Civilization? The antisprawl activists asked a similar question. Yet the outcry against the bulldozer was something new, because the concern no longer was limited to a tiny minority. From New York to California, countless suburbanites began to have doubts about the virtue of "progress."⁶

The activism of the 1950s and 1960s had profound consequences. The critics of tract-house development sought to encourage "a land ethic." To reduce the environmental costs of homebuilding, public officials challenged the near-sacred rights of property owners. Cities and counties passed ordinances to limit the spread of septic tanks, to restrict building on sensitive lands, and to check erosion during construction. Several states established programs to regulate how and where developers could build large subdivisions. The nation's courts also reinterpreted property law to allow greater public control over the use of privately owned land. Together, the initiatives made "a quiet revolution."

6. Both the title of my book and the argument of this paragraph play off Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

To readers acquainted with the historical literature on environmentalism, the story of *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* should seem both familiar and unfamiliar. The basic plot is one of the archetypal narratives of the rise of environmental awareness: the introduction of a new product or process, welcomed as a miracle, that people eventually come to see as the source of disturbing environmental problems. That is the story of DDT and nuclear power and detergents – and that is the story of tract housing. In several ways, however, a study of the changing response to tract-house development provides important new insights into the history of the environmental movement.⁷

First, the homebuilding story illuminates the relationship between the two great explanations of the origins of environmentalism. On the one hand, scholars see the movement as a response to postwar changes in the world of production. The chemical revolution in agriculture, the proliferation of synthetic materials, the development of atomic energy, the increased scale of power-generation and resource-extraction technology – all created new environmental hazards. On the other hand, scholars argue that environmentalism followed a dramatic shift in the world of consumption. The unprecedented affluence of the postwar years encouraged millions of Americans to put a premium on the environmental elements of "quality of life." How did people come to see the new machinery of production as a threat to the new dream of consumption? The question deserves more scholarly attention. Certainly the popularization of ecological ideas helped people to understand how new technologies might undermine the promise of affluence: In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson took pains to bring the hazards of pesticides home to suburban readers. The televised horror of the Santa Barbara oil spill also was important as a symbol of the ability of modern industry to turn the grace and beauty of nature into something grotesque. But the history of suburban development suggests that

7. For the controversies over DDT, nuclear power, and detergents, see Thomas R. Dunlap, *DDT: Scientists, Citizens, and Public Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Thomas Raymond Wellock, *Critical Masses: Opposition to Nuclear Power in California, 1958–1978* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); William McGucken, *Biodegradable: Detergents and the Environment*. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1991).

science and disaster were not the only ways by which Americans could come to see production as a threat to consumption. In new subdivisions, the bulldozer seldom was far from the living room, so the environmental destructiveness of postwar industry often intruded on the comfort of postwar prosperity.⁸

Second, the homebuilding story sheds light on the evolution of the environmental agenda. In *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, Samuel Hays argues for a three-stage chronology of environmental activism. During the first stage, from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, the major environmental issues were outdoor recreation, open space, and wilderness preservation. The issue of pollution dominated the environmental agenda from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. Then environmentalists took up a new set of issues, ranging from energy conservation to preservation of endangered species. But Hays does not explain the progression from stage to stage. How did concern about the loss of open space lead to concern about pollution? *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* helps to fill the gaps in Hays's analysis. Because the critique of tract housing evolved over several decades – and because tract housing caused a remarkably broad range of environmental problems, including almost all the problems Hays emphasizes – the homebuilding story explains much about how the concerns of environmentalists changed over time.⁹

Third, the homebuilding story contributes to a more complex understanding of “the environmental opposition.” Many historians see economic interests as the heart of resistance to the movement, and their arguments often are compelling. In the late 1960s and early

8. The first interpretation derives from a classic work of environmental criticism, Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971). For a recent summary of the argument, see Hal K. Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 11–15. The second interpretation comes from Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Andrew Hurley's *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) is the best study so far of the effects of postwar changes in production and consumption. For Rachel Carson's appeals to suburban readers, see *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 155–161, 173–184. Robert Easton describes the oil disaster in *Black Tide: The Santa Barbara Oil Spill and Its Consequences* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972).

9. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, 54–57.

1970s, for example, coal producers joined with a number of coal-dependent interests to form a coal coalition that fought against tough air pollution laws. Though builders never formally established a housing coalition, the building industry also had a diverse and powerful group of allies. Homebuilding was a driving force in the economy – the core of a “suburban-industrial complex.” But the power of the industry went beyond jobs and profits, because the single-family home was one of the defining symbols of “the American way of life.” The issue of homeownership was also tied to ideas about democracy, freedom, and civic order. In the effort to reduce the environmental costs of homebuilding, therefore, activists and officials often faced a combination of economic, social, and political arguments.¹⁰

But *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* does not merely fill gaps in the historical literature on environmentalism. The argument here recasts or revises a number of well-accepted conclusions about the movement's roots, evolution, and limits. Six points stand out.

1. Though a growing concern about the loss of wilderness obviously contributed to the rise of environmentalism, the movement also was a response to environmental change at the edges of the nation's cities. In *The Greening of a Nation?*, Hal Rothman argues that the battle in the mid-1950s to preserve Echo Park was the great catalyst of the environmental movement. His argument follows a number of works – from Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* to Stephen Fox's *John Muir and His Legacy* – that root environmentalism in the preservationist tradition exemplified by the Sierra Club. Yet scholars have not explained fully why Americans were more concerned about the fate of wilderness after World War II than before. In a fine study of the Echo Park controversy, Mark Harvey argues that the rapidly growing population of suburbia gave new strength to the wilderness cause. That argument accords with the common view that the environmental movement has always relied on the support of affluent suburbanites. Yet *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* shows that suburban environmentalism

10. Hays devotes a chapter of *Beauty, Health, and Permanence* to the antienvironmental lobbying of agriculture, labor, and industry. See 287–328. The coal story is the subject of Richard H. K. Vietor's *Environmental Politics and the Coal Coalition* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1980).

was much more than a function of affluence. The residents of post-war suburbs lived in the midst of one of the most profound environmental transformations in the nation's history. Every year, a territory roughly the size of Rhode Island was bulldozed for urban development. Forests, marshes, creeks, hills, cornfields, and orchards all were destroyed in order to create subdivisions. Though some of the environmental consequences of suburban development were invisible to untrained observers, others were obvious. Again and again, the destruction of nearby open spaces robbed children of beloved places to play – and the losses hit home more vitally than the threats to far-off sites like Echo Park ever could. The desire to preserve wilderness was the tip of an iceberg, the most visible part of a much larger concern about the destructive sprawl of urban civilization.¹¹

2. Though the environmental movement differed in some key respects from the conservation movement, the ideas of the conservationists nevertheless shaped environmentalist thought well into the 1960s. The conservation movement was devoted to efficient use of productive resources, Samuel Hays argues in *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, whereas environmentalism was a consumer movement keen to secure and protect a more satisfying environment. That contrast is overdrawn. The conservationist “gospel of efficiency” called for both restraint of private resource exploitation and promotion of wise public development. The environmental movement

11. For the preservationist roots of environmentalism, see Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?*, 33–55; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* [3d edition] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (1981; reprint, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). The argument about suburban support for the wilderness cause is from Mark W. T. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 242–243. In *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, Hays notes the importance of postwar suburbanization for the environmental movement in a discussion of the “paradox” of suburbia: “Amenities purchased there often soon became threatened by the increase in people, traffic, and pollution. The world seemed to close in and destroy what one had sought to secure. This experience shaped much environmental concern. One spoke of the problems of growth. How to approach the problem was another matter. The confrontation with environmental degradation in the city now was augmented by a confrontation with threatened degradation in the suburbs.” See 91. In *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington: Island Press, 1993), Robert Gottlieb makes a powerful argument for an urban industrial tradition of environmentalism. But Gottlieb does not discuss the postwar rise of suburbia.

certainly challenged the second element of the conservation creed. To environmentalists, the conservationists took a terribly narrow view of the nonhuman world, seeing only raw materials and power sources to be used in the long-term interest of the nation. Yet environmentalists continued to draw on many of the conservationists' insights into the costs of unregulated private exploitation of the land. Indeed, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* describes the urbanization of conservation – the recognition, over the course of two decades, that a range of problems once identified only with forests and farms also plagued the nation's metropolitan areas. As a presidential task force on suburban problems argued in 1968, “it is time to affirm an urban conservation ethic to match the concern for wise use of the nation's land and water resources expressed by Pinchot, Roosevelt, and others a half century ago.”¹²

3. Though ecologists played a prominent role as advocates for environmental activism, other scientific and technical professionals were also important in drawing attention to environmental problems. Almost three decades ago, in a pioneering study of the intellectual roots of environmentalism, Donald Fleming gave special attention to scientists who popularized ecological ideas, from Rachel Carson to Barry Commoner. Since the publication of Fleming's work, scholars have shown in many ways how the insights of ecology shaped popular perceptions of the environment. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* adds to that story, since ecological ideas played a part in the environmental critique of homebuilding. The language of ecology offered a way for activists to generalize a number of specific criticisms of tract-house development: Builders needed to have more respect for natural patterns and processes. But the arguments of ecologists directly shaped only a few of the campaigns to reform the development process. The critique also required the insights of architects, urban planners, landscape architects, hydrologists, geologists, soil scientists, public health officials, and

12. Hays begins *Beauty, Health, and Permanence* with a chapter titled “From Conservation to Environment.” See 13–39. Hays is also the author of a classic work on the conservation movement: *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959). For the quotation, see Charles M. Haar, editor, *The President's Task Force on Suburban Problems: Final Report* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1974), 13; the task force findings originally appeared in several volumes in 1968.

geographers. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* suggests that a neglected factor in the rise of environmentalism was the increase after World War II in the number of people who looked at the environment not as commodity producers or consumers but as professionals committed to an ideal of service.¹³

4. Though some federal agencies repeatedly battled with environmentalists, other federal agencies were instrumental in putting environmental problems on the public agenda. The overdrawn contrast between the conservation and environmental movements has also caused historians to miss the important role of the federal government in the rise of environmentalism. As several scholars have argued, the government's conservation and land-management agencies often pursued policies that were anathema to environmentalists. But officials in the government's scientific agencies were often the first to sound alarms about the environmental problems caused by suburban development. At the request of the Federal Housing Administration, the U.S. Public Health Service conducted a pioneering set of studies of the hazards of septic-tank use in densely settled areas. The U.S. Geological Survey, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife drew public attention to the ways suburbanization affected water, soil, and wildlife. At a time when the nation had few institutional sources of environmental information, the government's research centers and outreach networks often were catalysts to action. The leadership provided by federal agencies was not due solely to exceptional resources. Though Americans now distrust "big government," federal officials in the 1950s and early 1960s enjoyed great respect, and their recommendations had considerable influence.¹⁴

13. Donald Fleming, "Roots of the New Conservation Movement," *Perspectives in American History* 6 (1972): 7-91. In *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* [2d edition] (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Donald Worster calls the period since World War II "the age of ecology." See 340-433. Historians have done a number of excellent case studies of the role of ecological ideas in environmental politics. The most influential are by Thomas Dunlap: In addition to *DDT*, see *Saving America's Wildlife* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

14. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, 13-21; Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?*, 57-81; Paul W. Hirt, *A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests Since World War Two* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). In a fine essay on "Lyndon Johnson and Environmental Policy," Martin V. Melosi argues that scholars have neglected the federal environmental initiatives of the mid-1960s. See Robert A. Divine, editor, *The Johnson Years: Vietnam, the Environment, and Science* (Lawrence:

5. Though a well-organized antienvironmental movement came out of a struggle over public lands in the West, the effort to control urban and suburban development also led to a powerful antienvironmental movement – the movement to defend "property rights." The few scholarly works on the organized opposition to environmentalism suggest that the countermovement has come largely from the West – the home of the Sagebrush Rebellion and the Wise Use movement. Though a number of journalists have noted that property-rights activism transcends regional boundaries, almost all the recent commentary on the environmental opposition treats the property-rights issue as a plank in the Wise Use platform. The rest of the literature sees the property-rights movement as an offshoot of the conservative crusade against government regulation in the 1980s. But the relationship between regulation and property rights had become a subject of public debate well before Ronald Reagan became president. With the help of Richard Epstein's 1985 book on takings, the Reagan administration certainly gave the property-rights cause a boost. Yet, as *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* demonstrates, the issue was rooted in the debates of the late 1960s and early 1970s over land use in fast-growing cities and suburbs.¹⁵

University Press of Kansas, 1987), 113-149. Melosi focuses almost entirely on the passage of legislation, however, not the daily work of federal bureaucrats.

15. C. Brant Short, *Ronald Reagan and the Public Lands: America's Conservation Debate, 1979-1984* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1989) exemplifies the scholarly emphasis on the western roots of the environmental opposition. For a sampling of recent analysis of the backlash against environmentalism, see David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens: The 'Wise-Use' Movement, the New Right, and Anti-Environmental Violence* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994); John Echeverria and Raymond Booth Eby, editors, *Let the People Judge: Wise Use and the Private Property Rights Movement* (Washington: Island Press, 1995); Philip D. Brick and R. McGreggor Cawley, editors, *A Wolf in the Garden: The Land Rights Movement and the New Environmental Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer, *Green Backlash: The History and Politics of Environmental Opposition in the U.S.* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997); Harvey M. Jacobs, editor, *Who Owns America?: Social Conflict Over Property Rights* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). The commentators often describe Richard A. Epstein's *Takings: Private Property and the Power of Eminent Domain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) as the intellectual foundation of the property rights movement. As one concluded, "Epstein has played a critical intellectual role in raising the takings issue to its current prominence. Many of his colleagues and students form the cadre of policy entrepreneurs and public interest litigators who have pushed for revisions in the judicial takings doctrine and new statutory limits on regulatory impacts on property values." See Brick and Cawley, *A Wolf in the Garden*, 125-126. In a frequently quoted passage, the solicitor general in the second Reagan administration also pointed to Epstein's influence: "Attorney General [Edwin] Meese and his young advisers – many drawn from the ranks of the then

6. Though environmentalism was partly a form of consumer politics, the consumer mindset has limited the movement in critical ways. The relationship between consumerism and environmentalism is not at all clear. According to Samuel Hays, the environmental movement was a consumer effort to counter the irresponsibility of producers. For the first time, millions of Americans demanded that industry stop scarring the land, polluting the air, and fouling the water. Yet a handful of scholars have begun to complicate Hays's argument. The demands of the newly affluent were not all laudable: Knowingly and unknowingly, consumers routinely made choices that intensified rather than diminished the human impact on the environment.

In *The Greening of a Nation?*, Hal Rothman concludes that the desire for environmental quality is often outweighed by conflicting desires. Americans "embrace environmentalism when it is convenient and inexpensive," Rothman writes, "but when it challenges the comforts to which they are accustomed, they ignore or avoid it." Though not a book about the environmental movement, William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* also suggests that consumers can be environmentally irresponsible. In nineteenth-century Chicago, few people could see the changes in the land required to produce a balloon-frame house or a side of beef or a loaf of bread. "The ecological place of production grew ever more remote from the economic point of consumption," Cronon writes, "making it harder and harder to keep track of the true costs and consequences of any particular product." In Cronon's view, that problem is even more profound today.¹⁶

The Bulldozer in the Countryside offers a further qualification of Hays's argument about the relationship between consumerism and

fledgling Federalist Societies and often devotees of the extreme libertarian views of Chicago law professor Richard Epstein – had a specific, aggressive, and, it seemed to me, quite radical project in mind: to use the Takings Clause of the Fifth Amendment as a severe brake upon federal and state regulation of business and property. The grand plan was to make government pay compensation as for a taking of property every time its regulations impinged too severely on a property right – limiting the possible uses for a parcel of land or restricting or tying up a business in red tape. If the government labored under so severe an obligation, there would be, to say the least, much less regulation." See Charles Fried, *Order and Law: Arguing the Reagan Revolution – A Firsthand Account* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 183.

16. For the quotations, see Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?*, xii; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 340.

environmentalism. Even when homeowners protested against threats to environmental quality, the protests had limited aims. In the late 1950s, for example, suds began to pour out of the faucets of thousands of suburban homes – the residue of nonbiodegradable detergents in septic tanks had contaminated drinking wells – and the resulting outcry helped to make water pollution a national concern. Yet the desire for a better quality of life only partially restrained the disruptive impact of septic tanks on the nonhuman world. The nation's lawmakers ultimately protected consumers from the principal domestic problems caused by the sprawl of septic-tank suburbs, but backyard waste-disposal systems continue to harm life in lakes and streams across the country. The consumer perspective was myopic: Homeowners only cared about certain elements of the environment.

The popularity of suburbia makes that clear. In the nineteenth century, the well-to-do had begun to build homes in parklike grounds at the edge of the city, and the suburban dream became more common after World War II. Though millions of postwar migrants to the suburbs simply sought affordable shelter – buying a tract house frequently cost less per month than renting a city apartment – suburban homebuyers often wanted a chance to be closer to nature. The developers of subdivisions acknowledged that hope by naming developments for natural features, but the names evidenced a brutal contradiction. To create tracts of houses, builders in the 1950s and 1960s routinely destroyed the meadows, woods, and hills they honored in their place names.¹⁷

The Bulldozer in the Countryside is the story of how Americans tried to resolve that contradiction.

17. The historical literature on the appeal of suburbia is vast. The best known works include Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); John Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). For the post-1945 suburbs, see also Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 193–236; Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 240–261; Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 242–283; Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 15–58; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 162–182.