

Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement. By Neil M. Maher. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 316 pp. Notes, index, photos, maps, tables, and political cartoons. Cloth \$35.00

In *Nature's New Deal* Neil M. Maher brings us a topic that all American historians and many Americans know something about, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and its role in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. In so doing, however, he demonstrates that the CCC was much more than men in the woods and on the plains growing strong while planting trees, fighting fires, and conserving soil. In fact, this book shows us that while we might know some of the nuts and bolts of the CCC and understand its popularity, in fact we have little understanding of the critical role it played in American environmentalism in the mid-twentieth century. The heart of this book is the assertion that the CCC fundamentally remade American environmentalism. Maher successfully argues that not only did the organization become more environmentally conscious over the course of its life, but also that demonstration projects, education and promotional efforts, and even resistance to the CCC propelled environmentalism forward, making the movement stronger and more complex in the process.

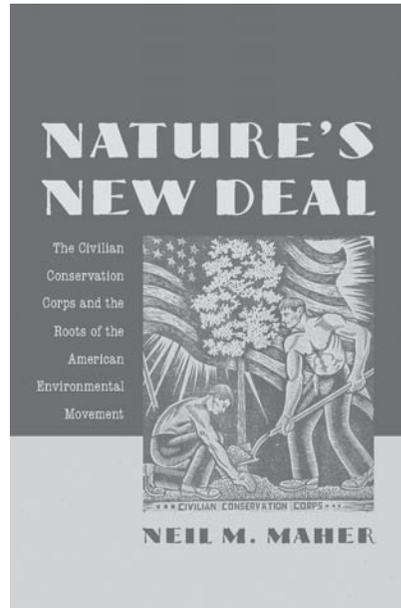
Maher does a nice job explaining the CCC—the organization of the corps, its functions, its shifting missions and goals. Moreover, the author shows how President Roosevelt employed the CCC strategically to build support in necessary regions in order to promote the New Deal and get reelected. The very popularity of the CCC provided support for FDR's expanding welfare state, according to Maher. Driving the CCC and therefore, the New Deal, was a conservation ethic that sprung from multiple sources in American culture: the progressive conservationists, the influences of both Gifford Pinchot and Frederick Law Olmsted, the Boy Scouts, and the childhood and governorship of FDR. The original missions of the CCC were to conserve forests and soil; from this sprung so much more. Those young men planting trees and creating erosion control projects learned by doing and also gained educations in conservation in classrooms and in their evening readings from the camps' library collections of magazines and books strongly emphasizing conservation and ecology. Furthermore, the demonstration projects and media publicity associated with them educated Americans on the practices and benefits of conservation measures.

The reader might begin this book assuming that the environmental importance of the CCC stemmed from its restoration of habitat and its success in building support for conservation. This is generally accurate but Maher offers a more interesting and sophisticated argument. The CCC rendered the environmental movement more complex and energized it in its opposition to the corps. Key environmental thinkers and leaders such as Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall originally evinced delight in the CCC mission of habitat restoration but became critics of what they considered a singular focus on resource

production and limited species planting and recreation over the need to preserve and create complex ecosystems and protect wilderness areas from overuse. Not only were they vocal in their criticism but they helped organize active opposition. Moreover, CCC activities stimulated opposition throughout the country from organizations as diverse as the Izaak Walton League to the National Park Service seeking to protect complex ecosystems and habitat from overly simple fire suppression and resource production measures. According to Maher, the National Wildlife Federation was formed by a coalition of conservationists concerned with the impact of New Deal programs environmentally, including CCC activities. There were

numerous other local battles across the nation to protect complex ecosystems from CCC projects with an increasing emphasis on protecting wild places. As these efforts grew, the idea of wilderness gained prominence in the national media and secured a foothold in the American consciousness.

The Battle over Echo Park figures prominently in the history of twentieth-century American environmentalism and has been treated as a post-World War II dividing line between the conservationism of the earlier years and the preservationist environmentalism of the post-war era. According to Maher, the CCC provides the bridge between the two sides of this environmentalist dichotomy. Naturally, he brings this argument home by examining the battle over Echo Park, showing that the programs of the New Deal and the dynamism of the post-war environmental movement, resulting largely from resistance to CCC programs, created the milieu necessary for the Echo Park fight to occur. The dramatic expansion of Dinosaur National Monument under FDR, an increased commitment to protecting recreational opportunities in nature—an idea promoted strongly by both the CCC and environmental groups, and an increased determination to protect wilderness, all informed the opposition to damming Echo Park. The role the CCC played in helping create an able and energized environmental movement capable of stopping the proposed dam is clearly explained by Maher. More traditional conservationist opponents to the dam were “joined by new advocacy groups, born during the New Deal years when Bob Marshall began calling for “wilderness conservation,” that greatly expanded both the constituency and political strength of the anti-dam bloc. Marshall’s Wilderness Society, for instance, created in 1935 partly in response to growing concern over CCC road-building projects in places like Great Smoky



Mountains National Park, publicly opposed the Echo Park dam for threatening wilderness in Dinosaur National Monument” (p. 223).

This thought-provoking and important work is written with remarkable clarity and Maher’s effective argumentation forces the reader to revise his or her understanding of the trajectory of American environmentalism. The author employs maps and images well. Maher’s textual analysis of CCC photos, cartoons, and advertisements is insightful although in a few cases somewhat repetitive; however, one can learn a lot just from reading those captions.

Nature’s New Deal belongs on every environmental historian’s bookshelf but it also speaks beyond our field to not only American historians in general but also to environmental activists and general readers. While Maher provides a strong argument for the central role played by the CCC in energizing and complicating the American environmental movement, he also shows the positive impact government can have in environmental work. Moreover, benefits ripple out from that; from healthy bodies to healthy landscapes with corresponding rewards to the political party that is willing to take environmental problems seriously and bring government will, money, and power to bear. Surely, that is an important idea in our current political climate and in this era of severe and ongoing environmental crises.

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Stalking the Ghost Bird: The Elusive Ivory-Billed Woodpecker in Louisiana. By Michael K. Steinberg. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. xiii + 173 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. Cloth \$24.95.

Michael Steinberg could well have been addressing his first words to me personally: “Of all the North American birds, the ivory-billed woodpecker may be the most charismatic ... [T]he ivory-bill ... fascinates people from all walks of life and has done so for centuries” (p. 1). I too have been obsessed with the species for as long as I have been interested in birds, which has been most of my life. The reasons are easy to understand. The bird itself is spectacular looking—it resided in magnificent places, the mature forests of the Lower Mississippi River basin where it once shared quarters with such other southern ghosts as red wolves, Bachman’s warblers, and Carolina parakeets—and, of course, the ongoing evidence that the species may not quite be extinct.

Steinberg, in his slim but fascinating volume of five chapters, focuses on the last point. Chapter 1 (“Background”) mostly summarizes the Arkansas rediscovery (or, if you prefer, controversy) and the Pearl River search; chapter 2 discusses the bird’s habitat; chapter 3 relates interviews he has had with twelve experts, eleven of whom believe the species survives (the one dissident, Kelby Ouchley, of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, is an agnostic, recently converted from thinking the bird is definitely gone); chapter 4 is a collection of recent ivory-billed sightings from Louisiana; and chapter 5 tells of the places that hold the most promise to enterprising ivory-billed searchers.