

## ***Capitalism: An Environmental History***

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In 1864, a little-known American linguist and ambassador to Italy, George Perkins Marsh, raised the alarm about how quickly humans were making the green earth desolate. In his native New England, a beautiful countryside once boasted prosperous towns among fields and forests with clear-running streams. Now industrial cities poured out clouds of smoke over murky rivers in a nearly treeless land. Bolstered by examples from the Mediterranean, Marsh's *Man and Nature* told how deforestation and short-sighted husbandry produced deserts. Marsh portrayed the problem as moral failure to care for resources with future generations in mind. He never connected Vermont's ecological devastation, so much more accelerated than the same process in the Roman Empire, with the factories 150 miles away that took its wood and wool.

A history of capitalism's environmental consequences, *Capitalism: An Environmental History* argues that capitalism culminates humanity's ancient quest to more efficiently use resources; that modern corporations developed powerful methods to divert or thwart environmental science, activism, and policy; and that conservation and environmentalism were products of consumer capitalism, which are entangled with the system they wish to control.

Forms of capitalism have existed from the earliest civilizations. Modern Western capitalism's hallmarks include separation of business from the household, rational bookkeeping, and rational organization of labor (eventually formally free). Neither of two major forms of capitalist organization, slave plantations and mechanized factories, had any true counterpart at any other time or in any other place. *Consumption*, the acquisition of things beyond basic needs, has existed whenever more was accumulated than needed for subsistence. *Consumerism* arose with Western imperial expansion and the wider availability of luxuries. When industrial capitalism flooded markets with goods, *consumer capitalism* remedied market saturation with planned obsolescence and inessential goods. Advertising persuaded the public to buy these goods and evolved into consumer capitalism's propaganda wing, shaping and directing social values, ideology, leisure and work practices, and politics.

Western capitalism's genius for organizing people to intensively exploit natural resources gave humanity unprecedented power to utilize resources to produce wealth. General quality of life improved and population growth accelerated in Europe and America. The profit motive created incentives that caused unchecked environmental degradation, globalization, and massive migrations of peoples. Rapidly increasing destruction of resources, from forests to mines to soils to wildlife, prompted the conservation movement, an international movement to oppose heedless destruction of nature and natural resources for profit, which however did not directly challenge industrial capitalism itself. Less effective were calls to abate air and water pollution, but water and waste systems improved urban health. Consumer capitalism, too, prompted a new resistance

movement, environmentalism. Like conservation, environmentalism did not fundamentally challenge the economic system that it criticized and in fact shared many of its assumptions.