

**Donald Worster**

**Facing Limits: Abundance, Scarcity, and the American Way of Life**

The first European explorers who dropped anchor off North America's shores asked an enduring question: Is this a land of extraordinary abundance, of infinite possibilities, or is it a land of disappointment and scarcity? My project, in general, is to understand how Americans and their European ancestors dreamed of New World abundance and were changed culturally and politically by its plenitude of natural resources, all the while encountering places of real scarcity and searching for an ethos of restraint.

The book resulting from this project, which is under contract with Oxford University Press, will consist of six chapters, ranging from the early modern period to recent debates over "the limits to growth." During my stay at the Rachel Carson Center, I will focus on researching and writing the first chapter, tentatively entitled "Adam Smith's New World." Explorers of the New World, I will argue, helped inspire Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, the fundamental work on which modern economic thinking rests. We have not yet adequately acknowledged how much the rise of Smith's richly imagined world of laissez-faire capitalism owed to the discovery of the New World and its bounty of wealth, so energizing to a Europe facing ecological limits and impoverishment.

Historians have never fully examined the crucial insight Smith offered in his magnum opus: "The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind." I believe he was right in suggesting that the Age of Discovery had changed history decisively and made a new set of economic attitudes compelling. Influenced by the apparent abundance of the New World, people began asserting that those new resources would, without government planning or intervention, make them all rich. Unaware that those resources were actually organized into complex systems that were vulnerable to human ambitions, a new global economy began to emerge, with the United States eventually at its core. In that economy, everything seemed available somewhere in generous supply, although the common experience continued to be a local scarcity of resources to meet demand. That local privation was supposed to drive people to seek new frontiers, and they would always find them, if not close at hand then in the far-off regions of the Americas. That sense of planetary abundance led to the biggest problem that capitalism created: a faith in infinite riches based on a vision of superabundant nature, but lacking a profound knowledge of that natural world and its intricately linked systems.