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After Nature: A Politics For The Anthropocene



Synopsis

Nature no longer exists apart from humanity. Henceforth, the world we will inhabit is the one we have made. Geologists have called this new planetary epoch the Anthropocene, the Age of Humans. The geological strata we are now creating record industrial emissions, industrial-scale crop pollens, and the disappearance of species driven to extinction. Climate change is planetary engineering without design. These facts of the Anthropocene are scientific, but its shape and meaning are questions for politics—a politics that does not yet exist. After Nature develops a politics for this post-natural world. J. D. Purdy begins with a history of how Americans have shaped their landscapes. He explores the competing traditions that still infuse environmental law and culture—a frontier vision of settlement and development, a wilderness-seeking Romanticism, a utilitarian attitude that tries to manage nature for human benefit, and a twentieth-century ecological view. These traditions are ways of seeing the world and humans' place in it. They are also modes of lawmaking that inscribe ideal visions on the earth itself. Each has shaped landscapes that make its vision of nature real, from wilderness to farmland to suburbs—opening some new ways of living on the earth while foreclosing others. The Anthropocene demands that we draw on all these legacies and go beyond them. With human and environmental fates now inseparable, environmental politics will become either more deeply democratic or more unequal and inhumane. Where nothing is pure, we must create ways to rally devotion to a damaged and ever-changing world.

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Customer Reviews

This book has caused me to reexamine not only politics, as the subtitle suggests, but also spirituality and how we enact our spiritual and ethical values in the world. This is the most important and thoughtful book I have read in a decade.

Dr. Purdy has not only written an enlightening and lucid history of American environmental policy and imagination beginning with our colonial days, but also an urgent and thoughtful call to action in a natural world that is destined be controlled by human decisions - the Anthropocene. He asks us to re-invigorate a democratic politics that practices a self-restraint informed by post-humanist aesthetics and ethics. Our politics must derive from love and beauty, an ecocentric worldview that honors the mystery and uncanniness of other lifeforms while also honoring the unique position of humans as creatures of meaning, imagination, and creativity. 'After Nature' is highly recommended reading for anyone who strives to be the change s/he wishes to see in the world, providing a solid historical and intellectual foundation for doing so.

After Nature by Duke law professor Jedediah Purdy is a highly scholarly, intellectual account of the impact and behavior of humans on the natural world. Professor Purdy states that we are now in the "Anthropocene" (age of humans) epoch because nature no longer exists apart from humanity. Humans shape nature now more than ever thus they have to take responsibility for the environment. The book is an intellectual history of how Americans have shaped their landscape and ideas and practices around the world. Professor Purdy refers to it as "a political history of American ideas involving environmental imagination." He states that there are four versions of this imagination: 1. Providential vision "nature has a purpose to serve humanity." 2. Romantic vision "aesthetic and spiritual." 3. Utilitarian vision "nature is a storehouse of resources." 4. Ecological vision "the world is formed of complex and interconnected systems." All four of these visions co-exist now and much of the book is devoted to a consideration of them. Professor Purdy also sees a three-fold crisis involving ecology, economics and politics. He says that markets produce increasing inequality and are blind to negative consequences, thus the only way to build a sustainable living space is through politics. He goes on to describe the contributions of various people to this issue, including John Locke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and many others. Now, he says there is a new appreciation of agriculture as organic and free-range means of growing food challenge industrial farming. The final part of the book is devoted to the topic of climate change. The basic idea, he says, is that we have a standard of success that we strive to meet, for example to keep greenhouse gasses below 350 parts per million of carbon.

But these standards are unrealistic and we must find a new approach. He proposes that democracy must be at the center of the Anthropocene epoch. Democracies need to practice self-restraint as we cannot depend on technology alone to solve this crisis. In the end people will change when they find two things: something to fear and something to love. I would like to rate this book at 3.5 stars but have to choose. There are some very good ideas and useful information here and it is well researched and written as benefits a university professor, but the book is too academic and the idea that democracy is the best system for solving critical problems such as global warming is simply not right. Democracies often pander to the lowest common denominator and elect people who advocate simple solutions. An authoritarian leader with a real commitment to solving these problems could be more effective. Finally lay readers may get bored with the formal, largely academic writing style.

a must read -- intelligent and really well written - puts things together in a really useful way.

If you really want to understand Climate Change and what lead up to it, you need to read and understand the history behind the various movements that contributed to our current situation!

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