
In his new book, A Common Fate, Joseph Cone has tackled the fascinating and complex decline of Pacific salmon and the individuals and institutions that responded to this crisis. No book on this topic could possibly cover everything; with many references to other times and other places, Cone chooses to focus on events between 1988 and 1993 and on the people and fish of the Columbia Basin.

The book begins with Gordon Reeves, a fisheries scientist with the US Forest Service at the time, who is snorkeling in an Oregon stream to evaluate the success of a project meant to improve habitat for salmon. This beginning reminded me of Mountain in the Clouds: A Search for Wild Salmon by Bruce Brown (1982), which begins as Brown joins Larry Lestelle and Dino Blackburn in a stream survey for adult salmon on Washington’s Queets River. Like Cone, Brown made many people aware of the ways salmon have suffered at the hands of humans. Chronicles in detail are Reeves’s background, concern for wild salmon populations, involvement in the listing petitions for wild salmon populations under the Endangered Species Act (he was president of the Oregon Chapter of the American Fisheries Society), and participation in the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team that produced President Clinton’s “option 9” forest plan.

Willa Nehlsen, lead author on an extremely influential paper published by the American Fisheries Society (Nehlsen et al. 1991); Andy Kerr of the Oregon Natural Resources Council; and Bill Bakke of Oregon Trout also feature prominently in the book, along with Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield. These individuals played major roles in bringing the problems of salmon to the attention of the public and of the state and federal agencies that were supposed to have been managing salmon populations. By emphasizing individuals rather than their agencies, Cone personalizes the issues effectively; we begin to know the names as people, not merely as actors in a complex biopolitical play. If you are wondering whether you can ever “make a difference,” read Cone’s book. Clearly, individuals taking strong, carefully planned actions at certain times can have tremendous influence over natural resource issues.

The book’s strength is its successful description of the web of people and processes that brought us from the late 1980s to the early 1990s in salmon conservation; readers seeking more about salmon biology might consult Pacific Salmon Life Histories (Groot and Margolis 1991) instead. Cone’s book has some weaknesses. Although the representatives of hydropower, irrigation, and forestry are not demonized as they were in Brown’s earlier book, they are not given much depth of character in Cone’s. It would have been interesting, for example, if Al Wright of the Pacific Northwest Utilities Conference Committee had been given the same depth of treatment that the listing petitioners were. Perhaps then we would better see the real difficulties that salmon will encounter in the future Pacific Northwest. Their enemies will not be the greedy and uncaring entities of the past that Brown portrayed but a far more complex villain—all of us and our desire for paper, timber, water, ports, shopping malls, and the other elements of modern Northwest life that disrupt salmon and their ecosystems.

In addition, the book suffers from a remarkably “Oregonocentric” view of the past few years. Although Reeves and his Forest Service colleague James Sedell did indeed play key roles, as did Kerr, Nehlsen, and Bakke, a reader might easily infer that there were neither issues nor important players outside Oregon.

For example, Kai Lee, influential member of the Northwest Power Planning Council and author of an insightful book on complex environmental problems including Columbia River salmon issues (Lee 1993), is credited primarily with having encouraged Willa Nehlsen. The extensive genetic research and deliberations by National Marine Fisheries Service scientists led by Robin Waples that went into the application of the Endangered Species Act to salmon populations are mentioned only in passing:

[NMFS] now wanted more clarity, so in the winter of 1990 a team of researchers in Seattle was duly grappling with the definition [of distinct populations under the act]. (p. 92)

Donald Bevan of the University of Washington led the team of distinguished scientists that made recommendations for the Snake River salmon recovery plan, but he is not mentioned by name, referred to only as “a retired fisheries professor.” Not only Washington but also California suffers from limited coverage. The status and events related to the Sacramento River population of winter chinook salmon, which was listed as threatened in 1989, received only two paragraphs, separated by 100 pages.

The under-representation of Washington and California among the people and events in the book may seem like a minor and parochial criti-
began, the site and function of the structure raised a regional rivalry that pitted the Columbia River Development League, centered on Wenatchee and other small towns in the Big Ben region, against Spokane’s Columbia Basin Irrigation League. As plans for the dam crystallized, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers elbowed each other for the right to design and oversee the project. Meanwhile, East Coast politicians tried to obstruct federal appropriations for the dam.

Pitzer suggests that President Franklin D. Roosevelt deflected criticisms about the cost by first authorizing a less expensive, power-generating low dam. When the low dam was under construction, FDR gradually transformed the project into a high, multiple-purpose structure. Still other battles ensued over Grand Coulee electricity: private corporations, public utilities, citizens of north-central Washington, farmers, and federal agencies struggled to control the terms of power sales.

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as much as technology. Competing individuals and
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Grand Coulee even became a pawn in Cold War politics. When the Soviet Union built the world’s largest hydroelectric plants in the 1950s, pressure mounted in the United States to regain the lead by erecting a third powerhouse at Grand Coulee. Then, in a bizarre, audacious maneuver, Soviet diplomats in 1966 attempted to place a bid on the construction contract for the new powerhouse generators.

Although Pitzer concentrates on telling the Grand Coulee story, he resists allowing the dam’s epic history to overwhelm other important issues. To his credit, Pitzer discusses the impact of the dam on salmon and Indians and the efforts to address these problems. He also deflates some of Grand Coulee’s mystique. For example, the dam did not play an indispensable role in America’s World War II effort, as many journalists, historians, and others have claimed. Rather, the war paradoxically delayed completion of the project while ultimately ensuring a demand for its electricity.

Furthermore, Pitzer frankly judges the financing of the Columbia Basin irrigation project. He contends that farmers have received substantial subsidies from the federal government and power ratepayers, contributing only an estimated 5 to 15% of the project’s cost. Pitzer also shows the difficulty of completing a long-term “megaproject” according to plan. Over the years, changing economic, social, and political circumstances prevented the Columbia Basin Project from creating and sustaining the small farms that New Deal planners envisioned.

Pitzer’s book is not without problems. In places it bogs down in the recounting of legislative politics, the financial costs, and other facts and figures. A stronger interpretive focus might have helped. Pitzer’s emphasis on the epic story deprives his narrative of greater analytical power; some of his most important insights remain buried in the text. He might have adopted historian Thomas P. Hughes’s concept of technological “momentum” to illuminate how Grand Coulee, as a component of large-scale human and technical systems, often eluded the control of any one political faction or group of citizens.

Pitzer avoids Donald Worster’s controversial interpretation of western water, portraying a much more complex, divided, and decentralized West than Worster’s “hydraulic society” thesis allows. But readers unfamiliar with western water development will overlook the significance of Pitzer’s findings. By sacrificing interpretation and analysis for narrative—just “telling the story”—Pitzer has missed an opportunity to clarify the public’s understanding of a major western water project. Readers will know more of Grand Coulee’s history, but they may well miss its larger meaning.

Pitzer has nevertheless done an admirable job. Only a historian with his energy and enthusiasm could successfully depict the epic sweep of Grand Coulee Dam and the Columbia Basin Project. His book will surely remain the standard history of the topic. Planners, scientists, engineers, historians, and citizens interested in the Columbia River and western water issues should read this book.

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cism; indeed, perhaps the omissions reflect a case of "turnabout is fair play" because Brown focused so narrowly on Washington. Still, as Cone's title implies, human activities such as dams, fishing, logging, farming, urbanization, and hatcheries—to say nothing of climatological and oceanographic regimes—are intimately tied to salmon coastwide. Cone's book improves our understanding of the human and scientific aspects of this tangled web, but the complete account has yet to be written.

references

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Who Pays the Price? carries an unsettling message that all of us need to receive, no matter how liberal or progressive we may be: the lives of First World residents rest upon exposing other peoples to environmental hazards. Every new technological foray or project not only imposes risks and costs along with bringing benefits, but the costs, risks, and benefits are not evenly distributed. Since the power to make decisions implementing new technologies and projects is the province of a relatively small number of people, class relations ultimately determine exposure to environmental hazards as well as the degradation of human and social rights.

The material presented in this book illustrates some of the many ways in which government action or government-sanctioned action has degraded environmental settings and abused human rights. Resource extraction, economic development, industrialism, and national defense efforts have all left their mark on the landscape. . . . [T]hese activities have also left their mark on humanity—some people pay a greater price than others. This fact . . . is explained and legitimized as a social evil acceptable in light of a greater good. In the social hierarchies of our world—race, ethnicity, class, gender—it is the powerless who pay the price, and their experience of a socially and legally sanctioned selective victimization is an abuse of human rights. (p. 219)

The purpose of Who Pays the Price? is to rally a social response to this dynamic, described by a number of powerful case studies. The response is "social justice environmentalism," reflected in popular movements around the globe.

The book's case studies are grouped into three areas: indigenous rights (trampled by exploitation of resources in the ancestral lands of traditional peoples); national development projects (such as large dams and economic schemes), which destroy the sustainability of traditional communities; and national security activities (especially uranium mining and nuclear weapons testing).

I know of no other book that so clearly links the fates of apparently disparate peoples (such as the Yanomami of the Amazon, the Navajo of our own Southwest, the Ok people of Papua New Guinea, and the Siberian-inhabitants officially known in Russia as the "Numerically Small Peoples of the North"). These indigenous nations have cultures going back millennia in their homelands, yet the regions they inhabit are usually described as wilderness, outback, bush, and similar terms, conveying a soothing image to literate and urban classes that no "real" people will be affected by the imposed projects or activities. Illahee readers are likely to be aware of the debate over the past decade about the concept of development and, in particular, recent demands that "development" activities only be undertaken if they are "sustainable."

This concept emerges from a distinction between sustainable development and quantitative economic growth . . . associated with the mere increase of consumption goods, at a high social cost, either by wastefully using natural resources, or by destroying cultural and social values. . . . [E]conomic growth has not been translated into improved quality of life for the majority of the people in developing countries.

The concept of growth is therefore one-sided, efficiency-oriented (efficiency becomes an end in itself), and quantitatively defined. In contrast, sustained development is a multidimensional concept, equity-oriented (from an intra- and inter-generational point of view),
and qualitatively defined so as to include variables and factors not easily quantifiable. It is based upon the moral imperative of respecting the needs of future generations, which implies the requirement of maintaining the capital stock of natural resources. . . .

Sustainable development is not a means to assure the continuous exploitation of natural resources, with the traditional disregard for equity considerations. It is an end in itself, since it implies the final objective of improving the quality of life of people, in a permanent basis. (International Seminar on Sustainable Development 1991: 5–6)

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Only a frontal analysis of power—
who has it, how they use and abuse it, and how we can
redress imbalances in its distribution—will allow us ever to
create a just and sustainable society.

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Powerful economic and social interests, however, are not prepared to give up their previous ability to make decisions irrespective of their negative consequences on others’ ways of life. Although many American liberals applauded the establishment by the White House of a Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development (at the instigation of Vice President Al Gore), few, if any, raised their voices in dismay when a vice president of General Motors was appointed to this body at the same time that the corporation was being sued by the city of Ypsilanti, Michigan, for closing down a factory (despite the company’s acceptance of subsidized tax breaks when the factory was constructed) and bringing significant distress to the city itself and many residents.

In chapter 17, Who Pays the Price? takes a clear and strong stand on these concerns. True sustainability requires thorough democratization of decision making and the provision of adequate resources to all. In the words of Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins (1978), “A good society is the best technology.” This chapter considers how conceptions of property rights might relate to resource use and sustainability, but it fails to adequately discuss the conflict between customary property rights in almost all indigenous communities (which are usually collective, communitarian, and nonexclusive, so that most property is seen as “social property”) and those in the dominant technological culture (which are private or “statist,” nominally public, but in both cases come under the control of relatively few individuals).

The failure of environmentalists to fully explore this contradiction is illustrated by their ready acceptance of the premise in what is probably the single best-known writing on this subject, Garrett Hardin’s (1968) essay, “The Tragedy of the Commons.” Hardin posits that common properties are inevitably destroyed because each individual is motivated to increase his or her own use of the resource; therefore, overcrowning and degradation always occur. What Hardin has overlooked, however, is that indigenous communities have used common resources sustainably for millennia without causing them to collapse. In contrast to the individualistic mentality fostered by industrial capitalism (which: Hardin mistakenly ascribed to “human nature”), these peoples are imbued with a communitarian, anarchist orientation, in which the good of the larger community is internalized in each member so that activities that would destroy sustainability are virtually unthinkable.

In the middle of a case study in another chapter, the book includes a small exegesis on “rationality.” The authors note that modern technological rationality fosters a focus on means (and whether they are logical) rather than a discussion of evaluating ends (see Bereano 1976: 148–157). Perhaps one reason for such obfuscation has been suggested by the planner Alan Altschuler (1969: 305, note 4):

Planners tend to use the words rational and wise interchangeably in evaluating public choices . . . in accord with the usage of natural law philosophers, but not with that of contemporary economic and social theorists. For the latter, the term rational refers to the efficiency of means where ends are known. Wisdom refers to deep understanding and the ability to make what are considered “good” judgments on complex human issues, when goals and efficient means are not generally known.

Consequently, the planners’ use of the word rational in the classic sense to defend their distinctly modern “expert” recommendations makes for some confusion . . . confusion [with] a political function. . . . It conveys the impression that expert logic or techniques can produce “good” decisions on complex human issues.

Along with these themes, Who Pays the Price? is useful for those of us concerned about more