



Dreaming of a New Deal for nature

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Sometimes it's easier to understand why things are the way they are today by looking back to the past. That's one common reason to study history; another is to see the possibilities in the past that are no longer present today. And then there are those moments when the past illuminates the present and suggests that perhaps there are hidden possibilities in our own times. If only we could see those possibilities and grasp them, then we might take history into our own hands, much as Civilian Conservation Corps workers did when they built bridges, planted trees, and cleared trails out of the Great Depression and into the New Deal.

Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement by historian Neil Maher explores the CCC's inspiring achievements both in politics and on the ground. During the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt used the CCC to help forge a new constituency and a political consensus that transformed American politics, while putting millions of unemployed young men to work in fields and forests, transforming the landscape and themselves. But Maher also probes the political limits of the CCC's combination of top-down environmental planning and bottom-up action. And that useful history suggests possibilities for our own new deal for nature.

The Civilian Conservation Corps planted 2.3 billion trees on 2.5 million acres of logged-over land, conducted "timber stand improvement" across 4 million acres -- mainly thinning thick stands and removing brush -- and battled insect infestations and tree diseases on more than 20 million acres of forests, all told an area roughly equivalent to half of the national forests in Colorado, Montana and Idaho today. Much of that work was in the West, in the early years of the New Deal, before the CCC turned its attention to controlling erosion on the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl, and then to work in national parks, which was equally impressive. The CCC built more than 200 museums, interpretive sites and park lodges, 2,000 hiking shelters, nearly 2,500 cabins, 400 bathhouses, 2,000 drinking fountains, and 12,000 latrines and toilets in the national parks. The corps also improved 600,000 miles of existing roads in the parks, built 125,000 miles of new roads and 40,000 bridges, and 8 million square yards of parking lots -- an area equivalent to 2,500 football fields. CCC trail crews improved 100,000 miles of existing hiking trails and blazed 28,000 miles of new trails.

This staggering public work was meant to encourage outdoor recreation, and it did. America's burgeoning car culture made vacationing in the parks and national forests easy and affordable, and the CCC's roads, trails and facilities made those places even more attractive. In 1933, 3.5 million people visited national parks. By 1938, it was 16 million people, and 1941 brought 21 million.

The CCC's work in the woods also brought a backlash on two fronts, and Maher sees that reaction as an equally important aspect of this history of the "roots of the American environmental movement." All the tree-planting, forest-thinning and firefighting helped ease fears of a "timber famine," but conservation biologists also began to worry that Roosevelt's vast young "army of forest workers" was destroying wildlife habitat in the process. These "biological blunders" spurred Aldo Leopold and others "to put forth a more ecological view of conservation," Maher writes. And while conservationists wholeheartedly encouraged healthy outdoor recreation as a way to cultivate a love of American nature, the rapidly expanding road network and growing platoons of car campers in national parks and forests also spurred a nascent wilderness movement.

Maher argues that the CCC's broad approach to conservation served as a transition between the "simple conservation" of an earlier era and modern environmentalism, which emerged, in part, as a reaction to the CCC. The New Deal also tested the limits of federal power in many ways. Maher's history of the CCC can be read as a case study of the American political culture of compromise. Even in this period of bold federal action -- taken with broad public support to rescue and restore a nation in truly dire economic and environmental straits -- compromise between federal, state and local interests defined what could be achieved on the ground. Maher's history offers inspiration for those seeking visionary solutions to our own ecological and economic troubles, but he also reminds us that to succeed, any environmental policy must reckon with our history of compromise.

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