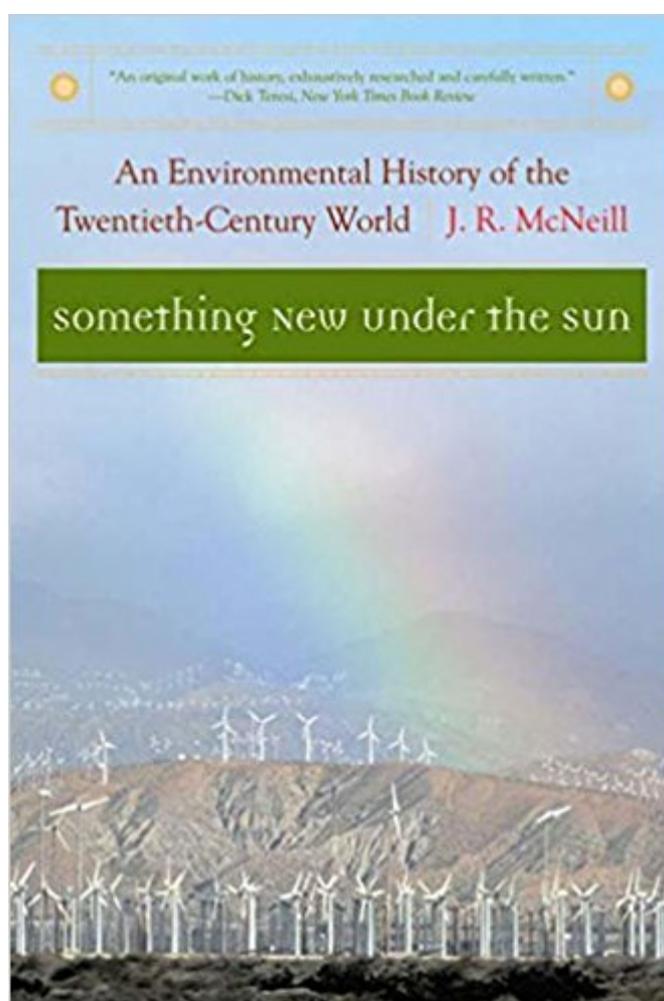


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Something New Under The Sun: An Environmental History Of The Twentieth-Century World (The Global Century Series)



Synopsis

"Refreshingly unpolemical and at times even witty, McNeill's book brims with carefully sifted statistics and brilliant details." — Washington Post Book World

The history of the twentieth century is most often told through its world wars, the rise and fall of communism, or its economic upheavals. In his startling new book, J. R. McNeill gives us our first general account of what may prove to be the most significant dimension of the twentieth century: its environmental history. To a degree unprecedented in human history, we have refashioned the earth's air, water, and soil, and the biosphere of which we are a part. Based on exhaustive research, McNeill's story is a compelling blend of anecdotes, data, and shrewd analysis — never preaches: it is our definitive account. This is a volume in The Global Century Series (general editor, Paul Kennedy). 400 pages, b/w photographs, 15 maps

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

J.R. McNeill, a professor of history at Georgetown University, visits the annals of the past century only to return to the present with bad news: in that 100-year span, he writes, the industrialized and developing nations of the world have wrought damage to nearly every part of the globe. That much seems obvious to even the most casual reader, but what emerges, and forcefully, from McNeill's pages is just how extensive that damage has been. For example, he writes, "soil degradation in one form or another now affects one-third of the world's land surface," larger by far than the world's cultivated areas. Things are worse in some places than in others; McNeill observes that Africa is

"the only continent where food production per capita declined after 1960," due to the loss of productive soil. McNeill's litany continues: the air in most of the world's cities is perilously unhealthy; the drinking water across much of the planet is growing ever more polluted; the human species is increasingly locked "in a rigid and uneasy bond with modern agriculture," which trades the promise of abundant food for the use of carcinogenic pesticides and fossil fuels. The environmental changes of the last century, McNeill closes by saying, are on an unprecedented scale, so much so that we can scarcely begin to fathom their implications. We can, however, start to think about them, and McNeill's book is a helpful primer. --Gregory McNamee --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Our profligate, fossil fuel-based civilization is ecologically unsustainable and creates perpetual environmental disturbance, says Georgetown University history professor McNeill, but he remains undecided as to whether humanity has entered a genuine, full-blown ecological crisis. Nevertheless, the evidence he presents in this comprehensive, balanced survey is alarming. Soil degradation now affects one-third of earth's land surface, though intensive fertilizer use and genetic engineering of crops have masked the ill effects. From Mexico City to Calcutta, from China to Africa, megacities choke on air pollution as economic development takes priority over other concerns. Acid rain has decimated lake and river life, crops and forests across Europe and North America. International in scope, McNeill's kaleidoscopic, textbookish history hops from Soviet phosphate mining in the Arctic to deforestation by white settlers in southern Africa, documenting the pollution of oceans and seas; the unchecked "harvesting" of fish and whales; environmentally influenced, disease-producing shifts in human-microbe relations; disruptive invasions by new species (sea lampreys in the Great Lakes, rabbits in Australia); and the massive impact on ecosystems resulting from urbanization, population growth, wars, oil spills, nuclear power accidents. McNeill's study underscores the mixed consequences of environmental and political decision making. For example, the Green Revolution fed additional millions, but it also promoted monoculture and strengthened landed elites in Asia and Latin America. The book closes with a capsule history of the environmental movement, gauging its successes and influence. This scientifically informed survey makes a useful resource for environmentalists, scholars, globalists, biologists, policy makers and concerned readers. 40 photos and 15 maps not seen by PW. (Apr.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sub-titled "An Environmental History of the 20th Century", this is a sober and objective survey of

environmental changes over the past 100 years. I was concerned this would be an emotional appeal or judgmental polemic from the left - but not the case, it is academic and professional history from an environmental perspective (the environment, not "environmental movement"). It's encyclopedic in scope and style. I would not call this an "entertaining" read (although some of the facts really fire the synapses), but it is deeply rewarding as a broad survey of a very large and complex problem. The chapters and sub-sections are arranged in a logical outline making it possible to read the chapters in any order. The main idea of the title "something new under the sun" is that humans have so fundamentally changed the environment that things really are very different now than they have ever been historically. To regard our current conditions of energy availability, access to water, unending economic growth - as enduring and normal appears to be an interesting gamble given the facts. Some interesting trivia: humans did not become the dominate primate until about 8,000 BC with the rise of agriculture (baboons outnumbered humans before then). About one-fifth of all humans that ever lived did so in the 20th century. In sheer energy terms, if all modern technology and energy sources were not available, the average American would need about 70 human slaves to maintain the current standard of living (each American "directs" 70 energy-slave equivalents). Each year, humans move more earth and soil than glaciers, wind erosion, mountain building (plate tectonic uplift), and volcanoes combined. Probably the single most damaging biological organism in earths history was the human primate Thomas Midgley Jr from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania born in 1889. He invented Freon (which destroys the Ozone layer), and also leaded gasoline, which has polluted most of the worlds soil lasting thousands of years (all of us carry elevated lead levels because of it and will continue to do so for centuries to come, leading to birth defects, lowered IQs, etc.). Midgley contracted Polio at age 51 and invented a system of ropes and pulleys to move his crippled body off the bed - he became tangled and was strangled to death in 1944 by his own invention, before learning how damaging his inventions were.

I bought this for my class. This book contains so much great information that I will have to re read it again and again to do the knowledge justice. There are things I already know before I read this book, but it connected dots together to reveal something completely new. For the vast majority of this book I didn't know before, the author skillfully organized them together to present a vivid and gripping tale of how human changed the environment, directly/indirectly, intentionally/accidentally, under technology, culture and politics impacts. The read provoked sadness, frustration, fear and many other emotions and it is one of the best books I read. Highly recommend for anyone who wants a stimulating learning experience to understand men and nature.

This book may be the best historical survey I've ever read. (And with an M.A. in history, I've read a few!) I got this book to complement my hard science slogging on global warming, and found so much more than I hoped for or ever imagined! McNeil's book provides the historical background and the human context for all the graphs and numbers in the science texts. If you're looking for one book to give you a focused overview of just how much human civilization has accomplished, good and bad, in the last 100 years, this is it. The organization of the book is excellent. McNeil sources everything, ends each chapter with an excellent summary, and wraps it all up with his own thoughtful commentary on climate change. He uses an inspired mix of the small detail (birds dying mid-flight) and the enormous concept (the Aswan dam affected the entire Mediterranean ecosystem). He describes chains of cause and effect and makes connections other historians and scientists seem to miss. The chapters dealing with agriculture are, I think, particularly relevant to our everyday lives; but students in nearly every subject will find this book useful. My husband is a family physician, and has read the sections on public health; my neighbor is a biologist with the USGS, and is reading the chapter on dams and irrigation.

Had this for a course text in an environmental history class and enjoyed it. It's an easy read even with discussion of statistics, and covers the subject in a way that breaks it down into time periods that are well defined in terms of their environmental character. Human impact on the environment is treated fairly and accurately. Upon finishing the book, a reader will have a better, fuller understanding of how we humans have affected the ecosphere of our planet. Very much worth reading.

Had this for a class. It's a good 'history' book, but as history books go - it's pretty boring.

Not a cheerful little story, but McNeill tells it well. We have not been kind to the planet, and if you want the details of our aggressive assault on the planetary ecosystem that we depend upon, McNeill lays it all out in black and white. We have exterminated species, depleted topsoil, sullied our waters supply and warmed the atmosphere to truly dangerous levels. A somewhat less gloomy account of the human impact on the land can be found in Diana Muir's recently published, *Reflections in Bullough's Pond*. In addition to being a wonderful storyteller, Muir gives some grounds for hope. Muir seems to feel that the record of past human creativity in problem-solving implies that we can solve our environmental problems, too. On the other hand, perhaps McNeill is right in implying that

as a species we are capable only of destruction.

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