

Defending Illusions: Federal Protection of Ecosystems

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Defending Illusions opens with this assertion:

A revolution is upon us. Its backers want to make protection of ecosystems the number one goal of federal environmental and land management policies. They would replace traditional ideas of using land and natural resources to enhance human well-being with new thinking that places protection of nature at the center of our relationship with the environment. This is the new paradigm intended by its champions to completely restructure how Americans see and interact with nature. Advocates of this new paradigm tell us that we must adopt their views in order to prevent long-proclaimed environmental breakdown. (1)

In reflecting on this claim, I was drawn to Isaiah 44:9: "All that make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame." Fitzsimmons succeeds in shaming the new paradigmists for zealously advocating the federal protection of ecosystems—for abusing science, generating political support by exploiting fear, preaching the worship of nature, and subverting the public's trust in representative democracy. Though Fitzsimmons does not couch his argument in terms of idols or shame, the new paradigmists he describes appear to the reader as stiff-necked zealots bent on worshiping their golden calf of undisturbed nature. To be sure, Fitzsimmons is no Moses or Isaiah, but he does succeed in shattering the new paradigmists' golden image by exposing its basis in dissimulation, fear, and idolatry. He leaves others with the task of crafting messages of hope and reconciliation, but draws on his background to show how market processes can provide a pragmatic way for improving environmental stewardship.

The title *Defending Illusions* was well chosen. New paradigmists have deluded themselves into thinking of ecosystems as real entities rather than mental constructs: "Scientists (who should know better) and nonscientists alike

routinely treat ecosystems as living things, as with references to ecosystem health ... the language of ecosystem health confuses landscape change with disease" (27). Scientists generally frown upon their peers when they mistake their models (mental constructs) for reality. Alfred North Whitehead referred to this as the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*. Yet many ecologists share a language in which they routinely discuss ecosystem health and integrity, and readily assign geographic boundaries to ecosystems. They speak as if the mental picture of "living and nonliving things, plus all the interactions between such components" has the same ontological status as an organism. I have often insisted that the concept of ecosystem management does not make any sense, since one can no more manage an ecosystem than one can drive a road map. One navigates the roads with the aid of the map. What *Defending Illusions* helped me to see was that the new paradigmists have deluded themselves into thinking that their ecosystem map neatly represents reality.

The tenacity of this illusion in the face of falsifying evidence to the contrary is described in the chapters "Mapping Ecosystems" and "Visions of a Greater Yellowstone." Different groups of new paradigmists draw radically different boundaries for ecosystems of the United States, which is not surprising, given that ecosystems are actually mental constructs projected onto the surface of the earth. Political motivations and value judgments have infused definitions of what constitutes the nature and boundary of an ecosystem. Attempts to define a Greater Yellowstone ecosystem illustrate how "naturalness" and other non-observable "ecosystem values" are used to envision its boundaries.

A chapter on "Claims of Environmental Calamity" describes how the new paradigmists have exploited people's fear of environmental destruction to mobilize political support for expanding the federal government's role in ecosystem protection. Fear-mongers use images of total destruction to frighten people into supporting radical environmental groups and their ambitious programs for protecting biodiversity. Yet the concept of biodiversity has persistently defied clear definition by leading scientists. Biologists, for example, cannot agree on what it really means. Regardless, unfounded fears over the loss of biodiversity are causing otherwise reasonable citizens to support revolutionary proposals such as the Wildlands Project, a vast plan to return 25 percent of the contiguous United States to natural regulation by excluding all human activity.

Fitzsimmons's description of the new paradigmists chasing after illusions reminded me that people have changed very little since the time when the Israelites convinced Aaron, in Moses's absence, to construct idols to guide them through the wilderness. While Fitzsimmons underestimates the importance of religious idolatry among the new paradigmists, his discussion of "Nature

Worship and the New Paradigm” provides useful insights into historical and contemporary religious sentiments about nature. However, the strength of his analysis resides in the scientific and economic arenas, not in theological interpretation. He documents the role of fear in the greening of churches but does not provide the trenchant critique here that makes the rest of the book so persuasive. Moreover, he makes an unfortunate choice of words in using the term *Christian nation* to refer to the Judeo-Christian religious heritage of the United States. I am certain that he would have chosen another term for describing this heritage if it had occurred to him how some radical political groups could distort his message.

Others, particularly Robert Whalen *et al.* in *The Cross and the Rainforest: A Critique of Radical Green Spirituality*, have done a masterful job of discussing the idolatry embraced by the new paradigmists. The new paradigmists are not irreligious, since they frequently experience a spiritual presence at work in the world. But they have identified this power with nature. Some of them are pantheists and thus regard God and nature as one. Such monistic thinking is common to those who argue that we should subordinate ourselves to the whole, that is, to the ecosystem. Their materialistic nature worship is even more entrenched than Fitzsimmons describes, since it involves the same fallacy of misplaced concreteness that has led scientists to talk about ecosystems as real things.

Defending Illusions is rounded out with general discussions on “Science, Ecosystems, and the Emperor’s New Clothes,” “The Law and Ecosystem Protection,” “Ecosystem Protection Proposals,” and “Human Consequences of the New Paradigm.” All four chapters illustrate how federal environmental and land management policies have given nature an authority unanticipated by the Founding Fathers. Democratic traditions and the role of law in protecting individual liberties are threatened by practices that subordinate liberty and self-governance to ecosystem protection. Laws such as the Endangered Species Act are being used to impose the radical proposals of a relatively small number of new paradigmists on the majority of United States citizens. This silent revolution in law and democratic governance causes one to question whether, as then-Senator Al Gore advocated in *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, salvation of nature is indeed becoming the “central organizing principle for civilization.” Fitzsimmons does not ask these larger questions, but chooses to focus instead on documenting how federal laws and policies have been grounded in confused scientific thinking and religious reverence for undisturbed nature.

Defending Illusions is a work of clear thinking and exceptional courage. It speaks prophetically about how people have been led astray by scientific, po-

litical, and religious idolatry. Anyone who reads this book and comprehends its message will feel the sting of its censure. Yet this sting will motivate reform only among those with sufficient courage to seek the truth of human environmental stewardship by abandoning attachments to idols.