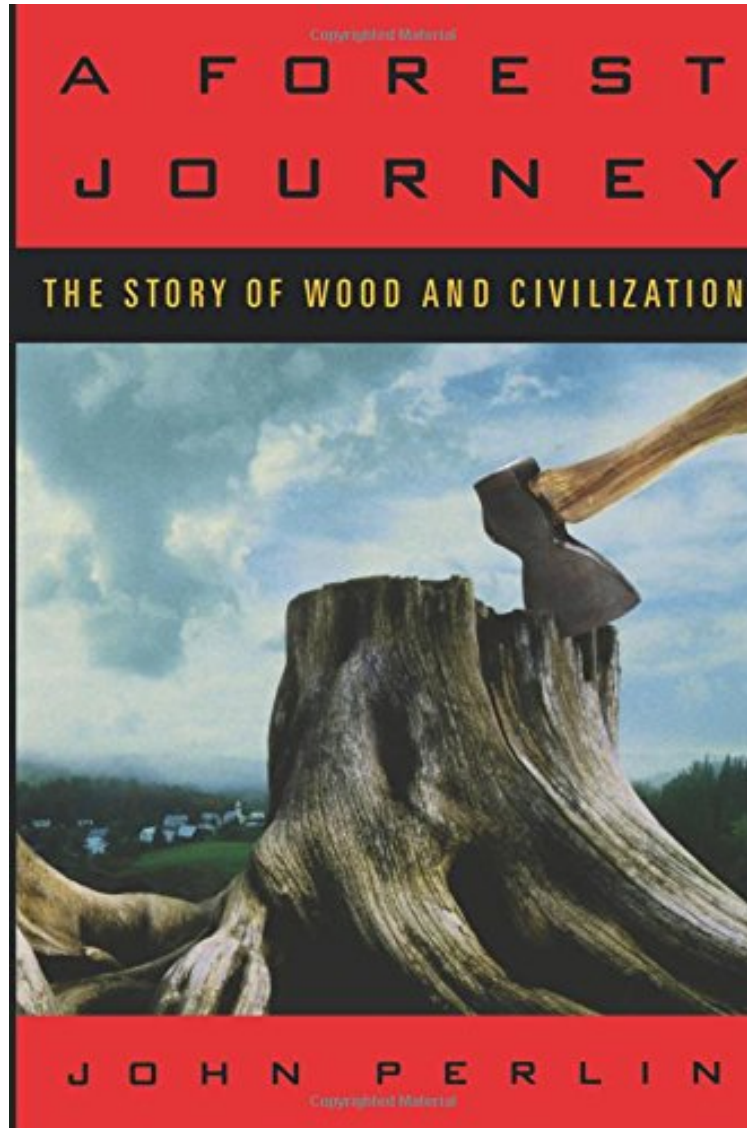


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A Forest Journey: The Story of Wood and Civilization

John Perlin

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#856684 in Books John Perlin 2005-09-20 2005-09-20 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.00 x 1.30 x 6.10l, 1.70 #File Name: 0881506761464 pages Forest Journey The Story of Wood and Civilization | File size: 30.Mb

John Perlin : A Forest Journey: The Story of Wood and Civilization before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Forest Journey: The Story of Wood and Civilization:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. How did I not hear about this before? By Wayne B. Norris I went to a meeting where the author spoke. I knew I had to read this. I have long held the notion of "history as a series of ideas propounded by legendary figures" in pretty serious contempt, having known my share of legendary figures and held

the view they were mostly legendary by historical accident. So I guess I will not read Toynbee any time soon. The notion that seemed most likely to me was the "history as a series of humans's finding natural resources lying around, using them up completely in ever-so-clever ways, then taking them from their neighbors, and continuing the process, all the while ducking fires, floods, earthquakes, and meteor strikes." This book deals squarely with that notion, and underscores wood as a huge driver of human history. Perlin describes civilization's use of wood for fuel for space heating and cooking, building materials for ships, buildings, weapons, furniture, barrels, wagons, and mine timbers, and fuel for the industries of glassmaking, iron, bronze, and sugar, and takes a number of good shots at quantifying the amounts of wood used for each. The numbers are very useful in describing the scale of use, and refreshing for a history book. I ALMOST held back from a "5" because there could have been more numbers, which would have made the case MUCH stronger, and also because the book totally left out the Chinese, mid-Asian [India, Iran, Mahgreb], South American, and African experiences. I suppose these could be the subject of another book some time. If they had been included, I'd have given this book a "6". I consider this book REQUIRED reading!

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A book for all students everywhere

By Richard Reese (author of Understanding Sustainability)

Once upon a time, at the dawn of civilization, the planet's forests were in peak condition, in terms of their age, range, and health. Wildlife was thriving. Modern lads and lasses would not believe their eyes if they could dream their way back to 10,000 BC and observe the stunning abundance of birds, fish, and wild grazing animals -- and the absence of cities. Sadly, on a dark and stormy night, some wise guys figured out how to smelt ore and forge ax heads, and things have been going downhill ever since. Axes did make it much easier to cut down trees, but the mad scientists totally failed to imagine the unintended consequences of their brilliant invention (as usual). But this was an era when it was quite popular to invent technologies that would have negative effects for many, many centuries. It was the trendy thing to do. For example, the digging stick. Agriculture preceded metal making. First, they farmed shorelines and riverbanks until the soil fertility wore out. Then, they cleared forests, and wore out the soil there. Then they moved to a different forest, killed the trees, and wore out that soil. And on and on. This cycle has been repeated for thousands of years. Prior to the digging stick, hunter-gatherers simply limited the number children they allowed to survive. By keeping their numbers low, they could live in a wild and healthy land, and enjoy a life that required far less effort and drudgery. Remember that!

John Perlin's book, *A Forest Journey*, is a history of forest destruction, with stops including Mesopotamia, Crete, Greece, Cyprus, Rome, Venice, England, Brazil, and America. Humans have always used wood in a number of ways, but the era of agriculture has shown little mercy for forests, and it has turned more than a few of them into barren wastelands and urban wastelands. A healthy forest grew in healthy fertile soil, but wheat would not grow in the shade, so the trees had to go. The wood was used to build houses, bridges, temples, and palaces. It was made into fences, docks, wagons, furniture, tools, and barrels. It heated homes and fueled industries that produced metal, glass, pottery, lime, sugar, and salt. Staggering quantities of wood were consumed by industry. Very importantly, wood was used to build cargo, fishing, and war ships. In earlier times, almost everything moved via water. A civilization with access to abundant forests had great potential power. It could grow, create profitable industries, participate in trade networks, defend itself from conquest, and conquer new forests. Be careful not to confuse this glorious enterprise of never-ending growth with a free lunch. The path of never-ending growth always seems to end at a mountain of skulls. Typically, it allows for a few generations of excess and debauchery -- and then the bill arrives. Holy expletive!

Perlin discussed the pattern repeated by the civilizations of the Mediterranean Basin. The trees were cut, then the heavy winter rains came, the soil eroded from the hillsides, the ports and bays were buried with eroded silt, and flash floods roared through the valleys. Eventually, the prime soil was sent to the bottom of the sea, and the remaining wasteland could produce little more than olives, grapes, and goats. The fuel for industry was gone, population plummeted, and the forest could never again recover on ruined land. Most of the arid wastelands of today's Mediterranean Basin used to be forests. Even the ancients understood that their civilizations were unsustainable. In the epic poem *Cypria*, Zeus started the Trojan War to thin the bloated human herd so the weary earth could recuperate. Plato wrote a bitter lament about the devastated land of Attica, a sickly skeleton of its former vitality. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod described the decline of humankind from the wonderful Golden Age to the horrid Iron Age. In *Genesis*, the Hebrew deity observed the stunning wickedness of humans, regretted creating them, and sent a huge flood to eliminate his multitudes of embarrassing mistakes. Well hey, if they could see that what they were doing was really dumb, then why didn't they just stop? They could have quit cutting trees, thrown away their icky plows, implemented a draconian population reduction regime, and lived happily ever after, right? Our modern consumer society has similar healthy options. Why don't we just stop?

The bottom line was that people who preferred to limit their numbers, and continue living in harmony with nature, had no future. Their thriving unmolested forests looked like mountains of treasure in the eyes of civilized sailors cruising by -- and civilized people cannot tolerate the sight of unmolested forests; it drives them nuts. In other words, if you didn't destroy your forest, someone else would. If you didn't build war ships, you were a helpless sitting duck. Thus, civilization bounced from region to region, repeating the same mistakes, turning countless paradises into parking lots. Progress!

That was the story in the Mediterranean Basin. It was a completely different story along the Pacific coast of America and Canada. In this region, the people remained hunter-gatherers, and their ecosystem stayed as healthy as it had been 10,000 years earlier (until you-know-who

arrived). In the absence of agriculture and civilization, life can be far more pleasant for one and all, including the entire ecosystem. Remember that! Perlin concluded with two huge chapters on industrial England and America, for which large quantities of written records still survive. He described greedy industrialists, corrupt politicians, exploited peasants, and several centuries of ridiculous environmental destruction. By the end of the book, alert readers will recognize similar patterns of unwholesome behavior that continue to this very day. The rate of destruction has skyrocketed -- and so has our understanding of the harm we are causing. Alert readers will be compelled to discard all fantasies of quick and easy remedies. This book makes me crazy. Why isn't ecological history a compulsory subject throughout every student's education? Why are we still training our youth to be mindless consumers, and punctual obedient industrial robots? There is more important information in this book than I learned during most of my school years. Imagine what could happen if we ever produced a generation of well-educated children. Hug every tree you see. Richard Adrian Reese Author of What Is Sustainable 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. History 2.0 By Alexia Briassoulis If you have ever wondered about western civilization, this book is absolutely essential. What exactly is it and how is it different from what came before? How has it spread and why? You will not be bored with densely packed trivialities and dates in this history book. Rather, you will get a truly enlightening overview of what, exactly, has been happening to our planet and the people who have lived on it for the last 8,000 to 10,000 years. It is an absolutely fascinating and therapeutic read. This is a truly empowering book for those who seek to understand current world affairs. My worldview has been radically altered and things that perplexed me before now seem quite simple to understand. There is absolutely no reason to be surprised about the current U.S. military/industrial situation in regards to oil. The U.S. is doing what all empires have done before, from Sumer to Istanbul to Rome to Cairo to Venice to Amsterdam to London to D.C. Although energy has always equalled timber before the last century, the game is unchanged: the monopolization of energy. This book is powerful because it demonstrates obvious trends that I have never really encountered before and makes connections that are self-evident to provide a coherent view of world affairs that cannot be forgotten once it is grasped. I would recommend reading Howard Kunstler's "The Long Emergency" and "The Upside of Down" by Thomas Homer-Dixon before or after this book. These three books together have really opened my eyes and have provided an excellent platform for contemplating the future of our planet and its nations. This is a game changer. If you want actionable intelligence, read this book. You will be a much more effective citizen for the effort.

A contemporary view of the effects of wood, as used for building and fuel, and of deforestation on the development of civilization. Until the ascendancy of fossil fuels, wood has been the principal fuel and building material from the dawn of civilization. Its abundance or scarcity greatly shaped, as *A Forest Journey* ably relates, the culture, demographics, economy, internal and external politics, and technology of successive societies over the millennia. The book's comprehensive coverage of the major role forests have played in human life--told with grace, fluency, imagination, and humor--gained it recognition as a Harvard Classic in Science and World History and as one of Harvard's "One-Hundred Great Books." Others receiving the honor include such luminaries as Stephen Jay Gould and E. O. Wilson. This new paperback edition will add a prologue and an epilogue to reflect the current situation in which forests have become imperative for humanity's survival. 50 black-and-white photos and illustrations, bibliography, index

From Library Journal Perlin has accumulated what seems every reference to the use and misuse of forests in the period beginning with Gilgamesh and ending with the 1880 U.S. census. In between, he chronicles the deforestation of Asia, the Mediterranean, Europe, the West Indies, and the United States by kings, warlords, and robber barons for purposes ranging from building navies to smelting iron to clearing land for cash crops. The research is exhaustive, but the book disappoints in two ways. First, the style is flat. All information is treated as equal in weight, without interpretation or expert opinion. This makes for heavy reading; the hundreds of subheadings in the text accentuate a sense of the book as a compilation, rather than a narrative. Second, given how deforestation has recently become a hot topic, one wishes for a connection to the present time, so that the information might be applied, rather than simply noted. - Mark L. Shelton, Columbus, Ohio Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. Like some Greek epic poem spanning 4,000 years of civilization an impressive array of research and a novel topic. - Los Angeles Times Perlin deftly combines a balance of social and ecological values as well as lessons for the immediate future. - John Brosnahan, Booklist A journey through time a sort of Western Civ. 101 with a focus on the crucial role of wood in the rise and fall of states and cultures...Solid survey that adds significant dimension to our picture of the current crisis. - Kirkus sThis work...captures the significant impact of wood on past and present civilizations. ...well written and well illustrated. - M. J. Zwolinski, Choice This book takes one those bold imaginative steps through world history that leaves you full of excitement, as suddenly events seem to fall into a pattern for the first time. Perlin not only presents us with a bold hypothesis profusely documented and illustrated, he does it with a story-tellers pace and ability to surprise. - Book Talks, BBC World Service Well documented and illustrated, it is history at its best. - American Forests From the Back Cover The destruction of the world's forests is one of the major concerns of our age. Each year the world loses some 37

million acres of forests. But this book is more than just a chronicle of deforestation.