Book Reviews

The Mountains of the Mediterranean World: An Environmental History. J. R. McNeill. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. vii and 423 pp., figs., tables, maps, refs., index. $69.95 cloth (ISBN 0-521-33248-6).

Reviewed by Karl W. Butzer, Departments of Geography and Anthropology, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

A modified title *Depopulation of the Mediterranean Mountains: An Environmental Interpretation,* would have highlighted the problematics of this book more sharply. That might not be fair to author John R. McNeill, who has woven together a finely textured and serious work that refrains from simplified or dramatic conclusions. But it would add emphasis to a novel and challenging perspective that raises important questions about long- and short-term perspectives on the relationship between physical and social landscapes.

Depopulation of the Mediterranean mountain lands began over a century ago and has reached alarming proportions, to conjure up stark images of eerily-quiet, decaying villages or dejected communities of old people persisting in a ritual reenactment of traditional life. The only exceptions are places that have switched to putting up summer vacationers or where urban workers have chosen to commute from ancestral places sufficiently close to industrial cities. Rural depopulation is not limited to either the Mediterranean world or to mountains, but nowhere is it more striking than in these difficult environments. In Europe this process engenders an emotive sense of loss, of both cultural heritage and community values, that bears comparison to how others see the continuing extinction of indigenous languages and cultures in Latin America. In Turkey and North Africa, on the other hand, concerns normally focus on the uprooted and marginalized squatter settlements where internal migrants gather.

McNeill explicates the complex interplay of different factors, namely rural population "overshoot," a world economy that depressed the price of farm products, and the different timing and rates of population growth and urbanization in the Christian or Islamic lands of the region. Furthermore he argues that, at the local level, overpopulation led to desperate and reckless land clearance, accelerated soil erosion, decreased agricultural returns, and forced emigration, and eventually reduced the available labor to below a threshold where terraces and irrigation could no longer be maintained, leading to a form of community collapse unprecedented in the history of the wider region. Finally, he speculates that the increasingly marginal circumstances of Mediterranean mountain people during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created an enduring resentment and a sense of grievance that rallied them to various radical causes, promoting a "current of mountain ecosystem history" in the tumultous events of the modern Mediterranean world. That recalls certain notions of Fernand Braudel, but with a significant twist.

To support this macro-historical interpretation, McNeill singles out five smaller regions for comparative examination: 1) a segment of the Taurus Mountains north of Antalya, Turkey; 2) the Pindus Mountains of Epirus in northwestern Greece; 3) the poorly consolidated and unstable Tertiary landscape of the Basilicata in southern Italy; 4) the valleys of the Alpujarras on the southern flank of Spain's Sierra Nevada; and 5) the eastern Rif of northern Morocco. Spanning five countries and two religious worlds, the case studies provide sociocultural, historical, and physical diversity. Since the settled valleys are mainly found below 1,000 m, their unity is not in their elevation but their marginal ecology which requires great investment of labor for relatively marginal returns with spatially circumscribed productivity. For each district, McNeill discusses two towns against a regional backdrop of social, economic, and environmental history.

But the environmental history of historians is qualitatively and quantitatively different from that of geomorphologists or palynologists (e.g., Butzer 1996). The "new" environmental historians appear to prefer literary over empirical evidence. McNeill makes use of some palynological results, but does not appreciate their broader implications while relying heavily on Classical authors. Human testimony is invaluable

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when it can be evaluated systematically, for example, from trees or hydrological features listed in hundreds of site-specific land-grant documents as compared to particular environments today (Butzer and Butzer 1993; n.d.). Less satisfactory are medleys of incidental observations or allusions that do not allow cross-checking as to whether they are objective or place-specific (e.g., can they be generalized to most valleys or most mountains?). Renaissance and modern observers sometimes provide useful travel logs, but Classical authors, however tantalizing, are too terse and selective to be used as an *independent* line of evidence. Then there is the problem of advocacy, since views on changes of the land have always been filtered by ideology. McNeill is a cautious craftsman and uses a wealth of sources, but his "deep history" of Mediterranean landscapes, despite its intrinsic value (and a strong section on the botanical history of the Rif), is not the environmental history of a geographer or biologist.

Human pressures on the environments of the study areas have indeed increased notably during the last two to five centuries, and several still were reasonably "pristine" in Roman times. But generalizing this to Mediterranean mountain lands elsewhere is inappropriate. The badlands of the Basilicata, Almeria, or Epirus are exceptional cases of highly erodible substrates; the Basilicata, in particular, has had a dynamic history of soil erosion punctuating some 6,000 years, but the countless debris slides triggered by exceptional rains or earthquakes simply provide fresh, fertile clays that are immediately plowed as if they were soils (Abbott and Valastro 1995). In one sierra of eastern Spain, slope soils were stripped during the fourteenth century (Butzer et al. 1986), accelerated runoff led to coastal progradation after 1700, as a consequence of stable soils on terraced hillsides that led to sediment starvation and resulted in channel rather than slope erosion (Butzer 1990). Peasants could never cut trees on seigneurial land, instead using woody shrubs or dead branches for fuel (Butzer 1990); lack of local woodland did not necessarily imply a shortage of fuel. Again, partially deforested but well-managed landscapes need not be degraded. Palynology in a pastoral environment of southwestern Spain demonstrates 6,000 years of stable pasture management (Stevenson and Harrison 1992), which is consistent with experimental ecological research. These examples show that increasing pressures on land use do not have a predictable ecological outcome, e.g., deforestation does not necessarily lead to soil erosion, nor does coastal progradation prove the erosion of slope soils. Chains of indirect argumentation based on the principle that process A necessarily produces result B are no more acceptable in ecology than they are in history.

The crux of McNeill's argument, that ecological degradation accelerated depopulation, is based on similar deductive inferences, not on information given by the participants. As a counterpoint, I will cite a seven-year study in the Sierra de Espadán of eastern Spain, where the historical-ecological vicissitudes of a mountain village and its neighboring communities were studied across a span of 800 years through archaeological excavation, archival documentation, land-use study, and semi-formal interviewing of very old people in the community (Butzer et al. 1986; Butzer 1990). Population growth not only slowed but stopped before emigration began. There was also a vibrant memory of what happened in the critical years around the turn of the century. The villagers had responded to the phylloxera crisis in France by planting every slope with grapevines 1860–1885, generating considerable capital until that infestation destroyed the local vineyards in 1907. The emigration began even as the community and its leaders debated alternative options for economic survival. They selected a long-term strategy, investing in cork oak, which requires a 12-year startup, which failed as a result of market forces. The slow drain of young people to domestic or industrial work in the cities grew into a flood. Collapse was delayed until the 1960s, when agricultural prices no longer covered the cost of labor. For the Espadán, there was neither empirical evidence nor a perception that there had been ecological mismanagement; declining productivity was never cited as an explanation, but the shortage of land and the lack of economic viability were. The stressed villages of the region did not take sides in the nineteenth-century Carlist insurrections, and oral tradition indicates that they even tried to keep the combatants apart by subterfuge. Rather than grievance or resentment, the universal emotion in contemplating past and present was nostalgia and an abiding affection for the ancestral home.

While McNeill opts for the generalizing approach of Braudel, I prefer the examination of complex human motives in Marcel Pagnol's films and novels set in the rural Mediterranean. McNeill has raised important questions, and they deserve further discriminating research, not only on environmental history but also on the interweaving of physical and social landscapes within the complex currents of change.

Key Words: deforestation, environmental history,

Mediterranean, mountain ecology, rural depopulation, soil erosion.

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The Biophilia Hypothesis. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, eds. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993. iii and 484 pp., figs., tables, refs., and index. $29.95 cloth (ISBN 1-559663-148-1).

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According to the biophilia concept, by understanding other forms of life, humans engender respect for and satisfaction from their existence. Understanding thus elevates the very concept of life itself. Comprised of fifteen chapters set out in six parts, *The Biophilia Hypothesis* explores ideas first expressed as such by E. O. Wilson (1984) from a constructive and empathetic vantage point. Twenty authors, many from the life sciences, articulate various reasons about how and why we are drawn to a spectrum of living things in order to satisfy our material and spiritual needs. This attraction is a predisposition that our species has to acknowledge and associate with plants and animals, and this tendency results in decisions we make to value them. These judgments, both as good or bad, are the basis for expressions of social concern and political action.

Drawing from Lorenz, von Frisch, Goodall, and other animal ethologists, cetacean expert Scott McVay introduces the ways by which companion animals intrigue us. The basic question for him and other authors is "to what extent can an affinity with life urge moderation in our behavior?" (p.17). By expressing and celebrating our experiences of life in all of its diversity, plenitude, and expansiveness, his essay, in the beginning of the book, has the ultimate goal of influencing current policies and practices that many consider to be shredding the biosphere. There is the chance, McVay believes, to practice patience and humility, curiosity and empathy, delight and understanding, before the face of the living world. In a word, there is a possibility for transcendence, opening us to novelty and inspiration along the kind of an evolutionary trajectory envisioned by thinkers like Pierre Theilhard de Chardin.

Co-editor Stephen Kellert argues that this is not just another effort to idealize nature. He points to a biological basis for our attraction, positing nine constructs that we make about the natural world. Kellert underscores that these are hypotheses by urging a systematic need for study and assessment of the biological premises he outlines.

Fellow editor Wilson agrees, arguing that a profound "emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms" (p. 31) is the result of our complex learning processes. Unfortunately, this linkage traces back to hunter-gatherer origins and thus, according to Wilson, faces atrophy in sedentary urban societies. As "the brain evolved in a biocentric world, not a machine-generated" one (p. 32), Wilson notes, mod-