

The nature of environmentalism

Patriots: Defending Australia's Natural Heritage, 1946-2004

By William Lines

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Reviewed by Aidan Davison

Over the past two decades, Australians have become more informed about environmental problems, more familiar with environmental discourse, and more likely to identify themselves as at least some shade of green. Yet dialogue between proponents for environmental movements and the broader public has ironically become, if anything, more difficult over this period. Reflecting this, membership of environmental organisations has remained in a range of around two to five per cent of the population. In 2004, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported a steady decline in the proportion of the population concerned about environmental problems. Although the recent conversion of many Australians from climate change sceptics to carbon cops is likely to have heightened levels of environmental concern, the evidence does not suggest that there has been a significant increase in trust for environmental groups. Australian environmentalists may not yet be debating the death of environmentalism, as are many of their American counterparts. Yet, one environmentalist has commented on a general mood of unease amongst fellow activists following the victorious wilderness battles of the 1980s: 'it is clear that the Australian movement's performance is weak when viewed against the challenges it faces' (Christoff 1).

William Lines' *Patriots: Defending Australia's Natural Heritage* offers one explanation for the failure of environmentalism to realise the promise of the 1980s. Ostensibly telling the post-war history of Australian nature conservation, Lines seeks to convince readers that environmentalism has lost its way because concern for nature has become muddled with and complicated by unrelated social concerns such as justice, racism, multiculturalism and reconciliation. 'People who advocate social justice and human rights' asserts Lines 'speak a different language and subscribe to a different worldview than conservationists' (312). The word environmentalism is, for Lines, irredeemably anthropocentric and an indicator of a dangerous shift in focus in Australian nature conservation activism around the mid 1970s. The word '[n]ature, in contrast, is an altogether different utterance. One of the least ambiguous words in English, its meaning is very clear and ancient ... [Nature is] the living and non-living world that came into being without the help of humans' (121-122). This shift from nature

conservation to environmentalism was, apparently, brought about largely by left-wing academics who 'tend to be conformist and cowardly by nature' (185) and who have corrupted students with their humanism. The result was distraction from the task of 'saving nature from humans: environmentalists were more interested in saving humans from themselves' (169). And why does nature have to be saved from humanity? Because 'all *Homo sapiens* have interacted with the world in destructive ways, including Australia's first human inhabitants ... The struggle for conservation is not a struggle against "forces", "structures", "social constructions", or "cultural artefacts", but a struggle against human nature' (243, 264).

I could hardly disagree more with these claims, and, more especially, Lines' simplistic reading of nature. Like Raymond Williams, I include nature among the most multiple, accommodating and puzzling of words. Lines' use of the idea of human *nature* as the nemesis of nature conservationists seems proof enough of this. The final sentence of the book is a fitting tribute to the incoherence of *Patriots*. The first half of this sentence makes a predictable exhortation to nature's patriots to 'mount a militant defence of what remains'. The second half, however, inexplicably cuts away a satisfying chunk of the book's argument by suggesting that conservationists also actively 'begin re-wilding the continent' (355). I do agree with this closing injunction, but take it to be the beginning of an entirely different argument, not the logical end of Lines' longing after pure nature.

Not only do I take issue with Lines' diagnosis, I suggest *Patriots* is itself evidence in support of a more plausible—if still partial, the matter being immensely complex—explanation of the failure of environmentalism to broaden its social base. For *Patriots* is a particularly disturbing example of a strident, dogmatic and un-reflexive tendency, a fundamentalist energy, that has been on the rise during my 20 years in environmental groups and that has alienated many Australians. As environmental issues have been drawn into the mainstream, environmentalist narratives have been disassembled and recomposed by those with different ideological and moral concerns—the re-invention of nuclear energy as greenhouse saviour, for example—that greatly increase the complexity of environmental debate. Like Lines, a growing number of conservationists appear weary of such complexity and yearn for the simplicity that comes from locating the political authority of concepts such as wilderness, nativeness and biodiversity in a realm beyond all politics, beyond contest, qualification and re-invention. In public discourse this transcendent realm—this timeless, universal Nature—is channelled by conservationists with the dispassionate help of science. In private experience this other-side is channelled through the deep subjectivities, the aesthetics, morality and spirituality, of embodied experience.

I think it inevitable that many Australians will balk at the prospect of reorganising their lives around unquestionable received truths about 'Nature'.

And while Lines sees no problem in the fact that nature conservationists have 'commonly combined both romantic and scientific sensibilities and overlooked the contradictions' (68), the fact that such truths are delivered in such a riven, internally contradictory way, surely explains why many regard nature conservationists with suspicion, even while sharing many of their practical concerns. Although sympathetic to the fact that fatigue shadows activism, I think the complex contestation that follows the mainstreaming of environmental issues is vital to the democratic constitution of sustainable futures.

While *Patriots* contains well-composed and interesting historical material, the writing moves erratically between laborious detail and graceless polemic, with the overall direction of the empirical inquiry unclear. Often mean-spirited, the text stands in contrast to Lines' much more constructive environmental history in the early 1990s. It is understandable (but no less disturbing for that) that praise for the 1991 *Taming the Great South Land* commands the back cover of *Patriots*. I am disappointed that Queensland University Press judged there to be a market for Lines' divisive misanthropy and that they were willing to satisfy it. And I am concerned that a review of *Patriots*, published in *The Greens* magazine, concluded that despite his sour criticism of environmentalist pioneers such as Judith Wright and Bob Brown, 'Lines' critique—particularly his argument that the environmental movement has allowed its nature-based core belief to be compromised by anthropocentric language and worldview—deserves much more internal debate' (Harries 25).

I am not suggesting that *Patriots* is a straightforward or uncomplicated book. Indeed, as the following passage shows, it offers insight into problems flowing from the strong alliance of ideas of nature and nation in Australia:

The cause of conservation arises from and fosters a concrete patriotism derived not from abstract discourses about freedom and rights but from living and breathing a physical, tangible, sunlit Australia ... Conservation was parochial, geographic, and territorial; its success depended on the nation-state. (312-313)

Despite this concession to the limitations of nationalism, Lines fails to reflect on the role that Australia's unique status as a continental nation-state has played in the environmental movement. Australia's colonial-settler heritage—and its subsequent development from a frontier culture to a predominantly suburban nation—has shaped the middle-class politics of Australian nature conservation. Further, Lines subsumes the tremendous span of Indigenous Australian cultural history within an unexamined 'fall from nature' narrative and dismisses all efforts to build a coalition of Indigenous and conservationist interests. He puts his faith instead in a version of liberalism closely related to American republicanism—this is a book about patriotism, after all. The genius of Western liberal democracy is, we are told, that it respects 'inherent differences between

humans' (218) by building local and 'lively civil society' (134) within 'an overarching solidarity achieved through patriotism' rooted in nature (218). Seeing scant evidence in *Patriots* of respect for social difference or creative contribution to environmental groups, I am entirely unmoved by Lines' appeal to an eco-nationalist solidarity. Writing before *Patriots*, Mark Tredinnick generously described Lines as 'Edward Abbey on steroids, but without the sense of humour ... I wonder sometimes if we are tough enough to take him. And I hope like hell we are.' (n.p.) My hope is that *Patriots* is enough to change many minds about the value of Lines' tough talk.

Aidan Davison (Aidan.Davison@utas.edu.au) is a lecturer in human geography and environmental studies at the University of Tasmania. He is currently researching Australian environmentalist experience of nature in cities.

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