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The Prophetic Voices of Environmental Journalism

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The Environment and the Press: From Adventure Writing to Advocacy. Mark Neuzil.
Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008. 305 pp. \$24.95 paperback.

Every fisherman, including Mark Neuzil, loves to tell stories. He admits this freely in the preface to *The Environment and the Press: From Adventure Writing to Advocacy*, a comprehensive look at the literary, historical, and religious roots of today's environmental journalism. The stories are great fun: Who can resist tales of the burning Cuyahoga River or a 1913 charlatan known as "Nature Man"? Better yet, Neuzil the historian places his stories into the larger context of how environmental writing has evolved.

Neuzil writes that today's journalists covering environmental issues echo the "prophetic voice" of Hebrew texts. Those early prophets wrote of hope and accountability. They predicted floods and near-apocalyptic events. He cites the modern example of New Orleans' *Times-Picayune* reporters John McQuaid and Mark Schleifstein, whose 2002 series on Louisiana's vulnerability to hurricanes predated the city's destruction by three years.

False prophets. Domsayers. Hook-and-bullet journalists. Nature writers. The forerunners of today's environmental journalists wore many labels, and the author shows their influences on writers today.

The Environment and the Press, which won the 2009 AEJMC Tankard Award, will interest scholars and students in many disciplines. For magazine professors and researchers, there is much to like here for, as Neuzil notes, serving niche audiences "is alive and well in environmental journalism."

In particular, in the "Tributaries" section of the book, Neuzil describes the contributions of early farm publications, outdoor sporting journals, and non-fiction writers from Izaak Walton to Rachel Carson. New media understandably receive less space in this

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Ellen Gerl, an assistant professor of journalism at Ohio University's E. W. Scripps School of Journalism, teaches courses in magazine writing and editing and a new course in environmental and science journalism. A former freelance writer, she wrote about food, travel, and science for a variety of magazines and is the author of two trade books about small business incubation.

historical survey. Still, the concluding chapter covers some early Web innovators, such as the Environment News Service (ENS), which gained credibility with reports on the environmental consequences of the first Gulf War, and the online magazine *Grist*, whose wry and edgy slant attracts a young readership.

For students interested in writing about the environment, this book provides a fascinating introduction to the field. They will enjoy reading Neuzil's accounts of such early environmental advocacy campaigns as the "plumage wars" of the 1880s, when the millinery industry used feathers from thousands of birds to decorate women's hats. He uses the controversy to illustrate persuasive communication waged by bird protectionists and fashion journals, among others who held strong beliefs on the issue.

Neuzil, a professor of communication at the University of St. Thomas, shares the occasional small historical fact among his broader insights. Readers learn that Columella, author of a twelve-volume agricultural treatise during the first century A.D., wrote about health problems associated with stagnant water "about 1,850 years before the connection between mosquitoes and malaria became generally accepted scientific wisdom." But lest readers be too impressed with Columella's prescience, Neuzil adds that the writer also had his "hits and misses," among them the idea that rabies could be prevented by docking a dog's tail forty days following its birth.

The "Main Currents" section of *Environment and the Press* details the back-to-nature movement of the 1920s and Pulitzer Prize-winning environmental hazard stories of the 1940s. By the 1960s, Neuzil writes, environmental journalism was a routine part of mainstream media, "a consequential factor in how citizens and their governments view, manage, debate, preserve, and exploit their natural surroundings."

At the book's end, the reader hopes Neuzil's research will inspire a prediction on the future of environmental journalism. However, the author resists the role of prophet. This small disappointment aside, *Environment and the Press*—with its synthesis of previous research, stories of lesser-known writers, and extensive chapter notes—represents an important resource for scholars of environmental journalism. Other individuals interested in the environment and writers who have covered it will find that story well told here.